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Amar Kanwar: From the fault lines

How the unabashedly political art of filmmaker Amar Kanwar is earning him a global following.

By Vandana Kalra (February 11, 2018)



Artist and filmmaker Amar Kanwar at his Saket, New Delhi residence on Thursday, December 14, 2017. (Express photo by Abhinav Saha)

Early on in the millennium, when art was still blue-chip in India, an Indian filmmaker was invited to participate in the most prestigious contemporary art showcase. The Nigerian art director of Documenta 2002, Okwui Enwezor, wanted to make the festival truly global and present undiscovered but exceptional artists. Amar Kanwar was one of them.

The unassuming Delhi-based filmmaker was not a regular at the leading art galleries; nor the toast of white cubes and art fairs. Instead, he was just becoming known outside the experimental art circuit for his works that explored the inequalities of the subcontinent. "There were artists who admired him, completely believed in his work, but then there were also those who did wonder how he was at the Documenta," recalls Roobina Karode, director and chief curator of Kiran Nadar Museum of Art.

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Kanwar's work at Kassel was a befitting reply. His 77-minute film, *A Night of Prophecy*, recorded the music and poetry of tragedy and pain. The artist-filmmaker had travelled across India, from Andhra Pradesh to Kashmir, Maharashtra and Nagaland, to weave poetic narratives that questioned the promise of democracy. Dalit writer Prakash Jadhav's powerful poem, *Under Dadar Bridge*, comes alive when a son recalls asking his now deceased mother whether he was born Hindu or Muslim. His mother replies, "You are an abandoned spark of the world's lusty fires." In Nagaland, children sang of freedom, and a schoolteacher in Kashmir recited verses as the screen moved from Kashmiri Pandits to graves of Kashmiri Muslims.

"It's a film that has a life of its own and lives beyond me now," says Kanwar. Seated in his sparsely furnished Saket studio, he has since then turned to poetry in several of his narratives. The only Indian invited to show his work at four consecutive Documenta editions, including last year, he is lauded for successfully blurring the boundaries between cinema and art. "He has not only developed his own mode of making videos but also given films an entirely new dimension. It is art in every sense of the word. I don't know anyone else of his kind in India," says veteran artist Gulammohammed Sheikh.

Kanwar has affirmed his position as one of the world's most politically discerning artists. Mounted as multi-channel installations, his videos compel his audience to build their own perceptions. He layers his chronicles with interviews and archival material, poetry, prose and animated drawings. He informs his audience of the different ways of viewing, just as his own art teacher did, at Delhi's Air Force School. "He asked us not to follow a prescribed template. All leaves are not green, the sky didn't always have to be blue," he says.

What he saw as a student of history in Ramjas College, Delhi also politicised him. Sikhs were killed or maimed by murderous mobs seeking to avenge the assassination of then PM Indira Gandhi in 1984. In that broken city, Kanwar assisted in relief work and participated in campaigns demanding justice for the victims. "I was upset and shocked at the brutality that followed against innocent citizens of my country, by the complicity of the police and politicians in power in the killings. I was upset by the protection that the killers received and still receive," says Kanwar.

A few months later, the toxic gas leak at Union Carbide pesticide plant in Bhopal killed thousands. "Again, we saw the same thing. Violence in another form. Disrespect for people. Complicity of corporations and administrations. And impunity. Those responsible were protected," says Kanwar.

We meet the 53-year-old a few weeks after he was awarded the Prince Claus Award at the Royal Palace Amsterdam, that recognises socially engaged cultural practitioners. It adds to the long list of accolades he has received, including the Golden Gate Award, San Francisco International Film Festival, USA (1999). "I took up films just because it seemed interesting, more open, without rigid academic and examination systems," says Kanwar, talking of the years when he enrolled for post-graduation at the Mass Communication Research Centre at Jamia Millia Islamia.

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No caption

He was still pursuing his Master's when he made *Site and A Wager* (1986), a film that discussed minimum wages, health and maternity benefits in India. The irony of portraying the plight of the underprivileged through the expensive medium of film struck him so much that he decided to quit filmmaking in the late 1980s. Posted in the coal mining belt of Madhya Pradesh as a researcher at the People's Science Institute, he felt the urge to share stories from the area. "I started looking at cheaper mediums such as drawings, photography and theatre, but then I returned to films," he recalls.

Back in Delhi, he was still searching for opportunities when he found himself at the centre of a civil and democratic rights movement, Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha, led by Shankar Guha Niyogi. The trade union leader wanted a filmmaker to document the mass movement in Bhilai. Kanwar reached a day after Niyogi was assassinated. He could not film him but he did record the funeral and the outrage that followed. There was also a recorded audio message in which Niyogi predicted that industrialists would harm him. Years later, in 2005, when the Supreme Court acquitted local industrialists accused of conspiring to kill Niyogi, Kanwar revisited the scene of crime in *The Prediction*.

A projection on a handmade book had archival photographs, newspaper reports, the legal history of the trial, and Niyogi's prophecy. It also included the mineral and resource maps of Chhattisgarh, and the prediction of their gradual eradication. Two more handmade books were part of the trilogy — *The Constitution* which talks about how the state fails to protect the basic rights of citizens, and *The Counting Sisters*, a story written by Kanwar where mourners count the dead and missing displaced by the government and large corporations in Odisha.

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The series, along with several other elements, adds up to The Sovereign Forest, a project that evolved over a decade and one that Kanwar filmed intermittently since 1999. Central to the display was the 42-minute single channel projection "The Scene of Crime" that offered "an experience of a landscape just prior to erasure as territories marked for acquisition by industries". "Almost every image in this film lies within specific territories that are proposed industrial sites and are in the process of being acquired by government and corporations in Odisha," wrote Kanwar in a note. It was exhibited across the world. Kanwar even took it to Odisha, inviting people to the Samadrusti campus in Bhubaneswar from 2012 to 2016, "to add to the growing body of evidence collected".

Scrupulously, he flips through a book that lists over 272 different varieties of rice seed, grown and harvested every year by the farmer Natbar Sadangi, meticulously labelled, collected from the "crime scene". "There were 30,000 varieties of traditional paddy seeds in Odisha, assuring very high yields. Today, there are only a few, all requiring large amounts of water and chemical fertilisers," says Kanwar.

Kanwar remains a reclusive artist, reluctant to talk about himself or commit to networking. "I clearly discovered, that over a period of time people actually relate to the 'work' rather than the network. And there is only a limited amount of energy so it's better and easier actually to let the films do the talking and connect with people than through networking. People reach out to you if they find meaning in the films," he says.

Seldom seen at art soirees, he is solely represented by New York's Marian Goodman gallery. "Once I started working with them, I realised I was just very comfortable working with them. I didn't feel the need to have dealings with more commercial galleries," says Kanwar. His cinematographer Dilip Varma and editor Sameera Jain, too, have been working with him since 1995.

His neighbours in Delhi might not recognise him as a world-class artist but his audience would identify his melancholic voice from his videos, where he is often the narrator. In *A Season Outside* (1997), for instance, he told them, how his family too fled Pakistan in 1947, and he grew up listening to stories of Punjabi women nailing their windows to barricade themselves against the prolonged rape and murder unleashed by Partition.

Over the years, his work has explored the nature of truth. "The 'document' of the documentary has for long already been thrown up into the air. Is an illusion more real than a fact? Which vocabulary is more appropriate for a dream? How can a pamphlet be a poem, how can a poem be the story of a murder, how can a murder become a ballad, how can a ballad become an argument, how can an argument become a vulnerability the expression of which negates the argument but eventually shifts all positions," says Kanwar, talking about his documentation approach.

Evidence for him is paramount. But what Kanwar does is question its very meaning. "Who defines evidence?" he asks. He had set out to find answers to this question during the making of

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The Sovereign Forest. He had also addressed it in his eight-channel video *The Lightning Testimonies* (2007).

Reflecting on the history of sexual brutality and violence in times of political conflict, the film's starting point was Partition. The 2002 Gujarat riots prompted Kanwar to gather stories from the past, collecting evidence, speaking to both victims and their families over a course of four years. From Manipur, he had interviews of women who famously protested naked outside the Assam Rifles office in Imphal. In Wokha, Nagaland, an orange tree was cited as witness to "everything the army had done over a number of days that seemed like years". "Sexual violence is something that we find difficult to talk about and often are unable to express. The narratives of sexual violence always seems to disappear, but, in fact, the memory remains submerged and lives for long. I tried to find a way to go beyond the violence and suffering which I think did happen, towards the experience of resistance and ways of surviving" says Kanwar. The account might be rooted in India, but its relevance is universal. "This work allowed us to open up conversations about sexual violence in other conflicts — in Europe after the World War II, in Africa, in Southeast Asia," says Nada Raza, assistant curator of Tate Modern, London, where the work was on view till last week.

In his most recent work, though, Kanwar makes a slight departure. He is still responding to the times and questioning the consensus but this time it is through his fictional protagonist, an aging mathematician who, at the peak of his career, retires to an abandoned train carriage. On the verge of blindness, he begins to experience hallucinations and epiphanies. They compel him to write letters that he compiles in the 'Almanac of the Dark'. Screened at Documenta last year, *Such a Morning* is a cinematic parable about the limits of knowledge, and addresses global political tensions, violence and insecurities. "The film searches for a sensory, hallucinatory and metaphysical way to re-comprehend the difficult times we are living in and the very meaning of truth, rather than presenting an argument," says Kanwar.

At the end of the film, he presents "a set of clues that may help to live, re-calibrate, respond and resist", suggesting the presence of light at the end of the tunnel. His own predisposition might take him elsewhere. As he says in *A Season Outside*, "I have a compass which keeps spinning me into zones of conflict".

Against the Grain

1992: Invited to Bhillai to document the Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha led by Shankar Guha Niyogi, Kanwar reached a day after Niyogi was assassinated. He recorded the outpouring of rage in his film *Lal Hara Lehrake*

1997: Kanwar explores non-violence and the Partition in *A Season Outside*. The 30-minute film opens with the ritual at Wagah, moving to the international border, where "only the butterflies and birds are free to fly across".

2000: *The Many Faces of Madness* captures images of ecological destruction, mining, displacement and deforestation.

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2002: For A Night of Prophecy, a film in 12 languages, Kanwar travelled across India to record poetry and protest music about caste, labour, religion and nationality.

2003: The silent film To Remember is a homage to Mahatma Gandhi in the aftermath of the Gujarat riots.

2007: Screened across the world, from Documenta to the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, Art Institute of Chicago and the Assam State Museum, The Lightning Testimonies explores the often ignored instances of sexual violence in times of political conflict, beginning with Partition.

2011: The Sovereign Forest, made in collaboration with Sudhir Pattnaik and Sherna Dastur, emerges from the conflict in Odisha between local communities and the government and mining corporations.

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