

# Framing India: Who crafts the narrative of agency and change?

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*LSE alumna Olina Banerji critiques western cinematic representations of India and argues that framing devices should be used to empower, rather than stereotype, Indian subjects.*

I wonder what I would have served Oprah Winfrey, messiah of the disenfranchised and under-loved, if she [came over to my house for dinner?](#) Would I have invited her to eat with her hands, or would I have, as I often do with guests, offered a spoon? I could not help but ask these questions as I watched the special episode of “[Oprah’s Next Chapter](#)”, during which she is cajoled into breaking bread with a large family on her televised visit to India. “You still eat with your hands?” she asked incredulously, in response to which a table full of people beamed with the knowledge of their 3,000-year-old civilisation.



Winfrey’s gaffe and the outrage it provoked among Indians – one blogger described the show as “[myopic, unaware, ignorant and gauche](#)” – recalled responses to Danny Boyle’s “[Slumdog Millionaire](#)”, which also left many Indians fuming. As Tarun Tejpal, editor of the left-wing publication *Tehelka*, put it: “It’s worthwhile to remember, we did not tell an Indian story and force the world to recognise it. They told us an Indian story and forced us to applaud it.” Tejpal’s words from 2009 about Boyle’s film hold equally true for Winfrey’s televised Indian jaunt in 2012. Both these representations of India – one a cinematic super-story about love and hope, the other a pseudo-documentary for the consumption of Middle America – exploit the economic and cultural fault lines that India would much rather hide.

Ranked 78 out of 100 in [a Newsweek study](#) on the ‘World’s Best Countries’, India grapples with the dual identity of being an emergent global power and a developing country wrestling with stark income, class, and gender inequalities and widespread social exclusion. Representations of the country therefore create unavoidable splits between the various ‘realities’ of modern Indian life, as both empowering and disempowering images are used as frames for viewing India. Western representations of India are especially fraught since in addition to tackling the country’s multiple realities (and risking the outrage that Winfrey and Boyle provoked), they have to negotiate post-

colonial challenges of narrative agency.

In the world of visual representation, the narrative of third world suffering is a bestseller. Beyond good-natured, global catharsis, however, such representations encapsulate a power tussle between those who live the story and those who narrate it, as alluded to by Tejpal. Through visual narratives, identity creation becomes a function of those who can observe from a distance and seize the agency to tell the 'truth' about the disaster-struck, perennially poor, ahistorical victims of a savage and exotic world order. This representational hierarchy of knowledge creates a framework that the West relies on for its interpretation of the East.

Mainstream visual culture is often blind to the dynamics of this hierarchy. Whether it is [Apu](#), the head-shaking grocery store owner featured in "The Simpsons" or the clichéd humour of the call-centre comedy "[Outsourced](#)", it's difficult for western image-makers to distill the post-colony into holistic images for consumption by viewers on both sides of the divide. (Of course, these arguments apply to all Oriental/subaltern cultures depicted on western screens; here, I limit my discussion to representations of India.)

But the mainstream media is an easy target for a representational critique. The real challenge lies in decoding agency in representations that claim to tell the 'truth' without an inherent bias. In the case of documentary film, for example, the 'otherness' of the Other or its representation is often insidious because viewers accord the genre the privilege of truth, assume the sensitivity of the filmmaker, and accept representational choices as natural phenomena. But even a supposedly neutral space is infiltrated with political, social, and economic power relations and the voice and agency provided to developing world actors is often tainted with what is already known about them. How a character is placed, in what light, who speaks for her, and how much agency for self-representation she has in terms of impacting the viewer's perceptions—all these factors help establish global hierarchies of 'looking'.

While the cultural currency of a documentary has far less impact than a mainstream film, any ability to represent bestows power, especially if the representations have Academy Award validation. In Zana Briski's "[Born Into Brothels](#)", she directs and plays the central role of the white saviour, and India is structured according to her worldview. Even though all the children filmed have a voice of their own, Briski's narrative supersedes them all, thereby replicating through cinema a top-down approach to development. And while the portrayal of Briski's struggle against apathetic Indian authorities to admit the children of [Sonagachi's sex workers](#) into schools is touching, it throws up uncomfortable questions about where the agency for change is located. Meanwhile, Megan Meylan's "[Smile Pinki](#)", a disengaged, cinema-verite narrative about a young girl with a cleft lip, describes how Pinki and others like her are treated at [Smile Train](#) camps in India.

While both accounts mean to empower their subjects, "Smile Pinki" facilitates an interpretive shift in the representational power dynamic: white agency is well hidden behind the camera and the ecosystem of change is primarily controlled by developing world actors. Moreover, this agency is humanised through shots of Pinki's father carrying her through the fields, assuring her that no harm would come from the face-altering operation. In "Born into Brothels", on the other hand, apart from the troupe of children that Briski turns into amateur photographers, most Indians depicted in the film – the children's parents, their acquaintances, school teachers, civil servants – are only props in the filmmaker's scheme of things and at best constitute a peripheral world, both visually and conceptually.

As these examples show, cinematic choices like where a filmmaker places a camera, the play of light and shadow, and editing options contribute heavily to representational hierarchies. Too often, in both mainstream filmic representations (think of "[Slumdog Millionaire](#)" as well as the 1984 adaptation of E.M. Forster's "[A Passage to India](#)") and documentaries, cinematic techniques are used to reduce the subcontinent to a teeming mass of indistinguishable faces. Without a face, voice, or history, agency and power for Indian subjects are a far cry.

However, dismissing such representations outright as negative or false is to 'fossilise' India (in the same way that I argue these documentaries do) by denying the material conditions of poverty and underdevelopment across the country. But how these conditions are represented, and whether subjects of representation have the agency to construct their own social, historical, and political identities, can begin to equalise hierarchies of 'looking'. Seating

Winfrey on an elephant, however, doesn't even begin the process.

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