



“We need a second generation of economic reforms- that focus on education and health”

The 11th edition of Jeevika Livelihood Documentary Festival organised by Centre for Civil Society utilised the medium of documentary films to highlight much-needed reform in the livelihood policy space.

14 December 2014, New Delhi: Centre for Civil Society (CCS), a leading public policy think tank based in New Delhi, hosted the 11th edition of their annual Jeevika: Asia Livelihood Documentary Festival on 13 December – in an effort to advocate the need for livelihood freedom for the rural and urban individuals who are currently restrained by a number of regulatory barriers while trying to earn their living. The films represented a fair blend of the interactive, observational and the expository genres of non-fiction film making.

‘Moddhikhane CHAR (Char: The No-Man’s Land)’ by Sourav Sarangi and ‘Padmini my Love’ Munmun Dhalaria, Ruchi Sawardekar, Sriram Mohan and Silja Wurgler were awarded the winning documentaries in the professional and the student category respectively. ‘Silver Gandhi’ by Rohit Pawar and ‘Her Stories’ were given special mention. Professor R Sudarshan, Dean, Jindal School of Government and Public Policy, also a member of the Jeevika Jury Committee announced the winners.

‘CHAR’ by Sourav Sarangi seamlessly moves between time, space and literally countries, to portray a poignant yet powerful account of people displaced by development. It strikes the arbitrariness of national boundaries to trade. It is the story of Rubel, a fourteen year old boy smuggling rice from India to Bangladesh. He has to cross the river Ganga, which acts as an international border. The same river eroded his home in mainland India when he was just four. Years later, a fragile island called Char was formed within the large river. With his family and a herd of homeless people, Rubel decided to settle in this barren expanse controlled by the border police from both the countries. Rubel dreams of going to his old school in India but reality forces him to smuggle stuff to Bangladesh.

The documentary ‘Padmini my love’ emerges from a recently issued government order in Mumbai which reduced the age limit of the iconic black and yellow Padmini taxis to a maximum of 20 years. What this means is that in a few years from now, the charming yet robust Padmini taxis will have vanished from the streets of Mumbai, taking away with it the livelihood of many who depend on it for their day to day survival. The film explores the various ways in which the government-imposed age limit affects the livelihoods of the taxi drivers on the one hand and shatters a peripheral economy around the taxi on the other. The four protagonists of the film talk about issues of migrant labor, the status of taxi drivers and the importance of taxis in the city of Mumbai through their own personal narratives, thereby offering a ringside view of the changing city and its invisible workers.



Other documentaries highlighting pertinent livelihood issues were screened over two days including 'Candles in the Wind', 'Ghumantu', 'Agbalbalitok (The Gold Prospector)', 'Babi' 'Bread, Butter and Garbage', 'The Ferryman', 'If's and But's', 'Ghar Ki Murgi Sone Barabar', 'Womb on Rent', 'Poop on Poverty', 'Dammed' and 'Kaansutra'.

The festival also hosted a panel discussion on '23 Years of Indian Economic Reforms'. Amir Ullah Khan, Director Research, Aequitas and Advisor to Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation & Barun Mitra, Director of Liberty Institute were the panellists. Amir Ullah Khan said that "While India's economic growth has been spectacular and per capita income has grown tremendously but it has led to huge amounts of inequalities. We have solved a lot of problems in manufacturing industry but what about health and education." He reflected on the fact that 55% of India is malnourished and perhaps it is time we start reforming these areas too—a second generation of reforms. Barun Mitra said that "If we believe that markets, reforms, and liberalisation would perform and should perform, we need to trust that each stakeholder/individual has a rational choice. For a civilized society, we must recognise and respect the other person as much as we want ourselves. That is the beauty of markets and freedom- that the most diverse choices can be catered to."

Ever since its inception in the year 2003, the festival has consistently endeavoured to create a platform to help sensitise people towards the problems faced by the poor on a daily basis. The festival has gained immense popularity over the years. This year, more than 80 entries were received from across the world.

The festival brought to the fore the serious need to concentrate on the issue of livelihood freedom for the poorer sections of society in India and Asia. Quality of life is directly related to the pursuit of livelihood and the pursuit of livelihood of choice is most valuable for those at the bottom rung of the economic ladder. Victims concerned include street vendors, rickshaw pullers, artisans and petty shop owners. Livelihood freedom includes the removal of various counter-productive licenses, laws, rules and regulations which are binding upon the citizens.

Despite the 1991 reforms, the poor are still struggling to earn an honest livelihood under the License-Permit-Quota (LPQ) Raj (whose main objective was to reduce the red taping in order to run business under the planned economy for India), and overbearing government regulations. As unlicensed professionals, street entrepreneurs have no property rights to protect their source of income, subjecting them to defamation, confiscation of property and public extortion. The choice of livelihood is not really a 'choice' for them. Illegally operating hawkers and rickshaw pullers, unable to seek adequate legal defense are often evicted, harassed and subjected to hefty bribes by local law enforcement, which makes them a stooge of public officials.

This festival has been instrumental in creating a space for dialogue on these issues and highlighting possible policy solutions. The 'Bamboo is not a tree' campaign owes its roots to the 2009 edition of the festival, when a documentary entitled 'Hollow Cylinder' showcased the dependence of the tribal community on selling bamboo in order to survive. This is simply a single example of how the power of effective filmmaking can bring about policy change, mind-set change and most importantly; attitude change.