

## Versatile archives and cinematic friendships, by Nicole Wolf

### 1) A versatile archive and a research trajectory

Recounted memories are one possibility for a first encounter with a film. Deepa Dhanraj's *KYA HUA IS SHAHAR KO* (What happened to this city?) (1986) is one of those films that I first *saw* through memories only; memories recounted by the filmmaker herself and the cameraperson Navroze Contractor of an intense process of making and showing as well as memories of viewing experiences by other filmmakers to whom *KYA HUA* became an important moment in their own film-political journey. The only one 16mm copy that remained with Deepa Dhanraj was not fit for screenings anymore and an existing VHS copy was hard to watch due its quality. So while the film existed as a 'poor image' (Hito Steyerl), it did not circulate as such and was hence 'lost' for re-viewing or being viewed anew by a younger generation of filmmakers.

Only while researching the Arsenal archive for the film series "Moving Politics. Cinemas from India" (co-curated with Dorothee Wenner in 2010, on the occasion of "Being Singular Plural" at the Deutsche Guggenheim) did I realize that there was a 16mm copy of *KYA HUA IS SHAHAR KO* in Berlin, not without traces of age, with slightly obstructing German subtitles, but perfectly watchable. *WHAT HAPPENED TO THIS CITY?* had been selected for the Forum section of the Berlin Film Festival in 1987 and had stayed in Berlin since.

This encounter initiated a series of questions towards the film's place, within the archive and outside of it. Rather than being driven by a logic of *discovery* and *rescue* of *lost* material, a trajectory started that surely acknowledged the value of the film as historical material, but was interested in what it might actualize in diverse contexts of the present. From here the project developed in two directions: One takes *KYA HUA IS SHAHAR KO* out of the archive and one gestures towards what could be adjoined to it.

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"In the early 1980s, new forms of militant Hindu processions around the Ganesh festival began to be held in Hyderabad, my city. Every year during the processions, riots would break out and people would be killed. We began filming the procession in 1984, when riots started and a curfew was imposed for twenty-two days. We found that political parties, both Hindu and Muslim, had deliberately engineered the riots to ensure that the chief minister won a vote of confidence in the assembly. While it was important to understand that the riots in which people lost their homes and lives were cynically created, it was also crucial to understand the history of these conflicts and to show how a communal consciousness was being manufactured before our eyes. Today this has been consolidated into fundamentalism. In so many ways, what we were filming in the 1980s was prophetic. Hindu fundamentalists destroyed the Babri Mosque in 1992, and in 2002,

2,000 Muslims were killed in a pogrom in Gujarat." Deepa Dhanraj, January 2013

KYA HUA IS SHAHAR KO is the only audio-visual record of the 1984 Hyderabad riots and pioneering in its record of Hindu-nationalist politics finding expression. In collaboration with Hyderabad Ekta, a group consisting of people with various occupational backgrounds who were seeking to address rising communalist tensions through secular discourses as well as engaging in relief work on the level of food and health in the economically poor area of the Old City, Deepa Dhanraj wanted to both understand the dynamics of the political developments herself and create a record that could be used to make transparent how violence was politically engineered and hence be shown to the effected communities themselves. Later the film was shown extensively throughout India engendering rich discussions. The film is striking in how it conveys both a sense of immediacy and analysis. Interviews with Hindu and Muslim leaders of the time are next to archive material and off camera commentary providing a historical background to the very specific situation of Hyderabad and the state of Andhra Pradesh. Guerilla style shooting in the midst of violence during the Ganesh procession is next to bearing witness to victim accounts of both communities who lost lives and importantly livelihood through the curfew imposed on the city. The time taken to observe the labour and craft that sustains the Old City and the quiet record of people waiting for curfew to be lifted, confined to their homes with the radio as the only connection to outside, create a respectful lyricism and contemplative atmosphere.

What is this film's place now? How do we meet it, attend to it and extend it? How does its structural focus on fundamentalist strategies signify now, locally and globally?

KYA HUA IS SHAHER KO also marks the consolidation of an independent documentary filmmaking movement in India during the mid 1980s, which is often seen as having been initiated in response to the repressive politics during Indira Gandhi's Emergency (1975-77). Crucial films of the time include Anand Patwardhan's WAVES OF REVOLUTION (1974) and PRISONERS OF CONSCIENCE (1978) as well as Gautam Ghose's HUNGRY AUTUMN (1976) – the latter two also in the Arsenal archive. My interest in the histories of documentary and specifically feminist film practices in India as well as a wider concern with questions of how film-aesthetic and -political alliances could be thought of today to make productive a legacy of political cinema internationalism, led me to look at a series of constellations within the archive. What then occurred as missing were the films Deepa Dhanraj made as part of the feminist film collective Yugantar, founded in 1980: MOLKARIN (Maid Servant) (1981), TAMBAKU CHAAKILA OOB ALI (Tobacco Ember) (1982), SUDESHA (1983) and IDHI KATHA MATRAMENA (Is this just a story?) (1983). Each of those films was created in close relation to existing groups and questions that were central to their research or activist work. In forging new representational and discursive spaces Yugantar must be viewed as a crucial legacy for political documentary practices in India today.

This archival impulse was however not one of solidifying a national documentary history, of filling a gap that would account for its feminist components or to correct constructions of feminist film histories based on practices in Europe and the US. While the politics of gaps are essential to be acknowledged it deemed more productive to playfully speculate on what the insertion of Yugantar's films could actualize within the archive. An eclectic

and speculative addition seemed appropriate for an archive which was itself built through personal relations and nurtured through a passion for cinema as intrinsically political. Furthermore, in 1973 the *1. Internationale Frauenfilmseminar* took place in the Arsenal, a *Modellseminar* to which Yugantar's focus on female labour as well as their investigation of the family as an institution could potentially have contributed.

What could be other sensibilities, queries and urgencies shared across the archive? Can feminist affiliations be outlined? Which other film collectives have forged political vocabularies? How might one then redress cinematic friendships in the archive for the present?

## 2) Projections or how to re-view political films of a past

This project posits an unquestioned need to give projection spaces in the present to those moments when the collision and collaboration between camera and political movement or urgency created a unique space where a political vocabulary gets shaped which then in turn becomes a platform for new ways of perceiving, listening and questioning. At the same time this project posits a caution towards a theorizing of those moments that ossifies them, towards a distance that enhances their pastness as well as towards too easily assumed affiliations. The relational aspect of the Arsenal archive itself seems to strengthen the inevitable need to actively labour towards film-political alliances.

How does one re-project in order to throw forward? How to contextualise without attempting to authenticate? Could something new get created if we respect our relative distance to the contextual circumstances of film-political events and, at the same time, acknowledge our drive to project current political desires onto moments which are recounted as episodes of radical change? What are those energies that one is seeking to re-animate? We might be too young and geopolitically removed from when and where these films were made to pick up easy associations, and yet engaging with those collective film events suggests associations to a past when political film practices engendered international affiliations that are evocative for thinking how we might affiliate ourselves today. Are there specific constellations in the present – urgencies, stagnations, a search for radicality – that are conducive to the surfacing of past moments? Furthermore, how do we write not stories of rescue, but working with the demands that diverse pasts make on us through the spaces of the possible they imagined and created? We suggest that these spaces must not be trapped within judgements of achievement or failure, nor must they be rewritten to idealise, but we might want to restore their potential for subversion and transformation in order to alter our perspective on the possibles of the present. Linking to the archives of feminist film seems particularly pertinent now, if not always.

## 3) Non-exhibition – a DVD and a seminar

KYA HUA IS SHAHER KO on DVD:

The currency of supremacist politics engendering violence, nationalisms, fundamentalism and dividing communities on local and global levels strongly supports the drive to make KYA HUA IS SHAHER KO more widely available. Screenings in Berlin and particularly those in Hyderabad have started a process of remembering and of utilizing the film, a document of the past, as an initiator for discussions and reflections on the trajectories of communalist politics as well as on past and present forms of resistance to it. The DVD to be released will have extra material which hopes to initiate these reflections through conversations with the director Deepa Dhanraj, members of Hyderabad Ekta who were involved in the making of the film and first responses from audiences.

A seminar on *Engaging cinema and re-viewing collective practices*. With YUGANTAR's films, guests and their projects, and organised by Nicole Wolf and Nanna Heidenreich.

The collective and collaborative process of each of Yugantar's films, their stress on 'standing with' those that their films were seeking to engage in cinematic and political terms and a strong sense of creating a radical space of possibilities, suggests an energy that we would like to respond to. By way of a seminar with invited guests, each of which will have a close relation to collective film politics, we want to continue to project our desires and urgencies in the presents onto those of the past, to extend, to explore, to discuss, share, critique and value. Thinking with film-political terms that were challenged or created then might help to revalue as well as rethink them or, to invent new ways of engaging cinema altogether.