

PROJECTING TAMBAKU CHAAKILA OOB ALI

REFLECTIONS TOWARDS A VERSATILE ARCHIVE OF POLITICAL CINEMAS

Nicole Wolf

One day after lunch the women workers of the Kurbetty factory reached the workshop late by a few minutes. The employer [malik] kicked them out and closed the door. The women touched his feet so many times and pleaded him, 'please let us in', and that they will work 10 minutes extra in the evening. But then you had to expect him to listen – he sat in his car and left. Everything has its limit and they asked the foreman [mistry] to let the women working inside come out. And together they sat outside the main gate of the factory. This news spread like fire in the village. That evening when we walked home after work, we saw the women still sitting there, outside the factory. When we reached them, they talked to us about how their situation and our situation was the same, and that our boss is taking advantage of our helplessness. 'Why don't we all together think about a solution?' Throughout our way we thought about how, yes, they were right, what they were saying is absolutely right.

Female voice-over,
Tambaku Chaakila Oob Ali, 1982¹

Now when I look back at it, in every aspect of that process, it was really working on a position of creating political affiliations... How do we present our project to the people we want to film with? What we had to create every time was where you are politically and where they are and what is our meeting ground. Is there trust? Is there political trust?... That had to be negotiated. Which way could they use the film, or not? Did they want their situation recorded or not? So it was developing a documentary practice, and it was creating theory about those politics while we did the practice. How do you frame women as workers?

Deepa Dhanraj, 19 December 2009²

For it is an irretrievable picture of the past, which threatens to disappear with every present, which does not recognize itself as meant in it

Walter Benjamin, from Theses VI of
"On the Concept of History"

T*ambaku Chaakila Oob Ali* (1982) is a film I encountered first and for some time thereafter only as a vivid memory from a time past. For many years, I knew of this 25 min, 16mm film through imaginations of recollected stories about it shared by Deepa Dhanraj of the film collective, Yugantar.³ I saw this film as a screening event on a blocked highway near Nipani, in Belgaum, Karnataka, where 3,000 people created a circle around an improvised screen, obliging even truck drivers to stop. I also carry images in my head from a midnight rough-cut screening, offered in a local cinema for free in support of the female tobacco workers' cause, to an audience of 2,000 people, who asked to see the footage again and again and debated it until three that morning.

The stress on open-ended process, on aliveness, on needing to ask questions not previously raised, but also the cheekiness and excitement of the narrative to me matched with the fact that for a long time I could not actually see *Tambaku Chaakila Oob Ali*, due to the fragile state of its materiality and its consisting of a print canned and stored in a cellar. Remembering the film always included references to a political climate both burdened by the restriction of civil rights during and around the Emergency and simultaneously energised through the emerging social and political movements of the late 1970s and early 80s, most crucially the autonomous women's movement. At the same time, there was the necessity to constantly negotiate and contest a set vocabulary, and each screening was part of existing and ensuing political processes of organising and unionising, throughout the three years it was extensively shown in different parts of India to women working in the informal sector, in both urban and rural areas (four language versions of the film existed – Tamil, Telugu, Kannada and Hindi).

In the absence of a ready-made film – which, one might argue, could but re-present this event without allowing for contingency, the various layers of information, the affective memories and reflections in hindsight that accumulate through conversations taken up time and again – I could concentrate

on how the film's circumstances were narrated, and fantasise on how this film-political event might productively repeat itself whenever actualised through a screening. I always connected to a sense of newness and excitement, as well as to a contemplative ambivalence towards the kind of images one had created, a self-critical stance underlined by an understanding of the contextual limitations of the then possible perceptions of the political, of women, work, labour and union politics, and its relation to other realms of subject formation. Memories, projections and the meeting of past and present political desires and urgencies strengthened the unquestioned need to give a projection space to this film now, in the present. At the same time, a caution arose that the film might too much belong to its own time, and that seeing it removed from the context it was made in and for would create a distance by enhancing its pastness.

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 while acknowledging our drive to project current political desires onto moments recounted as episodes of radical change?⁴ What are those energies that one is seeking to re-animate? I was 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 I write with this history not as its author, not as a story of rescue, but working with the demands that diverse pasts make on us through the spaces of the possibles they imagined and created? I suggest that these spaces must not be trapped within judgements of achievement or failure, nor must they

be rewritten to idealise, but – with a Benjaminian urgency – 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.

More concretely, these initial personal reflections are meant to take part in creating material, public and discursive projection spaces for *Tambaku Chaakila Oob Ali* as well as for *Molkarin (Maid Servant, 1981)* and *Idhi Kata Matramena (Is This Just a Story, 1983)*, all three produced by Yugantar in collaboration with grassroots women's groups.⁵

Film-Materialities and Agency

I finally watched all the available Yugantar material on a Steenbeck at the Arsenal film archive. Moving several kilos of prints and tapes from place to place was like transporting very precious objects that attain their own life. As the only surviving material, they mustn't be lost; they were wrapped in many layers; they were carried with much care in hand luggage; in the archive, they had to be stored apart from the rest of the films as they suffered from the infectious vinegar syndrome; they are touched with gloves and washed to make sure they move smoothly on the Steenbeck. There was a peculiar relation between the actual and very fragile film material, the narrations I had heard until then and my imaginations. It was difficult not to be moved seeing that print, which had had a rather clandestine existence for some time, move along a Steenbeck, the projection of its black-and-white images filled with scratches – visible traces of how the prints had been transported on local buses, screened and re-wound numerous times through different 16mm projectors. Again, it seems too easy a parallel to connect the precarity of the state of the film material, its age literally embodied through the many vertical lines, to the precarity of a political struggle. At the same time, I wondered what the material demands of this film were. How would it want to be restored? Does the 16mm celluloid print ask for being

touched up, made to look good, with almost no scars? Might one want to retain the traces time left on it, or would this again be an attempt to authenticate the pastness of the film? Can those particular textures of aging celluloid be thought of otherwise than as representational? And what is now the status of a singular print versus its digital copy that can multiply and circulate unregulated, online or through DVD copies, to create friendships and familial relations when being part of the many 'poor images'⁶ with which it might share a lot? A digital copy that is watchable again and again, and that allows for the creation of multiple film events, appeared to permit another, more active relationship to the film, a working relationship, maybe liberated from the slightly paralysing awe I felt towards the print's materiality and the paraphernalia around it.

Towards a Feminist Third Cinema

Even a dog sits in one place and eats peacefully, but we don't have this kind of luck. Every day we wake up early in the morning, we clean, we make bread, we wake up our children, we wrap our lunch in *rotis*, and then we run to the workshop. Eating lunch calmly is far from our reality, if you get to eat a few bites on your way, you are fortunate. If you reach the workshop at 8 a.m. it's ok, but if you are five minutes late, then the employer won't let you in and you have to spend a whole day out in the sun.

Female voice-over, *Tambaku Chaakila Oob Ali*

We were also trying to build working-class heroines.
Deepa Dhanraj, 7 June 2002

Tambaku Chaakila Oob Ali could be thought of as being affiliated with different kinds of political cinemas. It is a feminist collective's film; a collaborative film; a consciousness-

raising film; a film on violence against women; a film on solidarity, on organising, on unionising, on leaderships, on how to give evidence to injustice and on how to address the testimonial as a multiple voice that includes the singular. *Tambaku* is also a factory film. And if it can be said that the history of cinema is complicit in neglecting to bring the conditions inside the factory, literally, to light, *Tambaku* is one of several exceptions that add to our understanding of the relation between cinema and our perception of labour, work, the factory and its many discontents.⁷ As a factory film, *Tambaku* can evocatively be linked to the beginning of cinematic projections in India as well as elsewhere, namely the screening of the Lumière brothers' *Workers Leaving a Factory*. Claiming this link embeds the history of grassroots filmmaking within the history of a cinema which most often started its storytelling from the moment the singular person exits the factory, cinematic lives being the ones that leave the factory behind. Harun Farocki says as much in his essay film, *Workers Leaving the Factory* (1995, 36 min), when he provides us with an image archaeology – sifting through the archives of European and US cinema history – which seeks to think through the many cinematic sequences that imitate repetitively the motif of the first staged documentary film.⁸

Workers are seen running away from the factory, Farocki comments through his voice-over, “as if they had already lost too much time”. *Tambaku* opens with the women labourers walking hastily towards the factory. At the gate, they are awaited by their supervisor who lets them in, one by one, reminiscent of the reversal of the inaugural factory scene, i.e. workers entering the factory before we lose sight of their individual bodies and they become part of a workforce.

Time, next to the continuous stress on unity, is one of the conceptual aspects that strike me when I watch *Tambaku* now, and that align it to other, also more recent, factory films.⁹ Time is being structured and given by someone else's sense or commandment of time.

“For the world it is 2 p.m., but on our employer's watch it is 12 o'clock”.

“When the time for our bonus came, we got to know that even if we had worked for eight to ten months, *malik* had marked our attendance for only two and a half months”.

Keeping account of their days of work, in their own notebooks, becomes part of resistance strategy. Having just a little more time at one's disposal, a sense that one's time is not stolen but respected, leads to a different understanding of oneself, of one's labour and of time that is other than work, even if momentarily.

“You know, we felt as if we were reborn. Now we sit calmly and eat hot bread. From now on, it's a happy ending. We could reach home at sunset; we could spend our day with our men and children”.

The relation between time, work, labour and subjecthood reverberates through the images and connects the different parts of the film, one within the factory creating a concept of work and one outside the factory constructing a concept of organising.

In *Tambaku* we accompany the women workers right from the entrance into the factory, rather than leaving them at the gate. While brief, the following sequences are remarkable, not only because the tobacco factories were difficult to access (the owner permitted the team only five hours to film, and that under supervision by factory workers deputed to point out what they were allowed to film) and the conditions inside the workshop made breathing hard for those unaccustomed to tobacco dust, but more importantly, those images *inside* take part in the creation of a perception of factory work which seems to bring together elements of fordist production lines, exploitative feudal relations between land and factory owners, the insecurities of the informal sector and the ensuing unionising processes. By watching the steps required to move from tobacco leaf to fine tobacco, all necessitating the women to work out a common rhythmic pace that allows for a continuous flow of materials, we see

the concept of a female workforce developed while it is also interrupted with brief close-ups of individual women workers.

“Film can reproduce images of labouring, but ‘work’ is an economic and social concept, and hence must be signified as such to distinguish it from human activity that is held to be nonwork”.¹⁰ *Tambaku* leads us literally into the factory and ‘fabricates’ a concept of work that, one could argue, did not have visual expression at that particular moment in time.¹¹

Deepa Dhanraj stressed that what was new and exciting but also an urgent challenge at the time was the lack of a cinematic repertoire of poor women speaking to power. The discursive context on the level of perception was one that would show working-class *adivasi* or *devdasi* women as mainly sexual objects or as beneficiaries of the state which was preventing them, as mothers with numerous children, from starving. On the other hand, did the political discourse that Yugantar and the women’s wings of Communist or Marxist groups offered provide visual and conceptual images of the worker, the working class and of working class women?

If Cowie rightly argues that documentary is a “‘discursive practice’ in the sense given to this term by Michel Foucault, for it is not only a discursive construction but also a constructing discourse”,¹² then how did *Tambaku*’s fabrication of work take part in the construction of a discourse on work? How did the many filmic events that took place through the making and showing of *Tambaku* engender a film and political language that needed to be found in that very moment, and how might it in turn have been part of expanding the discursive framing of political discourses at the time? How does it make another real possible? Then or now?

Deepa Dhanraj recounts very critically all the omissions she could see clearly in hindsight and how these were framed by the political vocabulary and the filmmakers’ own backgrounds at the time. Foregrounding work led to not being able to listen to stories of violence in women’s homes, not stressing the fact that most of the women workers were *devdasis*, and some were Muslim, or not addressing the fact

that the women’s union was led by a man, Subash Joshi.¹³ Further, we do not hear about frictions between women; about what was needed to attain and stay with the much-stressed sense of unity? How were divides provoked through caste and religion played out and addressed?¹⁴

On the other hand, an existing vocabulary was expanded through just the mere presence of working class women on screen, acting as a collective body, not as victims and not isolated. The voice-over and two speeches by women addressing women stress that “not at any cost should this unity break”. Following from the collectivity as the condition of the production line, which is also underlined by the worker’s songs, *Tambaku* moves to stressing collectivity in organising and maintaining a political struggle. “If a woman amongst us gets scared, others should give her strength”, is supported by a succession of images of women’s bodies eating together, drinking tea together, sleeping outside next to each other, listening to speeches together, walking together, hence sequence by sequence creating a concept of organising.

Voice connects these images, but neither as an expository voice-over standing in for the filmmaker, nor through a voice of a particular worker giving testimony; *Tambaku* appears to resist the patronising act of ‘giving a voice’. The voice-over is a personal and subjective one that however embodies a collective testimony. The Yugantar filmmakers recorded the stories of many women and used those stories to first decide on the kinds of scenes to portray, and literally montaged the voice-over together from different testimonies.

This working process was complemented by recordings of comments during rough cut screenings which were then incorporated into the final voice-over. The result is a subjective and direct address that is yet not an individual’s voice, a practice which addresses the difficult translation process from experience to speech act and avoids the drive for authenticity attached to embodied testimony.¹⁵

It is also an evocative, and one might argue feminist, expansion of the use of voice, incorporating workers' testimonies and creating a cinematic direct address, as practised in one of the classic Militant Cinema examples, *Hours of the Furnaces*.

Yugantar's third and last film broadens the political vocabulary further. Their fiction film *Yeh Sirf Kahani Nahi Hai* (*This is Not Just a Story*, 1983) – made with lay actors – moves precisely into the before-neglected middle class family, addressing nuances of violence within the context of home as well as gesturing towards political solidarity through female friendship.

Projections We Make

Responding to Yugantar's work, presented here only in preliminary sketch, strikes me as productive. For the multilayered events it signifies in and of itself, for its participation in a crucial moment of movements reflecting and consolidating their political trajectories, for what it introduced into a history of feminist documentary filmmaking in India that continued to extend conceptions of film-political language as such, and for the redress of archives of feminist film practice in Europe.

Furthermore, concepts of work, time, solidarity and participation might be some of the vocabulary that projecting *Tambaku Chaakila Oob Ali* might throw forward. All of these seem too grand and general to be addressed here, and at the same time they are terms and conditions precarious and under pressure now, if otherwise. Could re-projecting *Tambaku*, without ossifying it, participate in re-activating those terms? Its film process, pioneering at its time and place, calls for links to current experimentations with documentary and evidential modalities. Its politics I imagine, and project, as made through the possibles of a Benjaminian 'now-time' that we need for finding new forms of political agency and new paths of how we might want to address work and take care of our time. ■

Notes

- 1 *Chhaya Datar* (1989) recounts that same incident in her dissertation research conducted during the mid-80s. See *Chhaya Datar*, **Waging Change: Women Tobacco Workers in Nipani Organise** (*Kali for Women*, 1989, New Delhi), p 9.
- 2 The following descriptions of the filmmaking and showing processes are based on conversations with Deepa Dhanraj that took place between 1999 and 2012. This text thus was solely made possible through Deepa Dhanraj sharing her experiences and thoughts, while I take full responsibility for any mistakes or mis-readings. During 'Persistence Resistance: Documentary

Practices in India', a one-week festival and discussion forum that took place in London in October/November 2011, Deepa Dhanraj brought whatever Yugantar film material she had found still available, and we watched parts of her 16mm copies during one of the sessions where she contextualised and commented on the excerpts we saw. For her too, as the director, this was the first time she reviewed those films after they had been dormant since the mid-80s. The London edition of 'Persistence Resistance' was made possible through the team of Magic Lantern (New Delhi), particularly the continuous efforts of Gargi Sen, all of whom I would like to thank here.

- 3 Yugantar was founded in 1980 by Abha Baiya, Navroze Contractor, Deepa Dhanraj and Meera Rao. **Tambaku Chaakila Oob Ali** was their second film after **Molkarin**, which concentrated on maid servants in Pune organising to demand better working conditions.
- 4 Eshun and Gray (2011) take a similar approach in their discussion and re-animation of what they call 'The Militant Image'. The film political works that their edited special issue refers to are mostly coming out of processes that have been declared revolutions and liberation struggles on the level of postcolonial nation states. The labour and feminist politics I refer to here are smaller in their ambition, but, as I describe further below, the filmmaking and screening practice has concrete links to Third and Militant Cinema understandings of film as a political tool. See "The Militant Image: A Cine Geography", Editors' Introduction, in (eds.) Kodwo Eshun and Ros Gray, **The Militant Image: A Cine Geography**, a special issue of **Third Text** 25(1), pp. 1-12 (January 2011).
- 5 As participant of the project 'Living Archive: Archive Work as a Contemporary Artistic and Curatorial Practice', situated at the Berlin-based Arsenal: Institute for Film and Video Art (<http://www.arsenal-berlin.de/en/living-archive/about-living-archive.html>), I have the opportunity to work with Deepa Dhanraj on the digitisation and restoration of all Yugantar films as well as **Kya Hua Is Shahar Ko? (What Happened to This City? 1986)**. This process includes conversations with people involved in the making and showing of these films at the time, as well as workshop situations with participants of various backgrounds and generations.
- 6 Hito Steyerl. "In Defense of the Poor Image". In **e-flux** 10 (November 2009).
- 7 I would like to acknowledge Manu Ramos' PhD research and in particular his unpublished chapter "Factory Trouble – Postfordist Cinema and Industrial Transformation", which has been inspirational to my thinking.
- 8 Harun Farocki. "Workers Leaving the Factory". In Harun Farocki, (ed.) Thomas Elsaesser, **Working on the Sightlines** (Amsterdam University Press, 2004, Amsterdam).
- 9 In Surabhi Sharma's film, **Jari Mari: Of Cloth and Other Stories** (2001), time and numbers permeate the post-factory city, Mumbai, where women and men assemble, take apart, pack or add other aspects within the many informal production lines.
- 10 Elisabeth Cowie. "Working Images: Representing Work and Voicing the Ordinary". In **Recording Reality, Desiring the Real** (University of Minnesota Press, 2011, Minneapolis, London), p. 46.
- 11 Ibid., p. 47.
- 12 Ibid., p. 50.
- 13 Datar (1985) writes about how she was welcomed by one of the Nipani unions to conduct her research, but how stress was put that theirs was a workers' organisation, not a women's organisation.
- 14 Chhaya Datar. "Divisions and Unity: Dynamics of Organizing Bidi and Tobacco Workers". In **Manushi** 39, 1986.
- 15 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1988) classic critique of Foucault and Deleuze's othering of the labourer, bringing the authentic subject back into their discourse by claiming that 'they can speak for themselves and they also do it very well', seems a relevant reminder. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In (eds.) Lawrence Grossberg and Cary Nelson, **Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture**, (University of Illinois Press, 1988, Urbana, Ill.), pp. 271-313.