

Metabolisms of the Feminist Archive and the Nowness of Yugantar (1980–83)

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DECEMBER 2017. A SEMINAR ROOM AT CIVIDEP (BENGALURU).¹ PRESENT ARE board members of the Bangalore Garment Labour Union, the Karnataka Domestic Workers Union, Munnade,² and Cividep, along with the filmmaker Deepa Dhanraj and myself. All gathered to watch *Tambakoo Chaakila Oob Ali* (*Tobacco Embers*, by Yugantar, 1982). We struggle with the projector, then decide to watch the film on the small computer screen, 15 people aligning their chairs closely so they can see. The room is only semi-dark. The low-res video file was attained from filming a 16mm film print, extensively screened in the early '80s, scratched and damaged, off the analog editing table. The atmosphere in the room is exceptionally concentrated for the entire 30-minute duration of the film. It is followed by enthusiastic discussions, astonishment and respect. Everyone expresses their deep admiration for the Nipani female tobacco workers, their dedication to the strike actions that *Tambakoo Chaakila Oob Ali* followed and enacted, the women's endurance, the strength and determination in their speeches, the clarity of their demands—8-hour shifts, regulated lunch breaks, paid overtime, bonus. At the same time, everyone is struck by the state of workers' rights today: demands are considerably less radical, and it is a challenge to organize workers given the fragmentation of the work-force, composed of migrant labourers from diverse locations, speaking different languages, often under the age of 18, restricted to hostels with poor living conditions.

"Theirs was a traditional strike."

Tambakoo Chaakila Oob Ali, made in 1982, is viewed like a manual for successful strike action: women workers stuck together day and night, they galvanized workers from close-by factories through physical presence and talking, they did not go home but ate and slept in public spaces for several days, sustained by water, food and blankets provided by the local community.

¹ Production still from *Molkarin*, 1981.

No one questioned the relevance of re-screening this “old, scratched, black-and-white film from another era”; everyone present was keen to get their hands on a copy, preferably in multiple language versions.

“We will screen this to at least 400,000 workers.”

Post-Emergency Synergies

Abha Baiya, Deepa Dhanraj and Meera Rao met after India's Emergency (1975–77). Like many of their female contemporaries they were galvanized by “the hopes and passions” that many have since then attributed to the autonomous women's movements that arose during the late '70s and early '80s. A time “buoyant, energetic and hugely innovative, drawing from and contributing to other social movements of the time, part of the struggles for civil liberties and democratic rights in the country. Inheritor too, of radical youth and student movements in India and across the world; (...).”³ Despite the still existing curtailment of civil rights and widespread experiences of state violence, everyone I have spoken to about the post-Emergency period has emphasized the radical potential and the immense sense of possibility felt during that time.

Precisely that energy and the many diverse activist and cultural practices inspired Baiya, Dhanraj and Rao to found the feminist film collective Yugantar (Change), supported by the cameraperson Navroze Contractor as well as the recording engineer G.V. Somashekar.⁴ Their political passions were directed to movement-building and filmmaking was for them one of several possible pathways. At the same time they initiated Yugantar when there was no precedent in collective and participatory filmmaking practices. There were only a few instances of non-governmental, independent filmmaking, and representational frameworks for female subjects and in particular working-class women on screen were very limited.

Yugantar and Film Technology

As Contractor had worked with state-of-the-art cameras in the US, the National Film Development Corporation (NFDC) employed him to demonstrate the ARIIFLEX 16SR in the late 1970s. These cameras had been newly imported and were subsequently rented to Yugantar. The collective produced three short films between 1980 and 1983.⁵ The lenses they used for *Tambakoo Chaakila Oob Ali* were Angenioux 12-120 F2.2 zoom lenses, and for *Idbi Katha Matramena* Arri Prime lenses 12mm, 16mm and 25mm, all T1.3. Ordinary 100-watt bulbs were used for good exposure but four 1,000-watt sun guns were used for the large meetings filmed for *Molkarin* so as not to disturb the ambience. The recorders used were Nagra for *Molkarin* and later Nagra S; the boom microphone was Sennheiser 816. All three films were shot on ORWO (East European) black-and-white negative film, at the time subsidized as part of socialist state friendships. Only 15 rolls of 400ft (10 minutes) of film stock were available for each film.⁶

I argue below that this particular moment of radical transformation, imbued with a sense that it was possible to reimagine political movements outside the framework of party politics, also sparked new synergies between political practices, filmmaking and broader cultural practices. The urgency to rethink the political and modes of political affiliations motivated a film practice grounded in collaboration at every step. The creation of new political subjects was brought together with the process of subjects first conceiving and



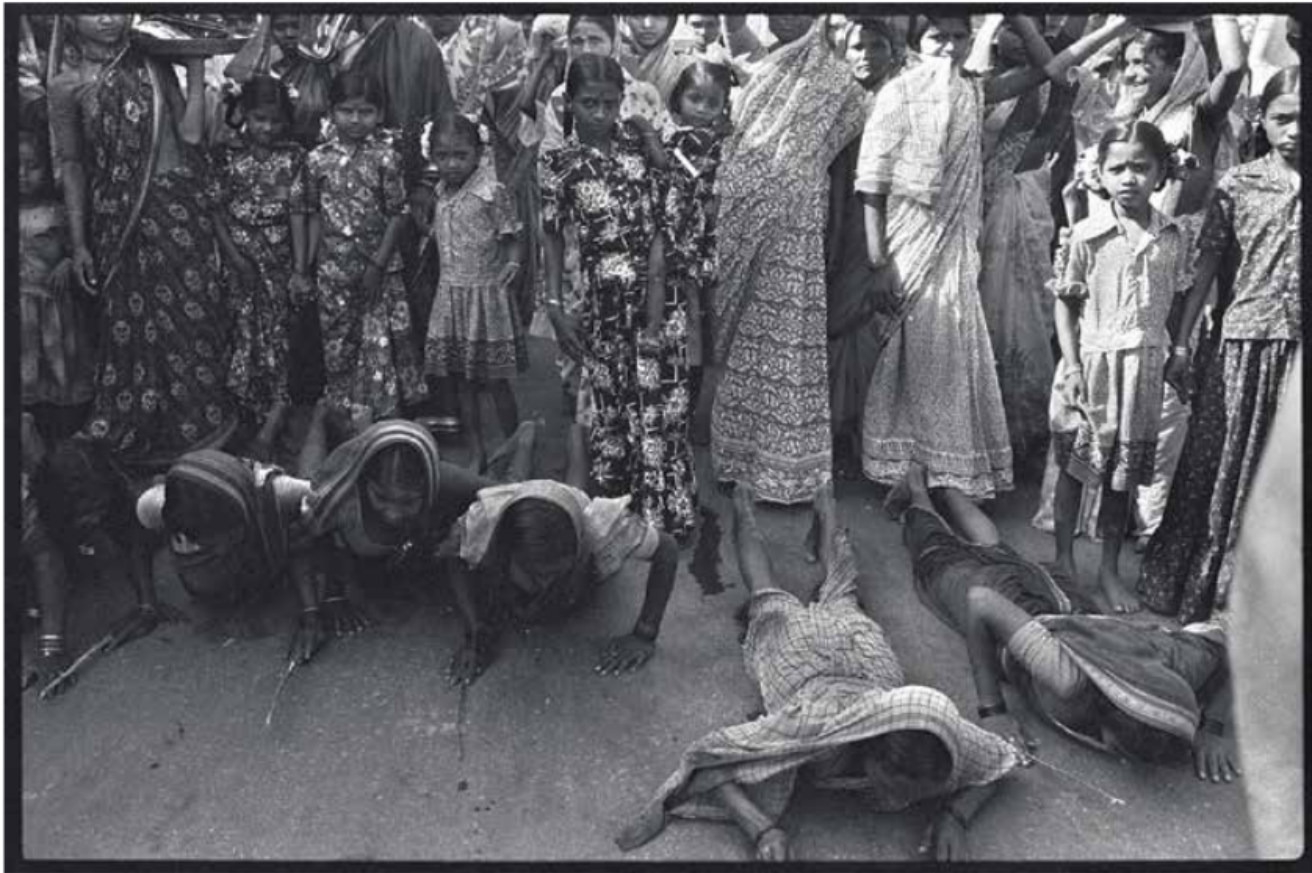
furthermore expanding their own screen presence. It is precisely in this synergy that Yugantar's nowness resides. This was tangible during the 2017 Bengaluru screening, in which the hitherto stored and now archived films acquired a metabolic charge and sense of aliveness as transformative possibilities in the past connected affectively to contemporary workers' struggles.

²
Production still from
Molkarin, 1981.

Languages of Political Affiliations

Each film produced by Yugantar developed through collaborative processes with an existing or an emerging political constituency. The encounter of two collectives demanded the invention of a participatory practice before this term came to stand in for a set method employed by NGOs and then applied to communities. Yugantar acknowledged that they owned the means of production, even if precariously, but endeavoured to "create a collaborative practice; (...) [to] generate theory and practice together. (...) [to] struggle together, to come up not only with the form but with an understanding, with an insight, something that really goes against the grain, that disturbs what you are presenting."⁷ The film collective thus conversed with ongoing processes of politicization: of domestic workers in Pune for *Molkarin* (Maid Servant) (25 mins, 16mm, black-and-white, Marathi, 1981), female factory workers in Nipani for *Tambakoo Chaakila Oob Ali*, and lastly with members of Stree Shakti Sanghatana (sss)⁸ in Hyderabad for *Idhi Katha Matramena* (Is This Just a Story?) (25 mins, 16mm, black-and-white, Telugu, 1983).

Molkarin, their first film, initiated the creation of impact through its focus on the power



3
Production still from
Tambakoo Chaakila Oob Ali,
1982.

of processes of collectivization: in its evocative aggregation of numbers (400 women met until midnight, groups of women went on strike for 3, 4 and 6 days, 800 women came out onto the streets for 15 days), in its visual stress on the process of women assembling, and through its narrative development. Yugantar met domestic workers through the Pune Shahar Molkarin Sanghatana (Pune City Domestic Workers' Organization, PCDWO), which had emerged out of a spontaneous strike of women domestic workers in Pune in February 1980. Started by Khanderabai, one domestic worker who was dismissed by her employer due to illness and subsequently gathered others around her, and initially supported by Left-oriented trade unions and women's organizations, PCDWO quickly developed into a large-scale organization that drew in domestic workers across the city. Inspired by this heroic founding moment Yugantar strove to recreate it on film with the help of the domestic workers and activists Leela Bhosale and B.J. Kerkar. *Molkarin* thus opens with one woman sweeping the floor in her employer's home, her voice-over reflecting on low payment, lack of security and the condescending behaviour of her employer. The film follows the domestic worker as she leaves her home and talks to other workers who subsequently also lay down their jobs and join her; culminating in large groups of women marching out on the streets. The camera and sound recording are often focused on movement, on feet and marching. In the longest sequence of the film women sit close together in circles—angry, arguing or laughing together. Responding creatively to the difficulty of the shooting process, *Molkarin* also engages innovatively with still images by bringing dynamic camera movement to photographs of large gatherings and women marching, reminiscent of Third Cinema aesthetics.

The need to actively produce a shared sense of solidarity, rather than assuming it, and to craft hitherto unknown screen representations through collective practices of re-

enactment, produces a particularly remarkable energy in *Tambakoo Chaakila Oob Ali*.⁹ Yugantar filmmakers spent four months in Nipani, listening to the stories of female tobacco factory workers after their working hours during late evenings and through the night. Many of them recounted their working conditions but also the significant strike actions which made the Nipani factory workers' union into the largest movement of unorganized labour at the time as well as the most successful: its demands for higher wages, breaks and paid overtime were ultimately met and became an example for others.¹⁰ Yugantar deployed those accounts to sketch a collage-like loose script for image and voice-over that laid out the harsh working conditions as well as the successive development of political consciousness. They brought the script back to the workers, drawing them in as collaborators. The workers arranged access to the factory for the filmmakers for two hours. Once inside, the workers directed the crew very precisely so that the camera would capture what they deemed important: the closure of the factory gate after 8 am leaving latecomers out, which meant losing a day's salary; the toxic dust created through the beating of tobacco leaves; the locked ventilation in the factory ceilings to ensure better-quality tobacco and enable collection of dust which could also be sold, all creating a very poisonous working environment; the new machine which workers had sabotaged by throwing a small stone into it to prevent women being substituted by machine work; the stairs leading to the factory owner's office to which women were called to provide sexual favours.

What is more, the women workers re-enacted crucial aspects of the strike. This demanded large-scale gathering of hundreds of women in public squares, where they ate and slept, held meetings, listened to speeches. Working-class women, who had gone through a process of becoming political to defend their rights as workers, were now re-embodying and reliving their politicization process in and through the screen, as it came to be played back to themselves and later to many others across the country, supporting the emergence of unions.

Analogous to the development of image aesthetics, the film's voice-over was scripted from the conversations recorded during the research process. The script was returned to the workers, who then read the lines they themselves had helped compose, now for the purposes of recording, thus inducting their own distinctive enunciations and political speech acts into filmic representation. This collaborative working process was complemented by the inclusion of the workers' comments on the rough-cut during informal midnight screenings. The final voice-over thus became a collage of pluriverse testimonies re-enacted. Pioneering for its time and context, *Tambakoo Chaakila Oob Ali* was not carried by an expository commentary of the filmmakers, nor by authenticating any particular worker through their directly filmed testimony, thereby "(...) resisting the patronising act of 'giving a voice'. The voice-over (...) embodies a collective testimony. (...) 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."¹¹

Film/Political Education

Dhanraj and Baiya have stressed the importance of creating "political trust" and developing a learning process in which collaborative filmmaking was a key feature. Their collective learning process challenged and contested the Marxist-Leninist political vocabularies of labour they came out of; and it inaugurated new formal choices in their filmmaking. In hindsight Dhanraj however also critiques their wanting to create "working-class heroines".



4
Production still from
Tambakoo Chaakila Oob Ali,
1982.

Caste-based divisions, the fact that many factory workers were Devdasi women, Muslim women or widows and therefore perceived as sexually available for the factory owner—these issues were not engaged with, just as the question of domestic violence tended to be excluded from their agenda at the time.

While this self-critique is more articulate now, it did lead to Yugantar's collaboration with the feminist research and activist collective Stree Shakti Sangathana. sss's extensive research expanded the then prevalent debate on dowry deaths and suicides to naming violence—specifically domestic violence—and came to focus on the family, including the middle-class family, as a key site of patriarchal violence. In a consciousness-raising style of night-long debates, Yugantar and sss shared their own experiences of violence. These cathartic conversations culminated in *Idbi Katha Matramena*, an improvised fiction film that continued Yugantar's pioneering of multilayered self-reflexive female subjects on screen.¹²

A Feminism that Metabolizes the Archive

Idbi Katha Matramena became Yugantar's "hit film", with diverse female audiences stirred to tears and passionate debate. A recent screening of the film at Hyderabad University provoked emotional responses, forging a connection almost directly to current debates on the nuances of sexual harassment.

Yugantar's films raise questions about the legacies of feminist archives for documentary and political practice today. The restoration of the 16mm prints—showing traces of the many screenings during the early 1980s and of adverse climatic storing conditions—carries the charge of an enthusiasm for the vibrant political time they emerged out of. At the same time it has been accompanied by questions. How to relate to political and filmmaking

legacies neither as a practice of excavation nor of prescription? How to acknowledge and make productive the limitations of questions posed and issues raised that were part of the political context they were born from? Actively working with the feminist archive as living metabolism would build on their singular synergies; it would do the kind of archiving, restoration, screening and thinking work that connects to that nowness that releases and translates the affective spaces of radical change without ossifying our readings of these traditions. What is to be restored and persisted with is the making of new alliances between film and political practice and novel concepts of collective political realms.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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All images in this essay are by Navroze Contractor.

NOTES

- 1 A civil society organization for Workers Rights and Corporate Accountability, based in Bengaluru. See www.cividep.org.
- 2 A Bengaluru-based NGO and union working for women workers in the textile industry. <https://femnet-ev.de/index.php/en/solidarity-fund/munnade-india>.
- 3 R. Menon, *Making a Difference: Memories from the Women's Movement in India* (New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2011), p. xii.
- 4 Baiya was a researcher and activist who later co-founded the organizations Saheli and Jagori (both Delhi-based); Dhanraj had been an apprentice with fiction filmmakers Pattabhi Rama Reddy, M.S. Sathyu and Chandrasekhar; Rao was working in an advertising agency and is now based in the US; Contractor was trained in camera and Somashekar in sound engineering, both at the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII), Pune.
- 5 Baiya, Contractor, Dhanraj and Somashekar continued to collaborate on *Sudesha* (30 mins, 16mm, colour, produced by Faust Film, Munich) and *Something Like a War* (51 mins, 16mm, colour).
- 6 Contractor, email conversation with author, March 2018.
- 7 D. Dhanraj in transcript of panel "Current Urgencies, Feminist Legacies and Political Fiction", with S. Chhachhi, D. Dhanraj and M. Dutta; conceptualized and chaired by Nicole Wolf, for *Visible Evidence 21*, New Delhi, December 11–14, 2014.
- 8 Some of the founding members in early 1978 were Lalita K., Vasantha Kannabiran, Rama Melkote, Uma Maheshwari, Susie Tharu and Veena Shatrugna.
- 9 See also: N. Wolf, "Projecting *Tambakoo Chaakila Oob Ali*: Reflections towards a Versatile Archive of Political Cinemas", in Raqs Media Collective and S. Sarada (eds.), *Sarai-Reader 09: Projections* (New Delhi, 2013), pp. 284–90.
- 10 See C. Datar, *Waging Change: Women Tobacco Workers in Nipani Organize* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989).
- 11 Wolf, "Projecting *Tambakoo Chaakila Oob Ali*", p. 289.
- 12 An extended discussion of *Idhi Katha Matramena* is forthcoming in *MIRAJ 7.2 (The Moving Image Review and Art Journal)*.

