Ohm, Britta. 2022. “Looking Back in Wonder and Concern.” *Dastavezi* (4): 87-96

DASTAVEZI
THE AUDIO-VISUAL SOUTH ASIA

Looking Back in Wonder and Concern

Britta Ohm

Abstract

Thirty years after shooting their student documentary on cinema and media change in India, one of the three (female, Western) filmmakers contemplates the gendered and cultural conditions of creating the film and how they resonate with the trajectory that Indian politics has taken over these past few decades. The film is a self-reflective journey into different protagonists’ relations to images and various media in an era of globalization that was sold as promising, liberating, and empowering as much as it was rife with apprehensions of westernization. The essay fleshes out that, in hindsight, the film bears many early signs of the socio-economic frictions, the forms of entitlement, and the ultimately brutal transformation that neoliberalism and Hindu nationalism have since enforced.

Keywords: Indian cinema, video culture, satellite television, 1990s globalization, gendered filmmaking, Hindu nationalism/Hindutva

Film: https://crossasia-journals.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/index.php/dasta/article/view/19132/18647

I began writing this short essay on our early film project when India's current prime minister Narendra Modi visited Berlin in May 2022. In his ostentatiously “Indian” attire that—as he doubtlessly intends—prompts German officials to put their palms together in *Namaste*, Modi came to meet Germany's new chancellor Olaf Scholz, who heads a coalition of Social Democrats, Greens, and Liberals. Encomiums were meted out to Modi as “a pivotal partner” (against China, e.g., even though that was not voiced,

obviously). Conversations between the two statesmen revolved around the global energy crisis (in the course of Putin's war against Ukraine), the terms of trade and investment, climate change, and digital transformation. Omitted was any palpable mention of the populist authoritarianism—characteristically violent, digitally supported, and rabidly anti-minority—into which Modi's prime ministership has quickly and foreseeably developed since 2014. German media, as usual hardly interested in Indian matters, were busy wringing their hands over how Putin had been underestimated for years.

While military ceremonies were being held, handshakes exchanged, and agreements signed between Modi and Scholz, a photo began circulating on Twitter, allegedly taken in 1993. It showed a round-faced, already grey-haired Narendra Modi on a sunless summer's day in Frankfurt. Sporting a blue rain jacket over a white polo shirt. He stands, his hands confidently tucked in his pockets, beside a friend who appears to be leaning in awkwardly. They were standing in front of the statue of Charlemagne, King of the Franks and the Lombards, and the first Holy Roman Emperor, who confidently holds up the *globus cruciger*, the globe surmounted by a cross. It remained unclear what the motivation was for posting this photo now (as much as it remains unclear what might have motivated Modi to pose then in front of that statue). Whether it was to show that Modi had long-term friends in Germany, to point out that he was even at that time a busy politician on a "stopover from the US" (as the tweet read), to simply picture how he looked 30 years ago in the same country, or to suggest that it is now Modi's turn to build an empire of global influence under another sign. In any case, it served to underline what a long way he has come since 1993.

At the time that photo was taken in Frankfurt, our student film team—Rita, Andrea, and myself, then in our early to mid-20s—were sitting in Berlin in a community editing studio. We were endlessly debating and, with the patient support of the brilliant cutter Karaman Yavuz, montaging the heap of material we had brought back earlier in the year from our nearly four-month shoot in India. It was amazing enough that we had managed to stick together this long, for we had not been a self-assembled team. We had come together through a scholarship program[1] that only accepted individual applicants for projects already formulated. It was another coincidence that both Rita and I, who already knew each other from an earlier trip to India, were accepted for the same project, generically titled "Cinema in India." We were lucky that Andrea, who had

1 ASA Program (*Arbeits- und Studienaufenthalte in Asien, Afrika, Lateinamerika*—Work and Study Visits in Asia, Africa, Latin America)

at the time been working freelance for Deutsche Welle (DW), was assigned to our team as its third member.

Together, we had felt bold enough to argue that a visual topic such as cinema demanded a visual approach and that we wanted to depart from the foundation's default requirement of producing a report, offering to make a film instead. We had bought a camera, an Hi8 (it was a format then hyped as the next big thing but that eventually went nowhere). We had applied for an extension and extra funding (miraculously, we got it). We had done some camera tests before our departure, street interviews in which we had asked nonplussed German pedestrians about what they associated with "India," drawing many blanks and clichés about elephants, spices, Goa, and widow-burning (Bollywood and SRK – Shah Rukh Khan – had at that time yet to hit the West). We still fumbled with the technicalities of the camera on the flight to Delhi. We had trusted in the Sony Professional sound recorder that Andrea had borrowed from DW and that was promptly stolen. And in all this amateurish struggle, we had decided to redefine our topic. We found India to be undergoing an acute media change. This involved increased consumption of video rentals and particularly the "satellite invasion," as it was popularly termed then, clearly flaunting neo-colonial/ imperial connotations: the fast proliferation of cable television, notably driven by Rupert Murdoch's Star TV, which was implicated in palpable technological, social, political, and economic shifts and appeared to severely question the historical dominance of cinema as mass entertainment. (This was before the "second wave" of cinema in multiplexes from the late 1990s onwards). Deciding to follow this moment with our still unfamiliar new companion, the video camera, we had thrown ourselves, wavering between journalistic and documentary impulses, into the fast flow of change at a time that sold itself as promising and liberating but that revealed itself to be riddled with problems and warnings upon the slightest scratch of the surface. I had no idea then that, for me, this plunge would mark the beginning of a lifelong academic occupation with the politics of media in India.

The completion of our editing in December 1993 was followed by a few semi-public screenings to well-meaning audiences. There were half-hearted deliberations about sending the film to small festivals. But the film's format, in many ways the unique result of the diversity of our team and of an unplanned process, was unlikely to fit in with most of those. Initially, we occasionally nurtured fantasies of returning to the film and preparing it for broadcasting. This, however, would have required, among other things, our securing the rights for the extensive pirated sequences of arthouse- and Hindi

(Bollywood) films we had montaged; alone this prerequisite doomed such fantasies to remain unrealized. After that, it boiled down to occasionally showing our rough VHS-copies of the film to friends and family. Eventually my own copy vanished in a fire in our flat. However, the master tape (Beta SP, blown up from Hi8) had been carefully stored, first by Rita, then by Andrea. Our commonly created product has never really lost its special status for us, allowing us to remain as a "team" irrespective of the different roads that we have since taken. When we unearthed and digitized the master tape and I watched the film for the first time in many years, there was also this thought: What a long way we have come since 1993 (even though I can only really speak for myself in the following).

Much in the film is quirky, precocious, and at times judgmental; it provokes the occasional facepalm or outburst of giggles. And from the perspective particularly of conventional ethnographic filmmaking, the film is outright untenable.

Yet, it also identifies and foreshadows many developments that only came to show their significance in later years. These include, notably, the brutalities of neoliberalism and the central role of media technologies in the ensuing post-colonial, post-socialist and post-secular transformation. It is a visual document of a time, place, and context of which I have not seen many others. India, too, has come a long way since 1993.

I cannot quite remember if it had been the early theft of our precious sound recorder that was ultimately responsible for our decision to work with protagonists, ones we found in a somewhat ad hoc manner and through friends and acquaintances, without letting them speak in the film. We instead led off-camera conversations with them to learn about their relationship with images and changing media. Clearly, the language barrier was decisive. None of us were proficient in Hindi or any other Indian language, let alone dialect (even though Rita had a Punjabi father and studied Indology, and I had attempted, in a megalomanic fit, to learn both Hindi and Bengali during our preparation phase). The lingual priorities in the four locations we eventually covered in the film—Delhi, Rajasthan (Borunda village), Calcutta, and Bombay—made it evident to us, however, that even proper knowledge of Hindi would not have carried us all that far in working through the comparisons and complements of spatially defined stories that we eventually came to seek. We thus remained dependent on alternating translators who, on top of everything else, translated for us into a language, English, that was neither their native tongue nor our own and that we hardly mastered at that time (eventually, we did take home a solid knowledge of Indian English). The many

layers of language and communication (and its failures) would, taken by themselves, have provided enough subject matter for a film. But we were neither modest nor sensitive enough to realize that then.

I do remember that I was very taken at the time by the concept of the essay film, thematized by the great Chris Marker, and that I found myself eager to find ways of letting image and text resonate with each other. Thankfully, my co-directors, and the realities we faced, quickly brought me down from such wild overambitiousness. We were dealing, after all, not with abstractions but with concrete humans who were willing, or not so willing, to give us some of their time. And that turned out to be a massive challenge under postcolonial and gendered conditions. Already the sequence with our first protagonist—Kumar (then about our age), film buff and employee in our Delhi guesthouse—inadvertently demonstrates our grandiose failure in even trying to align our textual renderings of what he had readily told us about himself and his passion for cinema with our attempts to visually portray him in his daily life. We had been keen to accompany Kumar and his friends to the cinema. While what he had claimed—that he was always working and had no time—was plainly evident, we had been blissfully numb to the subtext: How could he possibly show up at the cinema and in front of his mates with three Western women? Nor did he want to be portrayed doing the daily chores as a servant. Kumar thus confronted us straightaway with a fundamental question about documentary filmmaking (and, by extension, about research work per se): How do we show somebody who does not want to be shown in the way we see them? Where, and why, does the right to one's own image end (even figuratively)? And how do the spaces and limits of interpretation and assessment constitute themselves?

In fact, when seeing the film again today, our continuously encountering borders—"walls," as we repeatedly call them—our negotiating limits and at times stubbornly overcoming failures, emerges as the underlying red thread, and essentially it is this, I think, that makes the film still worth watching today. Limits were not only posed by our protagonists, even though those were the most immediate. The "solution" we found with Kumar, to everyone's dissatisfaction, was in many ways symptomatic of a much wider postcolonial context than our short moment of filmmaking: We claimed to respect Kumar's pride and preferences at the very same moment that we were disregarding them. Too eager, too dependent were we to take home images for the production of which we had already received money and the delivery of which would potentially enhance our resumes. In a way, we were thus inadvertent replicators of the

West's notorious hypocrisy that we had, of course, vouched to critique. At the same time, we bought ourselves the opportunity to at least point to the then-rarely addressed questions of caste, race, and class in our eventual textual-visual framing of Kumar as someone situated between professional and social subordination and private (cinematic) aspiration.

This pattern remains noticeable throughout the film. Whereas the camerawork demonstrated some moments of surprising craft (at least to my eyes today), the images of our protagonists repeatedly have a "stolen" feel to them; sometimes they even appear as boldly robbed and obviously staged—a flaw that we more or less successfully resolve and legitimize with textual contemplations and explanations and, again, with some surprisingly well-chosen soundtracks. Overall, and from today's perspective (and in today's academic codes), it was a remarkably wide spectrum of questions that we, rather intuitively, touched upon and that we extracted from our protagonists' interviews (and from the accompanying research) for incorporating into the commentary: questions of micro- and macro-economy, labor migration, male/masculinized entertainment culture, and Indian philosophical approaches to the sensualities of image-making and logics of storytelling (Chowdhury family/Delhi II); questions pertaining to the scope of media and mediation through the ages, of image-addiction, state television, and experiential patriarchy (Detha family/Borunda village); questions of time, temporality, history and continuity, of art (film), religion and politics, male aggression, female emancipation, and relations of new wealth and old poverty (Debatri Das/Calcutta); questions about rupture and imitation, commercial cinematic production and crisis, infrastructural and aesthetic transformation, middle-class private seclusion and exposure to new global images, social recklessness and political violence (Jajodia family/Bombay).

This rather broad canvas was undergirded by inquiries into locally and globally different cultures of seeing and being seen, and likewise, by interrogations of different levels, positions, and penetrations of view, gaze and perspective, of visibility, invisibility, exposure and taboo, of appearance and reality. Especially the latter related to the ubiquitous question of what the camera does, what it enables and what it disables through its sheer presence; what an image is—a projection, an imagination, a framed cut-out of reality?—how it differs from a picture (we only learned in time that there were distinct terms in English for what is the same, *Bild,* in German), and what different meanings they can acquire for different people, in different contexts. Most concrete became the question of what our presence as Western women, equipped with the

camera, did to the very reality we wanted to capture; how our privilege of movement and skin color collided with our being sexually harassed and spatially restricted.

There is a scene, located in the Chowdhury family/Delhi II-section, that at first glance seems to repeat the mistake we had already made with Kumar but that I read quite differently today. While discussing the high popularity of video rentals at the time, we show commotion at the local *video parlour* in Siddarth Extension. Interestingly, it seems here that we only half pretend that it was not our presence with the camera but the overall "video-mania" that created the male-dominated scene of exhibited fun and enforced dance. The scene now appears to imply communication with the viewers: after the obvious manipulation that we attempted with Kumar, they are invited to decide for themselves what the reality was in this situation. Did we merely provoke it through our presence? Or might it have occurred this way, or similarly, even without us and our camera being there on the spot?

But there is also a moment of vindication in this scene, even of vindictiveness, which points to gender as being one key problem during our shoot. When we refer to pornography as a creeping danger of media liberalization (reiterating simplistic state morals), we show a sturdy, grumpy-looking worker who dismissively sucks on this *bidi* (cigarette/rolled tobacco leaf), even though the fellow might not have had anything to do with pornography or violence. Exploiting mere optics and calculable resentments, this montage remains highly questionable even from a journalistic point of view. In the safe space of the Berlin editing room, the uninvolved man became the embodiment of the male aggression we had often sensed and sometimes experienced. Moreover, his image set the starting point of a theme that finds a continuation and reinforcement in the following sequence in Borunda village, where we realize that it is impossible for us to break through "the wall" behind which the local women remain. We leave it unreflected/uncommented as to how it was that we always gravitated towards the all-too available men in every situation and simply did not make the effort (mainly for lack of time, knowledge and, again, shared spoken language) to dismantle that wall's bricks, one by one.

In the Calcutta section, instead, we openly montage a sequence suggesting men's attitudes towards us: demanding, scrutinizing, and dismissive. Quite irrespective of their "real" intentions, we use them as an illustration of our own emotions as much as we felt that they were using us to satisfy their imaginations. This represents a debatable employment of film as a weapon that we directed, from the editing room in

Berlin, against the wall of men and boys that had been mercilessly closing in on us—wanting to do a general shot of the famous Esplanade tram depot—until our camera lens could frame nothing but the plain reality of their shirt buttons...

A textual jump from from this sea of uninhibited, space-claiming males to Narendra Modi and Hindu nationalism/Hindutva seems to ooze some manipulation yet again. Clearly, the violent regime that Modi has come to represent has essentially been built on the legitimation and organization of a lack of inhibition, of space-taking, and male aggression. The male crowd in the film, however, was still also about genuine curiosity, which is what Hindutva has systematically stripped its followers of. In turn, it has also disabled genuine curiosity about India. One aspect that indeed strikes me most about our film is how the visual worlds and practices in India at that time were still untainted by their appropriation through Hindutva themes—and how overpowering that appropriation is today. In the sequence of our cinema visit with the Chowdhury family in Delhi, we pondered the Natyaveda as an ancient influence on the dramaturgy of the Hindi film. This reference does not merely betray an inquisitive cultural innocence that would be problematic today because of its ignorance towards dominant Brahminical codes and traditions in popular culture. It also expressed a freedom of perception, learning, and questioning—including the freedom to make mistakes—that the Hindutva-occupation of all spheres has dramatically limited. Every interpretative move now demands reflection as to whether it might inadvertently play towards the evolved "Hindu rashtra" hegemony or attract the wrath of its proponents. Ignoring Hindutva must of necessity now be a conscious act of cultural re-appropriation, one that requires refined scales of intimate knowledge and walks a tightrope. Attempting to do a film in the way we did it back then would be impossible today. There are some good reasons for that. But, as it stands, more bad ones.

In the Bombay section towards the end of the film, in the shamelessly pirated long sequence of the intended blockbuster *Roop ki Rani, Choron ka Raja* (The Queen of Beauty and the King of Thieves), there is a short mention, easy to miss, of the “Hindu-Muslim unrest” on account of which the film industry initially held back the release of the movie. This “unrest” was the landmark of what is today commonly called “the Bombay riots of 1992/93,” orchestrated by Hindutva forces in the city after their infamous destruction of the Babri mosque in Ayodhya (Uttar Pradesh) on December 6, 1992. Equipped with our camera, we arrived in the midst of this anti-Muslim violence, with our train pulling into Bombay's Victoria Terminus (today Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus) in mid-December. We encountered a sea of Muslims anxiously waiting to

leave the city because they knew what was awaiting them. It was an image of collective fear that I have never forgotten. We did not take that very picture but many others over the coming weeks. Having missed the last local train, we spent a night, under curfew, in the Bandra mosque with terrified Muslim families, beleaguered by Hindutva mobs outside, yet protective of us...

The material we shot during the violence lies still stored away, unwatched since then, in the box with the original Hi8-cassettes. It was never transferred to Beta SP because we decided early to leave the violence out of the film. The gap to bridge would have been impossibly deep for us. I somehow imagine, though, that I sense in the Bombay section of the film an underlying tension and resentment of ours, leading us to bolder, even harsher framings and interpretations; also with our protagonists, the Jajodia family, who, interestingly, was delivering themselves to our camera lens with much greater ease and confidence than others. And the manner in which we show them, which is rather instinctive and again potentially unjustified, allows them to appear with the unimpressed air of the new (Hindu) middle class about them—a middle class that had nothing to fear and everything to gain.

In many ways, the "Bombay riots" constituted the last round of anti-minority violence that could be "left out" of a documentary that was otherwise oriented differently, without distorting its framework. Looking back, it marked the ultimate end of the narrative of "aberrations" that such violence constituted from the claimed normality of India's post-independence, Nehruvian democratic state. Ten years later, in 2002, when I did my ethnographic PhD research on transnational and commercial TV production, live images of the anti-Muslim pogrom in Gujarat flickered 24/7 for many weeks across the already vastly proliferated TV screens in the country. The pogrom was organized under Gujarat's then-chief minister Narendra Modi. In 1993, he had still been a *pracharak*, a full-time volunteer/propagator of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the long-established fascist core organization of the sprawling Hindutva network. Now he was already the leader of a regional Indian state and, through this very pogrom, fast gaining in popularity. It was then still hard to see where things were headed, even though many indications were quite clear. And there was a sense at least among some of my research colleagues in the country at the time, and among my informants, that the already shaky former framework was now substantially shifting. Continuing as before would not merely mean for us to be unduly negligent or legitimately limited but inadvertently complicit.

Our film ends with a lengthy quote from Alberto Moravia, who traveled India with Elsa Morante and Pier Paolo Pasolini in the early 1960s and contemplated how the respective points of view of “the Europeans” and “the Indians” have coevolved during modernity. The key sentences are perhaps these: “The Indians imitate the Europeans, and the Europeans the Indians. The Indians want to believe in the reality of the senses, while the Europeans believe less and less in them.” Without thinking much of Moravia today (more of Pasolini and Morante, however), it is tempting to allow for the thought that the long trajectory of fascism in India—beginning almost simultaneously with Germany, Italy and Japan, in 1925—has been part of such an urge to believe in the reality of the senses, with the result of a massive and brutal exercise in self-disenchantment. In turn, the either genuine or feigned ignorance of European, and notably of German politicians, towards this urge now bespeaks a cultivated and dangerous disbelief towards their own inkling that fascism was never only European.

P.S. We lost touch with Kumar and the Chowdhury and the Jajodia families. From Prakash, however, the filmmaker-cousin of our protagonist Sadev Detha (seen in Borunda village), we do hear sometimes. He still occasionally does documentaries. With Debatri Das and family (Calcutta/Kolkata) we have kept up a friendship over all these years. This essay is dedicated to them.