DASTAVEZI
THE AUDIO-VISUAL
SOUTH ASIA

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About Dastavezi

Dastavezi the Audio-Visual South Asia is an international peer-reviewed, open-access e-journal, which seeks to reposition the audio-visual as a central mode of knowing and thinking about South Asia. It is the first peer-reviewed journal connecting scholarly research from and about South Asia with audio-visual practices.

The journal is committed to promoting various modes of knowing by offering a platform for knowledge production and research on South Asia in audio, visual, audio-visual, and text forms. It is motivated by our desire to enhance the understanding of contemporary political, economic, and social developments in South Asia. Acknowledging the proliferation of audio-visual material in academic research, the abundance of camera-based research in ethnographic and regional scholarship, and the potential of documentary film to contribute to knowledge production, we consider the division between media practice and scholarly research to be mutually limiting. Instead, Dastavezi seeks to establish a platform for scholars and artists, to evolve new theoretical and practical epistemologies in their engagement with South Asia.

The journal incorporates audio, visual, audio-visual, and textual materials as equal outputs of academic research in order to nourish the various affordances emerging from the nexus between film production and academic writing. With its hybrid and open-access format, Dastavezi not only enables a dialogue between academics and audio-visual practitioners, but also provides an interested public with access to audio-visual productions on South Asia and the corresponding discussions.

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Introduction

Jürgen Schaflechner and Max Kramer

This is the fourth edition of *Dastavezi the Audio-Visual South Asia*, and we are happy to welcome five authors from India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Germany, and the United Kingdom as contributors. Aside from two documentary films and two photo essays, we extend our repertoire to feature a piece by the singer and artist Wajiha Naqvi, who, with the help of one of her audio recordings, reflects on how her embodied practice produces affective atmospheres.

In our first contribution, Mallika Leuzinger discusses the role of cameras in what has, in the past few years, almost become its own genre: enabling children from disempowered backgrounds to document their lives through donated cameras. Often applauded in the Global North as a way to include the voice of those most marginalized, Leuzinger's piece criticizes the shortsighted belief that cameras provide more immediate knowledge of subaltern voices. Instead, she shows how such projects perpetuate stereotypes and are far removed from attempts to pry open the sedimented imagery of poverty and childhood in South Asia. Even more so, she shows how the contributors in particular projects have been tricked into believing their lives will substantially change for the better once they participate in the documentation of their precarious circumstances. While their (usually white) producers collect revenue and gain international acclaim, the participants frequently remain invisible. Leuzinger's piece is a criticism of participatory projects that aim to use photo cameras to portray the life of the wretched objectively. She argues that there is no outside to the representation conundrum, and the camera, as an allegedly neutral tool in the hands of the subaltern, cannot neutralize the neocolonial frames informing the very foundation of many allegedly participatory projects.

In a piece on her musical apprenticeship with the *Qawwal Bachche*, a hereditary lineage of musicians associated with the 13th century *Qawwali* musical tradition, Wajiha Naqvi reflects on the shaping of her singing voice in devotional Sufi-Islamic practice. Being a disciple of this tradition, Naqvi provides unique and personal insights into how her teacher creates her voice (Urd. *awaaz banana*) by teaching her various

embodied techniques. As a student, she cultivates a "musical space in the throat" (*gale mein jageh bithana*) through listening, repetition, and memory. Naqvi shows how this musical space produces sonic intensities through a symbiosis of rhythms, lyrical elements, and bodily practices that simultaneously affect the performer and the audience. The power of affecting and being affected makes the performer's voice (*awaaz*) the main instrument to experience and share notions of the divine in the tradition of the *Qawwal Bachche*.

What emerges as a common thread between the following two essays, authored by Vindhya Buthpitiya and Iffat Fatima, is not only the theme of the Sri Lankan Conflict but also the shared question of how "the visual" relates to agency and desire. In her photo essay, Buthpitiya explores the photo studio as a site of the collective production of desire. From this vantage point, she engages with the history of one particular studio, how it was impacted by armed conflict, the changes in digital technology, and the war-related dispersal of the local Tamil community. In pre-digital times, the studio's photographs produced identification and political memory—although susceptible to the destruction of film due to tropical weather (compare here Karinkurayil's essay in Dastavezi's last issue) or as a casualty of war. In post-war digital times, the circulation of personal identification portraits, as well as those of martyrs, gave way to cinema-style weddings and creative self-representations. In the conflict zone's fraught peace, as Buthpitiya calls it, images are memory layers that drive multiple desires.

Watching Fatima's film and reading her and Buthpitiya's essays side by side, we encounter a conflict archive: a time shortly before a fraught peace, where the destruction of war is still visibly inscribed on the people and the landscape. While Buthpitiya speaks of the studio as a catalyst for aspirations for mobility and conflict memory, Fatima's *Lanka: The Other Side of War and Peace* (2002) demonstrates how the film camera catalyzes similar desires. In the accompanying essay, Iffat Fatima revisits her film shot in 2002, just after the peace contract in Sri Lanka was signed. It traces a drive along the A9 highway, connecting the Tamil North with the Singhalese South of the country. Crucially, both together enable us to rethink audio-visual agency in zones of conflict. We can understand Fatima's approach as a way of inducing an active force into stereotypically frozen relations. She beautifully expresses this notion in her essay, noting:

*The camera does come with a certain amount of power. [...] I think
[our interlocutors] somehow willfully appropriate the camera's power;
they acquire agency. It gets them out of their victimhood in a way.
Once the film is made, the agency's power has been transferred there,
into the film. When you say it's a powerful film, what do you mean?
Essentially, the power of this agency is reflected in the movie.*

The purpose here is to rethink the documentary film's aesthetic power and limitations—one of our journal's main concerns. As Leuzinger has shown above, the distribution of cameras and lenses to marginalized groups is not enough to pry open the emancipatory potential of audio-visual media. It is rather a question of the political ethics of form.

Fatima understands the documentary form as energized by the creative power of people—as a micro-politics of filmic thought that moves below the surface and is continuously adaptive to changing contexts. The "revisiting" of a film many years after it has been created precisely reveals such alternations. In the case of Britta Ohm's contribution, it is now almost thirty years ago that she undertook the project which resulted in the documentary film *Darshana: Inverting the Gaze* (1993). Ohm begins her essay with Indian prime minister Modi's visit to Germany in early 2022 and reflects on the meaning of a photograph depicting Modi in 1993 standing in front of a statue of Charlemagne—uncannily revealing the Hindu nationalist leader's loose play with the aspirational power of aesthetics. Ohm's contemplation of Modi's image sets the tone for her essay in which she revisits the film made with two colleagues in that same year. The viewer quickly notices the filmmaker's perceptive power that came with her (then) lack of familiarity with South Asia. Ohm recontextualizes some aspects of the film that do not conform to how she understands the ethical expectations of ethnographic filmmaking today. While she criticizes her former use of what one could call the voice of documentary—a form of address as a device of representing the story and its characters—she appreciates the anticipatory stance of the film. Dastavezi's emphasis on multi-mediated formats is crucial in this regard. From Ohm's essay we discover that the sound recorder was lost during production—prompting the use of an essay-like voiceover commentary. Only by reading the essay together with the film can we engage with the ethics of filmmaking in more nuanced ways. Watching *Darshana* today, it is uncanny how the film team's reflection on the cinematic gaze and its relation to

changing media environments and gender relations predicted the desires of Hindu nationalism in post-liberalization India. We hope that through these and similar contributions, Dastavezi will become an archive for a media history of the present moment.

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Projecting Empowerment:
Camera Politics in and beyond Twentieth-Century South Asia

Mallika Leuzinger

Abstract

This essay reflects on the ongoing mobilization of the camera as a tool for empowerment in the Global South by revisiting the controversy around *Born into Brothels* (2004) and its American director's efforts to teach photography to the children of sex workers in Kolkata. The aesthetic production being demanded and, just as importantly, side-lined by the award-winning film was thrown into relief by the counter-production *We are Foot Soldiers* (2011)*, whose irreverent and sceptical energy remains instructive.

Keywords: photography, technology, gender, development, power, participation

"Empowering women one camera at a time." I was in the midst of a PhD on amateur and domestic photography in South Asia when this sentence threw me off course. I had been tracing how the camera had made its way into a range of households, or rather, came to be wielded by unexpected hands in unlikely settings since its arrival in the 1850s, and had settled on three women in particular.[1] I had interviewed their relatives and assembled an archive of photographs, letters, articles, and memories that spilled across different family homes, albums, magazines, institutions, and the internet. My research was guided by Ariella Azoulay's work, notably her monographs *The Civil*

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1 My PhD initially centered on Haleema Hashim (1928-2017), a Kutchi Memon woman living in the port city of Cochin, who had commandeered an Agfa Isolette III gifted to her husband by a wealthy relative. I also focused on the Bengali Hindu twin sisters Debalina Mazumder (1919-2012) and Manobina Roy (1919-2001), who went from experimenting with an Agfa Brownie under the tutelage of their father in the provincial town of Ramnagar to partaking in transregional amateur photography clubs that extended into present-day Afghanistan. They also came to publish their street photography from London, Moscow and Paris in the illustrated press. For discussions of their work and legacies, see Mallika Leuzinger, 2017. "The Intimate Contract of Photography: Haleema Hashim's Practice and its Afterlives." Object, 19, 29-54, and Mallika Leuzinger, 2020. "Seeing Double: The Photographic Lives of Debalina Majumdar and Manobina Roy," PIX- Personal Paradigms Issue, 86-93.

Contract of Photography (2008), and *Civil Imagination* (2012), in which she argues that photography is a political relationality. Those who in the usual terms of citizenship are marginalized or excluded have equal claims on a photograph's meaning or life, and must be recognized in "the practices of both picture taking and the public use and display of photographs" (2008, 20).

Figure1: Self-portrait taken by Hashim Usman and Haleema Hashim, c.1995.
Photograph courtesy of Nihaal Faizal.

Figure 2 (left): Page from an early album made by Manobina Roy and Debalina Mazumder, ca.1935 now with Mazumder's daughter Kamalini Mazumder in Kolkata. The photograph was taken by the author in 2016.
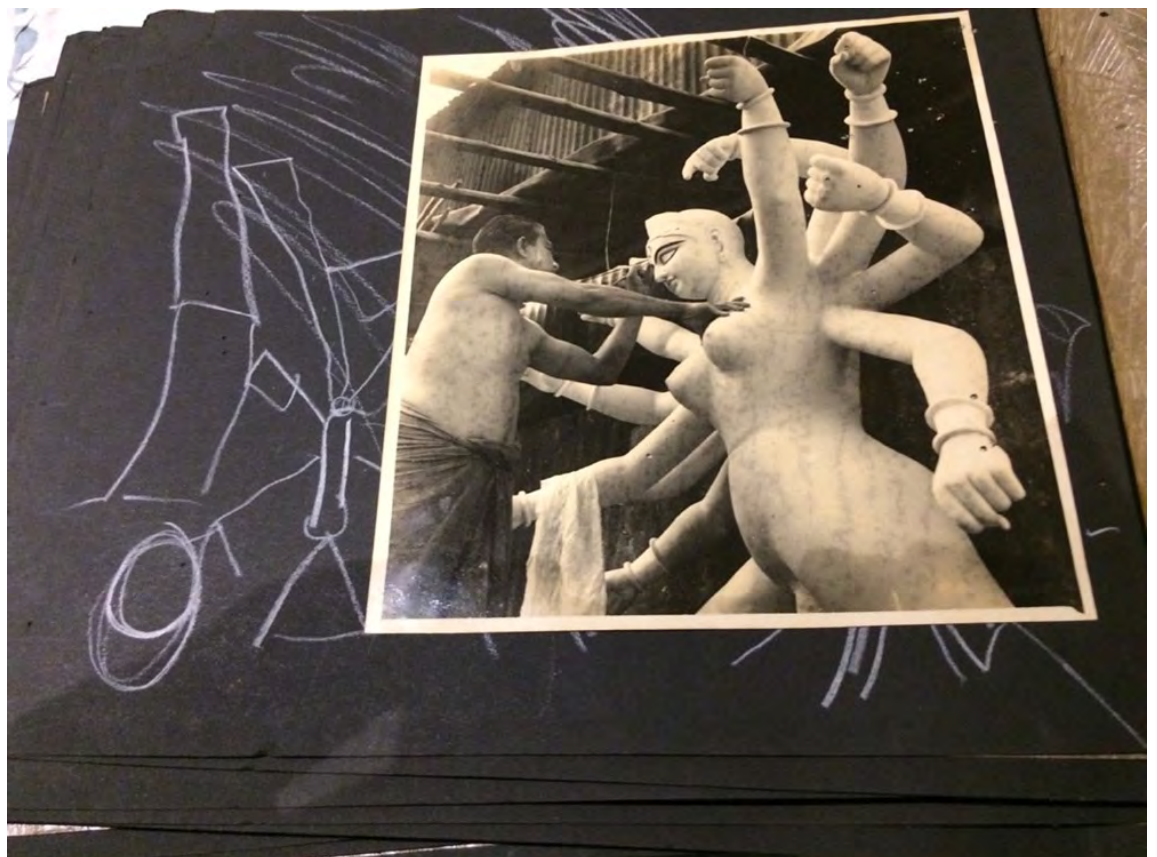
Figure 3 (right): Page from a later album made by Debalina Mazumder in the 1960s and now with her daughter Kamalini Mazumder in Kolkata. The photograph was taken by the author in 2016.

Figure 4: A copy of Manobina Roy's article entitled "A Sunday Afternoon in Hyde Park" for the March 1960 edition of *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, now with her son Joy Roy in Mumbai. The photograph was taken by the author in 2016.

Figure 5: Haleema Hashim's archive as assembled by her great-grandson Nihaal Faizal in Cochin. The photograph was taken by the author in 2016.

Azoulay has sought to maintain her conceptualization of photography as "a useful fiction" (Lewis and Parry 2021), but it was during an international conference on "women in photography" that I encountered it as a manifesto, indeed, as a developmental agenda. Specifically, I was introduced to Lensational, "a social enterprise which aims to empower women in developing countries economically and emotionally through equipping them with digital cameras and photography training."[2]

I remember seeing an infographic, in which a flurry of icons, arrows, and text boxes emanating from a single point-and-shoot camera put forth "the Lensational model," and recall being told that, from its headquarters in London and Hong Kong, Lensational had reached over six hundred women "whose voices are rarely if ever heard, from domestic helpers in Hong Kong to children of sex workers in Pakistan."[3]
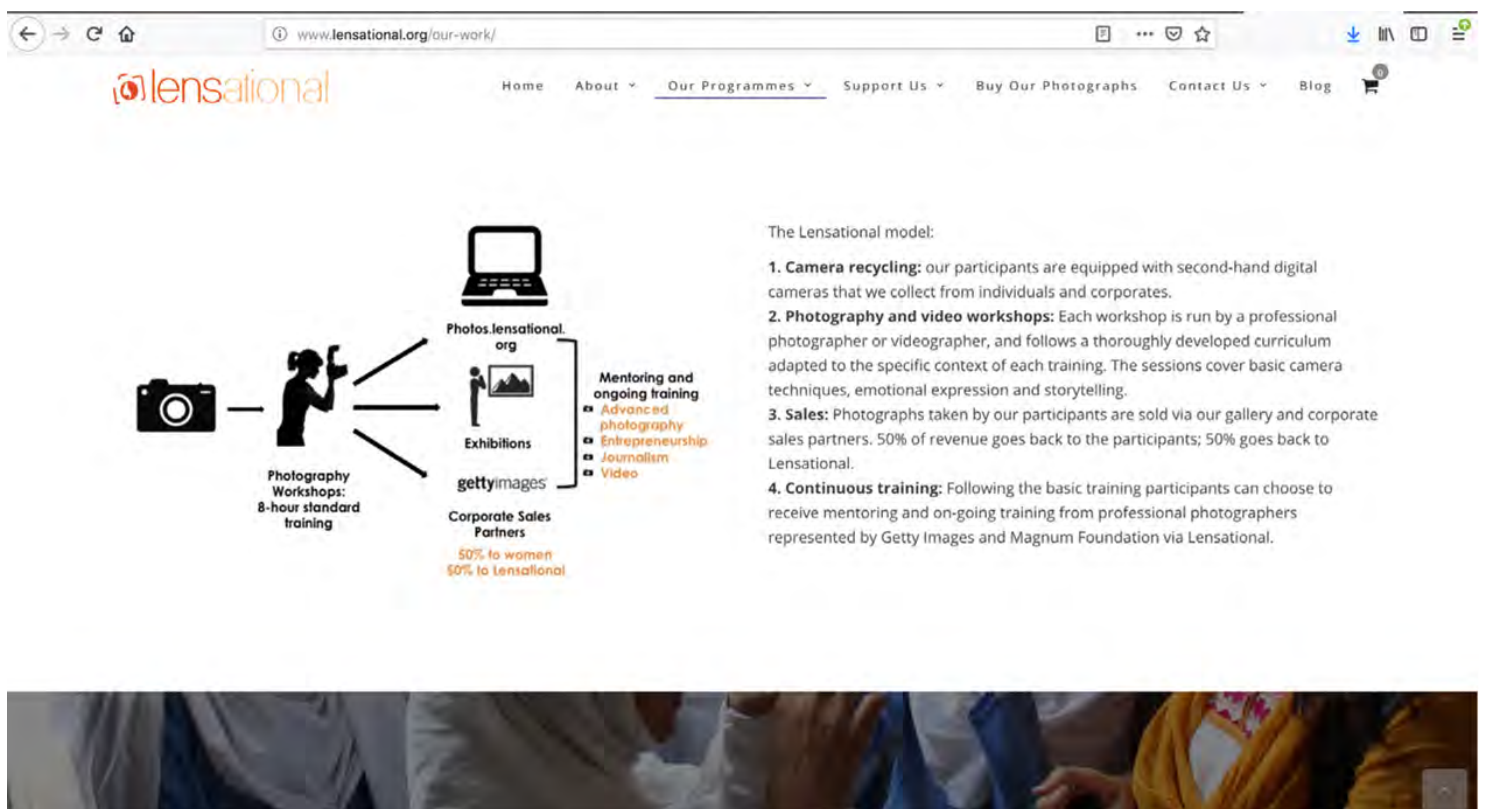

Figure 6: The Lensational model as seen on Lensational website.
The screenshot was taken by the author in 2019.

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2 See Lensational. "Home Page." Accessed 15 November 2017. http://lensational.org

3 ibid.

These assertions jogged vague memories of an American photographer who had ventured into the red-light district of Calcutta and purported to save the children of sex workers by teaching them photography, a venture which she filmed. Given the furore that had surrounded her film, I was struck by the enthusiastic tone of the presentation and the approval that it elicited from the audience. My own presentation was commended for proving that the camera had been "a tool of empowerment" even in earlier times, and for foregrounding "women photographers in parts of the world that are as yet unfamiliar within a US/European photo historical context."[4] Suddenly caught between these academic, artistic, corporate and activist visions of photography, I came to pay closer attention to the assumptions and appropriations driving them, and equally, to instances of dissent and moments of mismatch.

Camera projects

After the conference, I began interviewing the founders and facilitators of camera projects and studying the materials they produced. Scrolling through the Lensational website, for instance, involves repeated viewings of an info banner that declares in upbeat blue lettering:

> *Our work doesn't end after training. We grow our students' photography portfolio and sell their work on our own stock platform, and through our partner Getty Images. We supply you with the first female-centric collection of images produced in the developing world.*[5]

An action shot of a veiled brown woman rising above a gritty landscape into a gloriously clear sky is also set to recur. Lest her act of kicking back be seen as frivolous, heavy statistics are marshalled, such as the fact that only a miniscule fraction of the suppliers of the stock photo industry, "which is worth $2.88 billion globally," live in Asia (6%) and in Australia, Latin America, and Africa combined (1%).[6] Media reports and press releases are also provided, such as a notification that the toiletries brand Dove has teamed up with Getty Images and a network called Girlgaze, comprised of 200,000 female-identifying and non-binary "creatives" to "take action," and "drive a more

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4 See Echo Gone Wrong. 23 February 2017. "Call for papers. Fast Forward: Women in Photography – Lithuanian Edition." Accessed 27 April 2022. https://echogonewrong.com/call-papers-fast-forward-women-photography-lithuanian-edition/

5 See Lensational. "About." Accessed 31 January 2019. http://www.lensational.org/

6 See Lensational. "Impact Report 2017," 1-35, 8. Accessed 31 January 2019. http://www.lensational.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Impact-report_FINAL.pdf

diverse and inclusive landscape through media and advertising." The linked-to page consolidates rather than competes with Lensational's model, emphasizing the growing appetite for change spelled by the arrival of "the world's largest stock photo library created by women and non-binary individuals to shatter beauty stereotypes by showing women as they are, not as others believe they should be."[7]
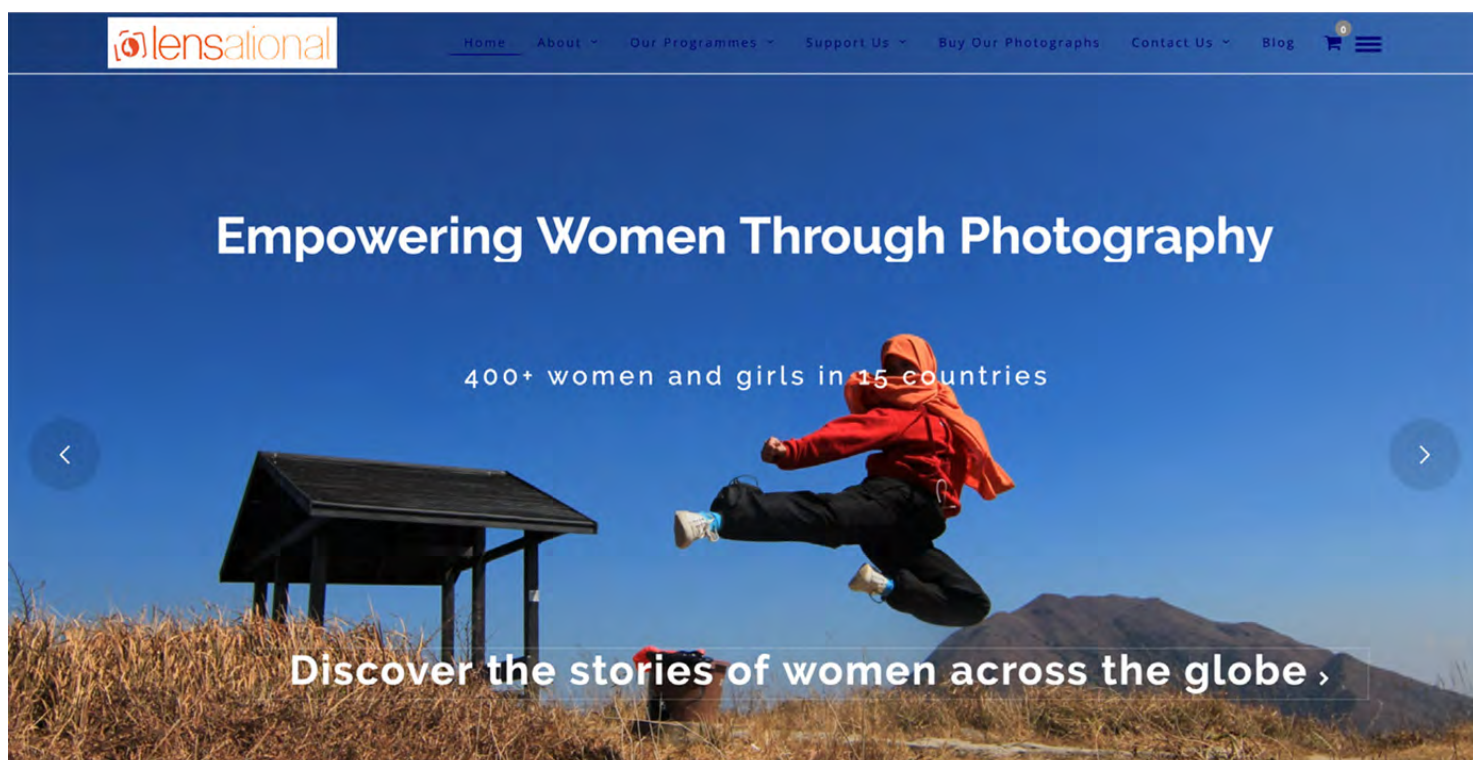
Figure 7: The landing page of the Lensational website. The screenshot was taken by the author in 2019.

I soon learned that, although Lensational's programs are mushrooming in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, and India, they are far from the only photography-based initiatives that seek out women in South Asia. There is PhotoVoice, "a UK-based charity that uses ethical photography to promote positive social change;" in 2010, for instance, PhotoVoice conducted the program "Images of Foul Play" with eleven Dalit men and women campaigning to eradicate manual scavenging in the Delhi district of Seemapuri.[8] There is "Ladies Only – Stories for All," organized by the indigenous artist Aqui Thami and the British photographer Joanna Wingate, for which five women in the

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7 See PR Newswire, 27 March 2019. "News from press.gettyimages.com." Accessed 31 January 2019. https://www.prnewswire.com/news/press.gettyimages.com.

8 See PhotoVoice. "Images of Foul Play." Accessed 20 August 2019. https://photovoice.org/images-of-foul-play/

Mumbai slum of Dharavi were lent Canon and Nikon point and shoot cameras donated by British tourists from August to October 2013.[9] Thami promoted the workshop in interviews for the city's leading newspapers, asserting that, "though the five women spoke Tamil, Telugu, Marathi, and Hindi—their communication was through portrait and street photography. The photographs and the pre-workshop interviews are compiled in a photo-book, the proceeds of which will go to the women." The article invited people to an exhibition at the Art Loft, a venue in the up-scale neighborhood of Bandra.[10] And there is Photographing the Female (PTF), launched by the Danish photographer Sarah Høilund in 2017 and intended to be "a global platform that uses the transformational power of visual storytelling to explore what it means to be female around the world today."[11]
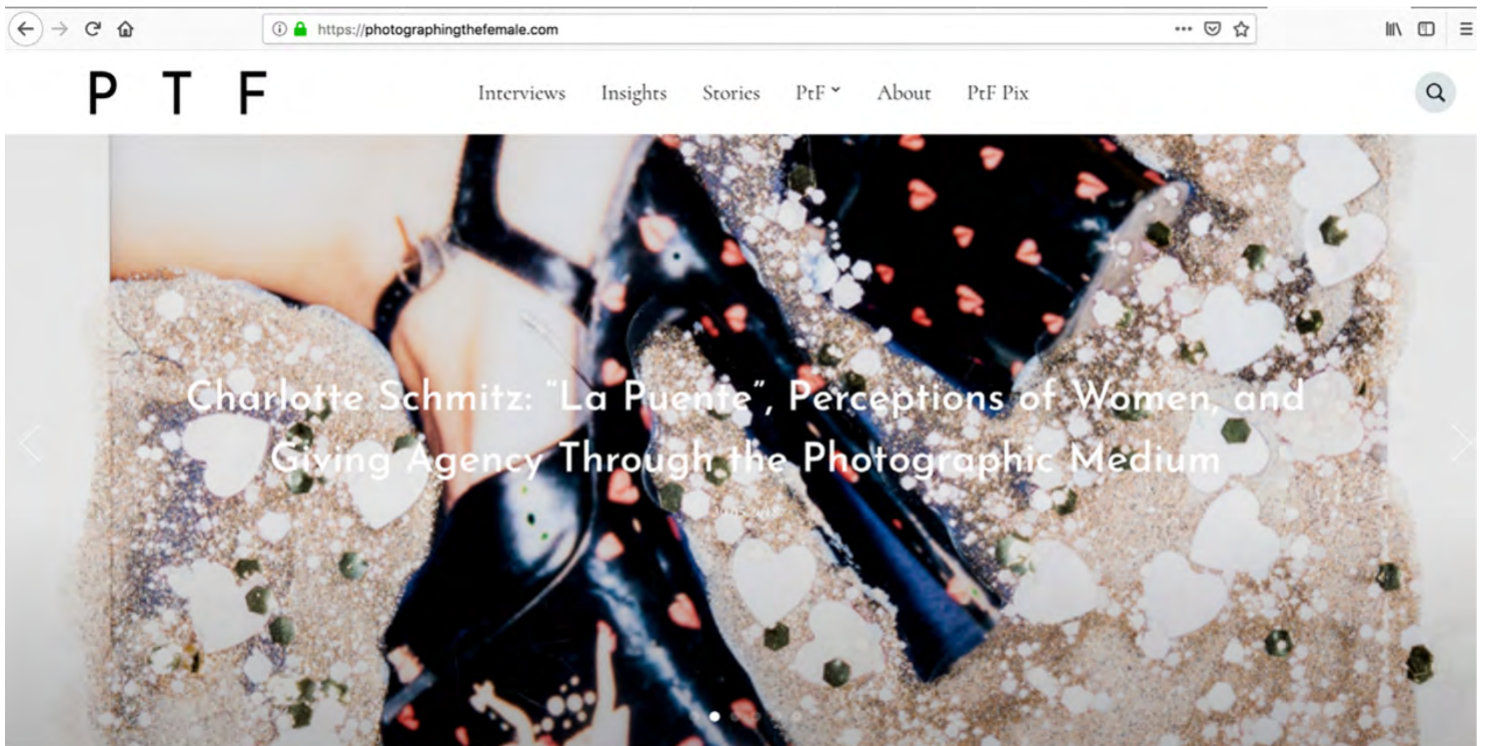
Figure 8: Landing page of Photographing the Female website. The screenshot was taken by the author in 2019.

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9 For a blog post by one of the donors which cites Joanna Wingate's detailed description of the workshop, see Bombay Jules. 2013. "The Dharavi Cameras – Follow-up News." Accessed 21 March 2019. http://bombayjules.blogspot.com/2013/11/the-dharavi-cameras-follow-up-news.html

10 See Kanika Sharma. 2013. "Mum's the word in Dharavi," *mid-day.com*. Accessed 19 January 2019. https://www.mid-day.com/articles/mum-s-the-word-in-dharavi/237589

11 See "Photographing The Female." Accessed 21 January 2019. https://photographingthefemale.com The website has since ceased to exist but for a discussion of the initiative, and even the Alsisar workshop by Høilund, see Chiara Bardelli Nonino. 2018. "Photographing the Female," *Vogue Italia*. Accessed 14 January 2022. https://www.vogue.it/en/photography/emerging-photographers/2018/06/07/photographing-the-female-by-sarah-hoilund/?refresh_ce=
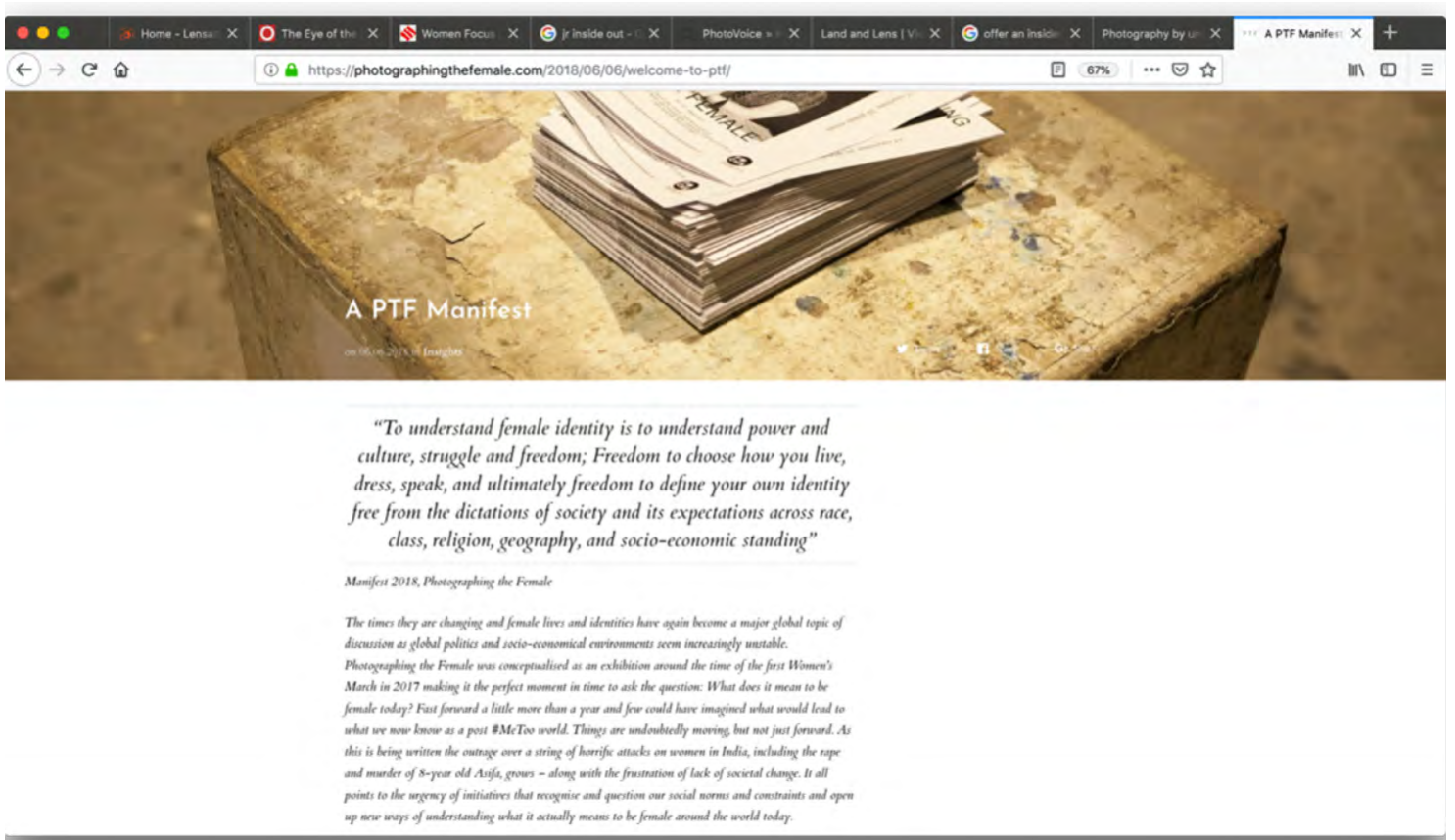
Figure 9: Manifesto page as seen on Photographing the Female website.
The screenshot was taken by the author in 2019.

PTF ran two workshops: the first was in connection with the arts and music festival Magnetic Fields, held in the former royal palace of Alsisar in northwest India, for which women from the nearby village were given 24 hours to photograph with disposable cameras.[12] The second workshop took the form of a week-long program on the theme of "girlhood" with teenage girls in Dharavi.[13] There, as Matias Echanove and Rahul Srivastava observe, "an increasing number of students, researchers, activists, and writers are feeding off Dharavi to produce new concepts, participatory methodologies, and architectural systems" (2015, 64).

Where Echanove and Srivastava's observations stop short of critique, Bill Cooke and Uma Kothari's *Participation – The New Tyranny* is forthright. Written two decades ago on the back of beleaguered development programs and, significantly, conferences, their book outlines:

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12 See Magnetic Fields Festival. "Photographing The Female." Accessed 25 August 2019. http://2017.magneticfields.in/photographing-the-female/

13 See Photographing The Female. "Workshops." Accessed 18 October 2018. https://photographingthefemale.com/workshops/

> [t]he naivety of assumptions about the authenticity of motivations and
> behaviour in participatory processes; how the language of empowerment
> masks a real concern for managerialist effectiveness; the quasi-religious
> [and I would add colonial] associations of participatory rhetoric and
> practice; and how an emphasis on the micro level of intervention can
> obscure, and indeed sustain, broader macro-level inequalities and injustice
> (2001, 14).

Born into brothels

It is my contention that Lensational, PTF, and "Ladies Only—Stories for All" revitalize a particular skeleton in the participatory closet. They hearken back to the 2004 project undertaken in Calcutta's red-light district of Sonagachi by British photographer Zana Briski and American film editor Ross Kauffman, which drew a fierce rebuttal for its adverse treatment of local participants.[14] It piqued the interest of my interlocutors, who said it was "inspiring" and "encouraging;" the Lensational facilitator who was most familiar with the project expressed his sympathy for Briski and impatience with her critics.[15]

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14 These critiques have been compiled with links to sources in 2009. See "Born into Brothels – The Hollywood Scandal." Accessed 1 March 2019. http://bornintobrothelslies.blogspot.com/

That the camera itself is simply one object in this arsenal of (neo)colonial paraphernalia is suggested by projects that deploy this language in relation to other "western" and/or "modern" objects that they "gift" to women, such as sanitary napkins. Thus the fate of *Born into Brothels* is intertwined with the current fanfare around *Period. End of Sentence*, directed by Iranian-American filmmaker Rayka Zehtabchi, which has received the 91st Academy Award for Best Documentary Short Subject. The film focuses on how the introduction of a machine that makes sanitary napkins impacts the lives of a group of women in the northern-Indian rural district of Hapur. See PTI, *The Wire*. 2019. "Period. End of Sentence, a documentary on menstruation in India, wins an Oscar." Accessed 1 March 2019. https://thewire.in/film/period-end-of-sentence-documentary-oscar-menstruation

For the earliest critique against the film-makers and producers' visions, see Mythrispeaks, 2019. "And the Oscar goes to "Period. End of Sentence" – for use of false data, misrepresentation of Indian women and violation of child rights." Accessed 1 March 2019. https://mythrispeaks.wordpress.com/2019/02/26/and-the-oscar-goes-to-period-end-of-sentence-for-use-of-false-data-misrepresentation-of-indian-women-and-violation-of-child-rights/

15 I am quoting a Lensational facilitator with whom I corresponded via email in December 2018.

Figure 10: *Born into Brothels* merchandise as seen on Zana Briski's website. The screenshot was taken by the author in 2019.
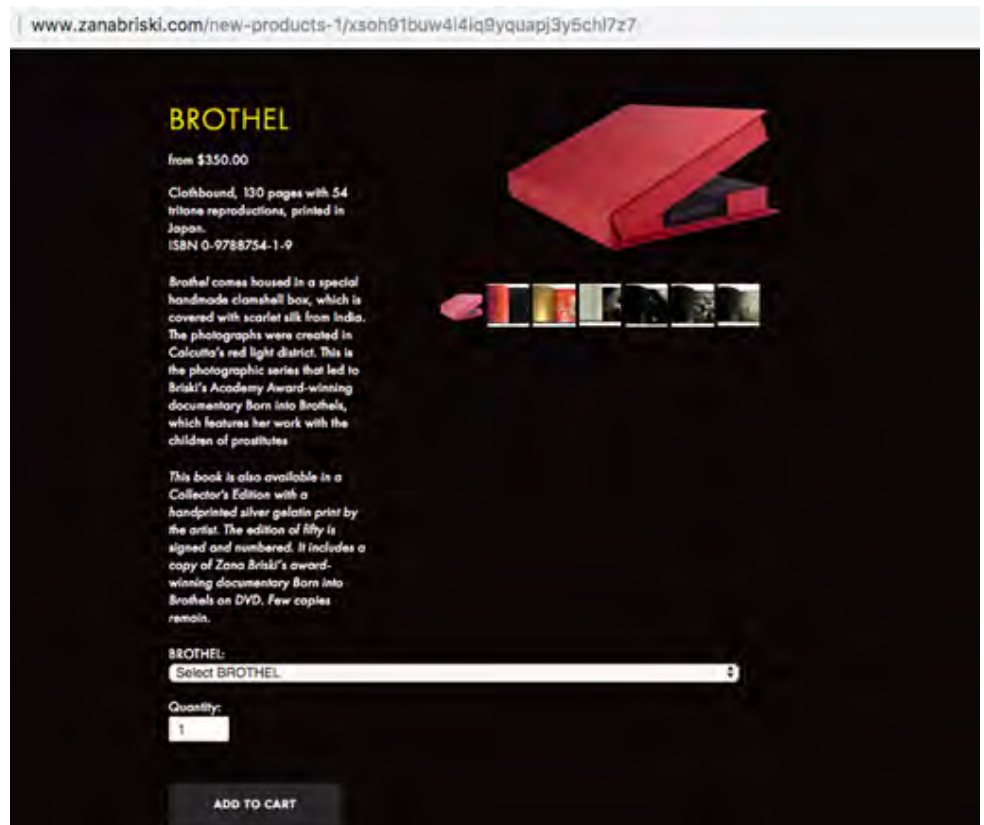
Born into Brothels chronicles how Briski arrives in Sonagachi, gives film-roll cameras to five girls—Suchitra, Tapasi, Shanti, Puja, and Kochi—and three boys—Gaur, Manik, and Avijit—and founds the charity *Kids with Cameras*.[16] Briski also elaborated on this journey for an article in a medical journal:

> *As a New York-based photographer, I became interested in the lives of these children in 1998 when I first began photographing prostitutes in Calcutta. Living in the brothels for months at a time, I quickly developed a relationship with many of the kids who, often terrorized and abused, were drawn to the rare human companionship I offered. The children were fascinated by my camera, and I thought it would be great to see the world through their eyes. I had the idea of teaching photography to the children of prostitutes. To do so would involve overcoming nearly insurmountable obstacles: brothel owners, pimps, police, local politicians, and Mafiosi. I held weekly photography workshops from 2000 to 2003. In class, the children learned camera basics, lighting, composition, the development of point-of-view, editing, and*

16 See Head First Development. "Kids with Cameras." Accessed 15 November 2017. http://headfirstdevelopment.org/kidswithcameras/

sequencing for narrative. To my delight, equipped with inexpensive point-and-shoot 35-mm cameras, the children produced incredible work that was emotionally direct and unfiltered. Their images are explosions of color: self-portraits, family pictures, street scenes, stunning tableaux of Bengali life. In 2002, I established the non-profit organization Kids with Cameras *to empower children through learning the art of photography and to support their well-being and education by sponsoring them in homes and schools outside of Calcutta's dangerous red-light district. Through the sale of their photographs, the children support their own education and their own futures. Using this project as a model,* Kids With Cameras *will send photographers to teach other marginalized children in communities around the world. (2004, 512)*

The construction of Sonagachi as a lurid space of violence and degradation, overrun by a cast of evil characters, and of Briski as a guardian angel uniquely positioned, through her Western perspective and connections, to save innocent children, catapulted *Born into Brothels* into the limelight. It won hundreds of positive reviews and thirty awards, including the Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature and the Sundance Film Festival Audience Award.[17] A reporter at *The New York Times* was impressed that "Ms. Briski had the simple, improbable and altogether inspired idea of organizing a photography class." He waxed lyrical about how the children's photographs provided the film "with some of its most beautiful and revealing images, offering glimpses of life in the crowded, colorful alleyways of the red light district that no outsider could capture."[18] Such orientalizing and exaggerated praise is just as prevalent in Indian newspapers years later. A Kolkata-based journalist declared in 2015 that Briski should be celebrated for her efforts to engage children alternately described as doomed, with their fates having "been sealed at birth, born to be shunned by society at large, with little or no prospects for their future," and as "a bunch of bright-eyed tweens, frolicking around in the neighborhood lanes, flying kites, pulling each other's legs."[19]

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17 See "A slice of Calcutta in Oscar spotlight – Born into Brothels wins award, The Little Terrorist misses out," 2005. *The Telegraph Kolkata*. Accessed 3 March 2019. https://www.telegraphindia.com/india/a-slice-of-calcutta-in-oscar-spotlight-born-into-brothels-wins-award-the-little-terrorist-misses-out/cid/669912

18 See A. O. Scott. 2004. "Nurturing the Talents of Children in Calcutta." *The New York Times*. Accessed 1 March 2019. https://www.nytimes.com/2004/12/08/movies/nurturing-the-talents-of-children-in-calcutta.html

19 See Manimanjari Sengupta. 2015. "These Children Were Born Into Brothels. But They Didn't Let Prostitution Become Their Destiny," *ScoopWhoop*. Accessed 3 March 2019.
https://www.scoopwhoop.com/inothernews/born-into-brothels/#.lj7ejr9fg

Despite this acclaim, and Briski's missionary zeal to expand *Kids with Cameras* to other countries, the organization has disappeared from public view amidst allegations of unethical fundraising and breach of promise. An internet search of the project yields reports of the children receiving little or no money raised in their name.[20] Briski has ceased doing charity work, film-making, and even photographing human subjects. Although she was amenable to being interviewed by Tiffany Fairey, the founder of PhotoVoice, in connection with the latter's doctoral research in 2011, and also by a journalist who ran a profile on her as recently as March 2017, Briski's secretary informed me that contact would be impossible given her total immersion in a long-running art project based around photographing insects.[21]

The interventions that forced this retreat began in 2005 with a letter to the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences from Partha Banerjee, who undertook post-production translation for *Born into Brothels*.[22] He contested the "often-explicit presumption by both the filmmakers and the U.S. media personalities (including the nominators at AMPAS) that the efforts by Ms. Briski and Mr. Kauffman were able to uplift the children from the poverty and destitution they live in." He had visited the children between the end of filming and the release of the film and found that they were living "even a worse life than they were in before Ms. Briski began working with them." Their parents, too, had been misled into believing that by providing the filmmakers "with so much unrestricted access to their secretive lives… and that [,] too, so generously (…[had] their written consent ever [been] requested and received by the filmmakers?) … their children would also be sharing some of the glories the filmmakers are now shining in." Above all, Banerjee objected to the film's misrepresentation of Sonagachi. The efforts of "hundreds of Calcuttan activists, social workers and medical practitioners" have made Sonagachi a relatively safe haven for sex workers and their children, a place "synonymous with many struggles won by its inhabitants." Citing well-

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20 *Kids with Cameras* no longer has a website, its URL redirecting to "Hotels-Rajasthan." Accessed 20 February 2019. http://www.hotels-rajasthan.com/kids-with-camerasorg/ For a report on the uncertain fate of the children featured in *Born into Brothels*, see Jhimli Pandey Mukherjee and Mandal, Caesar. 2009. "At the Oscars four years ago, now a sex worker," *The Times of India*. Accessed 1 March 2019. https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/At-the-Oscars-four-years-ago-now-a-sex-worker/rssarticleshow/4186270.cms

21 That Briski maintains her missionary stance is evident in her recent statement that photographing insects is "Not so different… from what I did in the brothels – bringing attention to those who are feared, ignored, abused, from their point of view." See Tony Rogers. 2017. ''Born into Brothels' Director Zana Briski Returns to her First Love: Photography", *ThoughtCo*. Accessed 21 March 2019. https://www.thoughtco.com/born-into-brothels-director-zana-briski-2073806

22 Banerjee's role as translator foregrounds how language barriers are glossed over in most of the camera projects I have studied. Briski did not speak Hindi, Joanna Wingate of 'Ladies Only' writes, "I conducted the sessions in English and Aqui, translated the workshop into Hindi for the group. This was the first such experience for me. Our group was a multi-language group! English, Hindi, Marathi and Telegu." See Bombay Jules, "The Dharavi Cameras – Follow-up News."

established "financial institutions, health clinics, sex education schools and blood banks," Banerjee ridiculed "the conjecture drawn by the makers of *Born into Brothels* that it was only them that were responsible for any humanity and benevolence doled out to these children and their parents."[23]

The most conspicuous erasure is of the sex worker's collective Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (DMSC), active in Sonagachi since the early 1990s, which facilitated Briski's stay. The DMSC's peer-based approach foregrounds the agency of the sex workers and their collective bargaining power. It is credited with ensuring that the HIV rate amongst sex workers in Sonagachi decreased to 5% and remains lower than in any other red-light district in India. *Born into Brothels* portrayal of "sex workers' odd relationships with their children… where sex workers are depicted as negligent, abusive parents who push their children into criminality and sex work" bulldozed over the DMSC's efforts to produce an image of sex work that deconstructs "the binaries of [an] moral/immoral framework that the traditional discourse is all about;"[24] and specifically, "to run not only [a] non-formal education program but varied activities to help build the career of their children."[25]

A second letter was thus penned, this time from the DMSC secretary Swapna Gayen to the editor of *The Telegraph*, Kolkata's leading English-language newspaper, following their report of the film's Oscar win. "Being a sex worker and a mother," Gayen wrote, "I can say that we are more protective as mothers than can be imagined." She highlighted that the DMSC had asked Briski "many times to share the film with our ethics committee, but she didn't pay any attention." Gayen also underscored how, "[i]n this age, when it is the norm to respect ethical considerations while making documentaries, the film used hidden cameras to shoot intimate moments in the lives of sex-workers and their work zones." Gayen feared that "the global recognition of such a film, giving a one-sided view of the lives of sex workers in a third world country, may do a lot of harm to the global movement of sex workers for their rights and dignity," reversing "hard-won victories for rights, un-stigmatized healthcare and access to resources."[26]

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23 See Partha Banerjee. 2005. "Documentary 'Born Into Brothels' and the Oscars: an insider's point of view." Accessed 9 January 2019. https://mm-gold.azureedge.net/Articles/partha_ban/born_into_brothels.html

24 See DMSC. "History." Accessed 20 February 2019. https://web.archive.org/web/20130903060029/ http://durbar.org/html/history.asp

25 See DMSC. "Equal Participation – Durbar repositions sex workers' children." Accessed 20 February 2019. https://durbar.org/html/education.html

26 See Swapna Gayen. 2005. "Nightmares on celluloid" [Letters to Editor], *The Telegraph Online*. Accessed 2 March 2019. https://www.telegraphindia.com/opinion/letters-to-editor-15-03-2005/cid/1022371

Figure 11: Still from *We are Foot Soldiers*, 2011, 0:34 as seen on YouTube. The screenshot was taken by the author in 2019.

We are Foot Soldiers

There was also a counter-production made by Amra Padatik, a collective of and for the children of sex workers under the aegis of DMSC, and by the filmmakers Debolina Dutta and Oishik Sircar.[27] *We are Foot Soldiers* begins with a lively protest march organized against the Immoral Traffic Prevention Act. Several children are seen carrying placards, chanting slogans, and generally asserting themselves on the streets, such that their political agency takes center stage. Subsequent scenes feature daily life in Sonagachi–tea is poured, Badminton is played, a mother and toddler laugh into the camera, a young boy sticks his tongue out and scampers behind a pillar—and five children in particular: Gobindo, Mithu, Ratan, Chaitali, and Pinky.

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27 The filmmakers have reflected on the ethical and methodological issues which they had to navigate. See Debolina Dutta and Oishik Sircar. 2011. "Beyond Compassion: Children of Sex Workers in Kolkata's Sonagachi," *Childhood*, 18 (3), 333-349 and "Notes on unlearning: Our feminisms, their childhoods." *Feminism and the Politics of Childhood: Friends or Foes?*, edited by Rachel Rosen and Katherine Twamley. London: UCL Press. Although my essay focuses on *We Are Footsoldiers*, the DMSC and the perspectives of the sex workers in Sonagachi were already the subject of the 2002 film *Tales of the Night Fairies,* directed by Shohini Ghosh.

Figure 12: Still from *We are Foot Soldiers*, 2011, 4:15 as seen on YouTube. The screenshot was taken by the author in 2019.
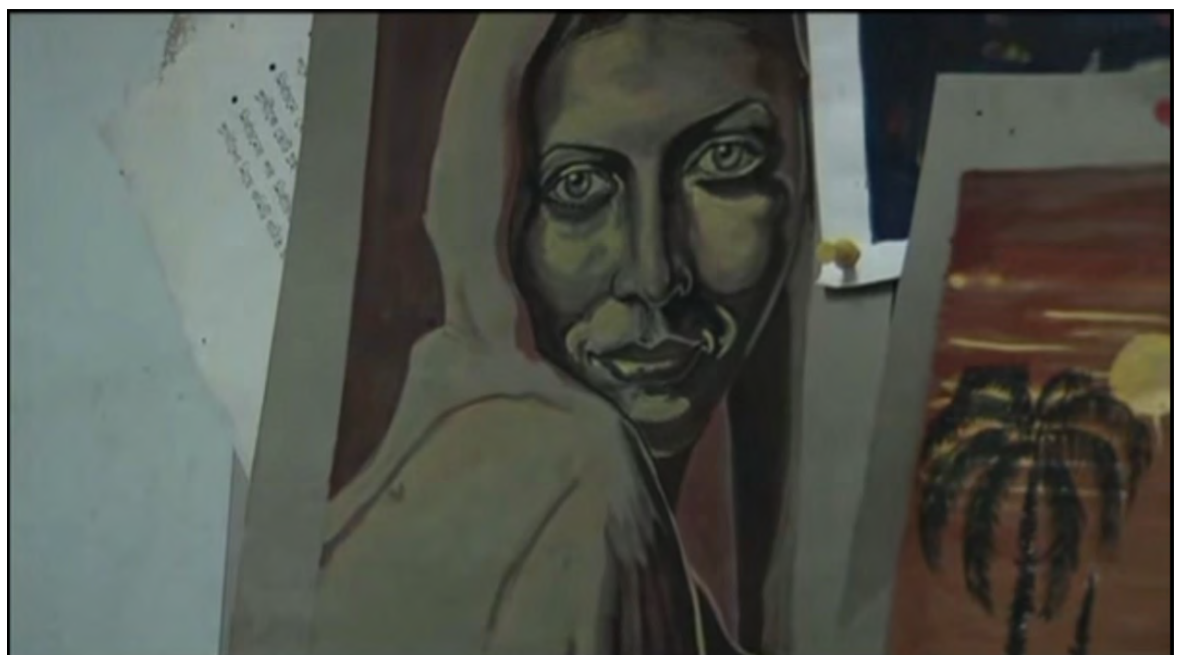
Figure 13: Still from *We are Foot Soldiers*, 2011, 2:41 as seen on YouTube. The screenshot was taken by the author in 2019.

Figure 14: Still from *We are Foot Soldiers*, 2011, 2:50 as seen on YouTube. The screenshot was taken by the author in 2019.
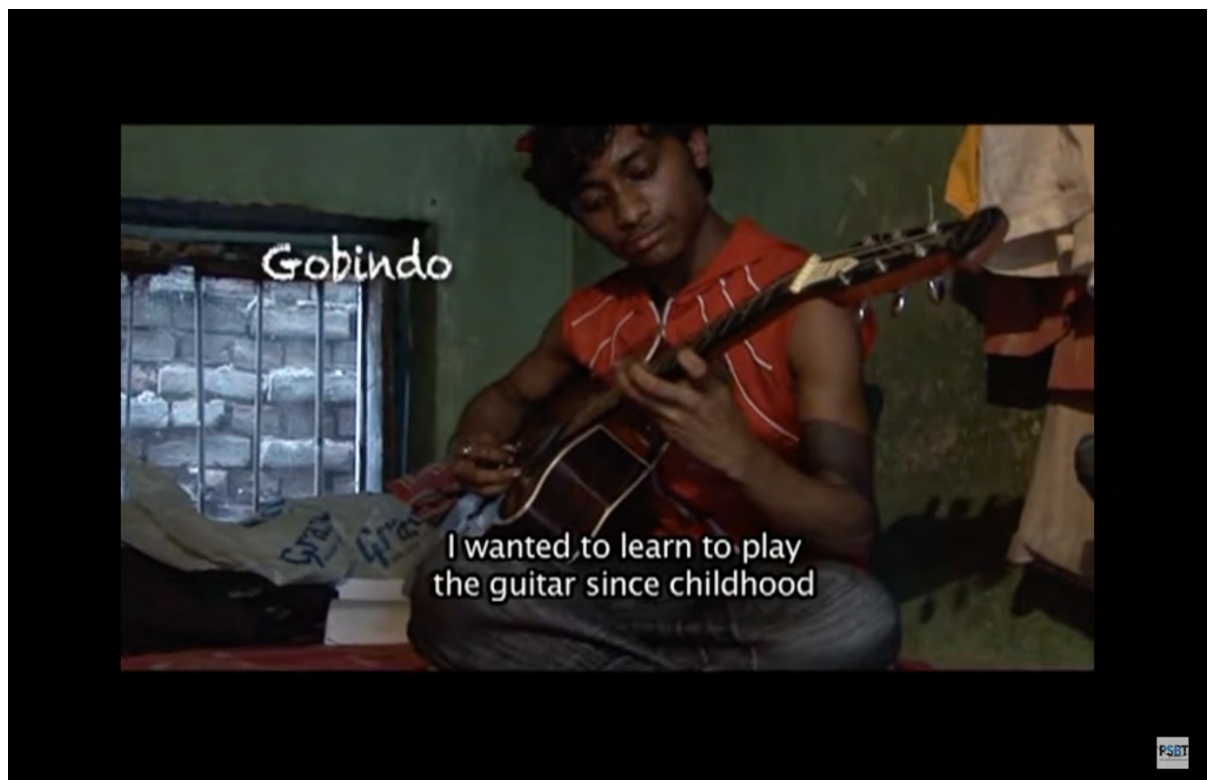
Figure 15: Still from *We are Foot Soldiers*, 2011, 1:49 as seen on YouTube. The screenshot was taken by the author in 2019.

The camera pans, for instance, over a series of women's portraits painted on canvas. As Ratan explains, "I've had a knack for painting since childhood. But I've never had the opportunity to gain formal training. If I'd see a picture anywhere, and if it appealed to me, I would paint it." In his opinion, the "neighbourhood is full of artisans. Even little boys can draw beautifully!" although he is keen to point out that his talent amounts to more than just making pretty pictures: "I know commercial art [too]. I can make thermocol models, *pandals*" (2:36). Other shots include Gobindo playing guitar, Mithu speaking about the joy she gets from listening to music with her daughter, and a dance routine being performed in a room full of adults at the edge of their seats, whose clapping and singing along discloses a keen interest and investment in their children's personal development. The voice-overs point out that, in contrast to Briski's focus on the stigma of being involved in sex work, it is the children's respect for their mothers' profession, the incomes it generates, and close familial bonds that have protected them. For Rathan, "my mother and me were like friends, we always shared our feelings with each other openly" (7:22).

In a mere twenty-six minutes, such scenes undermine Briski's authorial voice as well as the narratives now being formulated by camera project facilitators such as Aqui Thami. She told a journalist that prior to her running of the "Ladies Only" workshop in Dharavi,

> *these women haven't experienced friendship, in the sense that they never went to school, and even if they did, they dropped out quite early and never made life-long friends. Then they became busy with housework and taking care of their kids. They never went outside of their homes to do something they felt good about.*[28]

Lensational likewise introduced the two-day workshop it ran for Chennai schoolgirls by emphasizing their social isolation and heralding the need to "reach," "discover," "unveil," and "develop" their lives.[29] *We are Foot Soldiers* clarifies the extent to which such an outlook is perceived as claustrophobic, aggressive, and inappropriate by those whom it seeks to harbor.[30]

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28 See Riddhi Shah. 2017. "Dharavi Art Room: a Safe Space for Healing by Art," *The Future of Design*. Accessed 21 March 2019. https://www.tfod.in/art-design-articles/5582/dharavi-art-room-a-safe-space-for-healing-by-art

29 See Lensational. "School Girls with Nalandaway Foundation." Accessed 14 January 2022. https://www.lensational.org/portfolios/india-nalandaway-foundation/

30 The persistence of this voyeuristic schema is evidenced by an inadvertent disclosure told by the filmmaker of *Period. End of Sentence*: "We were filming people telling us things that they don't want to be talking about, so we were always trying to not be invasive, especially with the camera. And in the edit. For example, we walked into a co-ed classroom, unannounced, in India. The teacher asked the 15-year-old students if anyone could tell her what menstruation was. And there's a shot in the film of a young girl who's called upon, and she stands up completely petrified. In the film, there is about 30 seconds where she literally cannot say a word. In real life we got about three minutes of footage of her where it seemed like she was going

The film also directly confronts the hype around *Born into Brothels*, showing the children watching it for the first time on the Amra Padatik premises, scrunching up their faces and subsequently launching into a series of sharp and nuanced criticisms. Gobindo comments that: "Our lives have become consumable products in the market. That this is a bad and dirty place for children. And that the only way out is to rescue us out of the brothels… This perspective is extremely disrespectful towards our mothers" (12:58). Pinky, too, is under no illusions about the voyeuristic and moralistic gaze they have been subjected to and metaphorically turns the camera back on Briski (13:14):

> *I didn't like the film at all. It belittles us. A sex worker is shown changing her clothes. Don't mothers change clothes in all houses? Was it right to shoot that? Just because they are sex-workers living in brothels people dare to expose their lives in this way. If I go and secretly shoot their private lives, how will they feel? I heard the film won an Oscar. Given a chance… I would've beaten the Oscar out of the film!*

Arguably, *We Are Foot Soldiers* does put *Born into Brothels* in its place. The intellectual clarity and eloquence of its voice-overs, brevity, amateur montages, and graphics scupper Briski's blockbuster aspirations. And where *Born into Brothels* involved much-publicized screenings at cinemas and exclusive fundraising events at five-star hotels and can now only be accessed online upon payment, *We are Foot Soldiers* has always been freely accessible online and has been incorporated into Amra Padatik's own advocacy materials.

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to faint. It was so hard to watch and realize that the shame was so painful. In the edit, part of you wants to indulge in the drama of it and continue that shot for as long as you can. And then you realize what it is to be respectful and sensitive and not exploit them." See Nayantara Roy. 2019. "Period. End of Sentence: Transforming a Taboo into a Cause," *International Documentary Association*. Accessed 1 March 2019. https://www.documentary.org/online-feature/period-end-sentence-transforming-taboo-cause

There is no acknowledgement of how this extreme discomfort was induced by the filmmakers' unannounced presence and insistence on making her talk about her period in front of her classmates, teacher, and a rolling camera. Instead, her sense of shame is taken as a sign of village backwardness. The desire to be ethically considerate also figures here as a self-promotional gesture rather than a sincere effort to consider the girl's welfare.

Figure 16: Still from *We are Foot Soldiers*, 2011, 3:36 as seen on YouTube. The screenshot was taken by the author in 2019.

Figure 17: Still from *We are Foot Soldiers*, 2011, 12:22 as seen on YouTube. The screenshot was taken by the author in 2019.

Figure 18: Still from *We are Foot Soldiers*, 2011, 12:58 as seen on YouTube. The screenshot was taken by the author in 2019.

The construction of "new eyes" and intimate commodities

In academia, a detailed critique of the visual strategies by which *Born into Brothels* purports to see, and present, the red-light district through the eyes of its children was offered by Frann Michel. She identifies how the film's manipulative patterns of cutting between day and night, sharp and grainy, outdoor and indoor scenes construct the innocence of the children's vision in contrast to their environment. Michel also notes that "insofar as Briski's teaching directs the children to understand their photography as art, she coaxes them toward an aesthetic marketable in the Western Art world" (2007, 59) – i.e., toward images that are "emotionally direct and unfiltered" and/or "explosions of color" (Briski 2004, 512).

During "editing sessions" in which the children were asked to examine and discuss the images they had taken as contact prints, Michel flags how Briski does not attempt to teach them about developing or printing, thereby limiting (their understanding of) the process of editing to playing with composition and framing in the act of photographing. "Of course," Michel observes, "the very idea that composition and framing must be learned belies any notion of an innocent eye that simply records an autonomous vision, and Briski's vision clearly shapes the choice of images for eventual exhibition" (2007, 59).

For Michel, it is no coincidence that the project's most publicized images were "accidental" in nature. Suchitra is filmed saying that the subject of her striking portrait "was asking me to take her picture, so I got irritated and took it;" a visceral photograph Manik made of his sister's hand obstructing the camera lens is attributed to a fight between siblings rather than a collaborative creative experiment. Moreover, in giving the children analog film cameras rather than digital cameras, Michel contends that "Briski forces a lag between the taking and the reading of the image, between the children's creative and critical acts, and allows her own critical skill to intervene, as a model for theirs" (2007, 59).

This is equally so for PTF workshops whose imagery, I was informed, shared a "focus on the social element, family, kids, friends, dogs, animals. And then a good mix of household, life on the streets and objects and buildings." The organizer claimed that they had a "beautiful immediacy to them—they were rarely very staged. Much more intuitive, like snap-shots are, which also lent them a sense of intimacy and felt more personal." While the predominance of this aesthetic also proceeds from an accident ("We were supposed to show them some reference images but, as far as I remember, I forgot to bring the printouts ☺. Instead we just gave them ideas of what could be

interesting things to shoot."), it is above all the result of participants having recourse only to disposable cameras with 36 color exposures, twenty-four hours and their immediate surroundings.[31] Moreover, the choice of "disposable" cameras compounds the analogue "lag" that Michel identifies, for it leaves the participants unable to experience the developing and printing process. It also suggests that their voices/visions are not worthy of a greater investment.

PhotoVoice eschews disposable cameras in its projects because of its throwaway associations. Like Lensational, it is convinced of the long-term cost effectiveness and the broader availability of the infrastructures around digital cameras.[32] Yet both PhotoVoice and Lensational are answerable to Michel's critique. In all but the rarest of cases, their digital cameras are point-and-shoot models that companies like Nikon and Canon are donating because they are being phased out in the transition to camera phones and high-end DSLRs. Although favored by facilitators for being inexpensive, durable, and modest, these cameras are assigned to participants only for the duration of the workshop. They cannot be used outside the workshop's hours and premises because, in the eyes of the organizers, allowing participants to "take them home" means they will "likely be lost" or "taken away and sold on" by "jealous" or "disapproving" family members.[33]

Meanwhile, the curricula of the workshops proscribe the use of any technical settings other than the zoom function, let alone teaching even basic image editing techniques because these are time and resource intensive, and "good results are not guaranteed." A Lensational program manager who told me that "it is futile to teach aperture," stressed that he had no interest in "aesthetics:"

> *Far more powerful is the process of looking through the camera, when you're confident in making pictures, you're confident as a person; that skill of photographing is far more important for me to teach. I tell them to make twenty portraits, [to get] the experience of 20 people saying no to you (these are soft skills); walk x steps in this direction to take a photograph without the camera, then go back and do it; so remembering details, being alert. Photography is just an excuse, these skills are exercising your mind, [they are] team-building, leadership exercises and activities which you*

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31 I am quoting the PTF facilitator with whom I corresponded via email in January 2019.

32 See PhotoVoice, 2016. *Facilitator's Guide*. Amsterdam: https://rutgers.international/resources/photovoice-facilitators-guide/

33 These words were used by a Lensational facilitator with whom I corresponded via email in October 2018.

subconsciously learn, using photography or visual studies as a medium. The
actual image is not important.[34]

These diktats come to dominate the kinds of spaces, times of day, and ways in which participants are able to photograph; and the subsequent manner in which their photographs must circulate and be interpreted.

On Lensational's website, a visitor can thus click through them in the hundreds. Many are candid (some to the point of blurry) images of women and girls taking or looking at photographs, or engaged in manual tasks like cooking, selling small wares, and carrying water in the slums, villages, beaches, and big cities they live in. Others are studied images of women and girls pursuing physical activities with traditionally masculine associations such as skate-boarding, rowing, jumping, and riding motorbikes; landscapes like the ocean at sunset and mountains in the mist; and natural elements like waterfalls, rocks, flora, and fauna. They are browsable in digital galleries titled "Yam Festival Ghana" (20 images); "Female empowerment" (17 images); "Landscape" (46 images); "Work" (7 images), "Abstract" (34 images); "Nature" (21 images); "Photographese" (141 images); "Wanderlust of school girls in Chennai: Purvai Festival" (15 images); "People" (96 images); "Black and white" (38 images), and "Latest exhibition" (46 images), although these categories sometimes change.[35] Alternatively, the images can be willed into view by a search engine with entry fields for keywords; date range; image city/state (US)/country; orientation (e.g., horizontal, vertical, square or panoramic); and pricing type.[36] Hastily framed snapshots and heavy textual documentation also mark the "Images of Foul Play" page on the PhotoVoice website, strengthening not only Michel's arguments but also the blanket position Claire Bishop takes in *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (2012), wherein she deems such projects incompatible with the production of art.

As a specific project, *Born into Brothels* received renewed academic attention in Pooja Rangan's 2017 book *Immediations: The Humanitarian Impulse in Documentary*. Here, "photography workshops among the children of sex workers in the film *Born into Brothels"* are connected to "live eyewitness reporting by Hurricane Katrina survivors, therapeutic attempts to facilitate autistic speech, and the rehabilitation of Asian draft elephants as painters" (2017, 5). Rangan argues that this impulse is pseudo-participatory. In practice, it is parasitic upon the lives of its subjects, and is part of "the

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34 As told to me by a Lensational facilitator with whom I corresponded via email in October 2018.

35 Lensational, "Galleries." Accessed 10 March 2019. https://lensational.photoshelter.com/archive

36 Lensational, "Photos." Accessed 10 March 2019. https://photos.lensational.org/search-page

neoliberal hegemony of affective, virtuosic, and creative modalities of labor that are not recognized or compensated as such" (2017, 5). Rangan draws on the work of Marxist cultural critics to demonstrate how Briski's humanitarian media intervention does not save its participants from exploitation as it claims and has been celebrated for doing, but "actively enlists them in an insidious form of child labor that is recast as self-actualization" (Rangan 2017, 27). She unpacks an early scene in which Briski,

> [b]earing a bag full of consumer point-and-shoot cameras, contact sheets, and magnifying glasses… is led by several children to a locked room, where one of the children unlocks the door to admit her. This interaction poetically captures the trade-off embedded in Briski's altruistic claim of setting aside her own artistic aspirations to foster those of her students [...] In exchange for lessons in photography, Briski's students afford her literal and representational access to a space that is, by her own admission, indecipherable and impenetrable to a visitor. (2017, 30)

Figure 19: Still from *We are Foot Soldiers*, 2011, 12:39 as seen on YouTube. The screenshot was taken by the author in 2019.
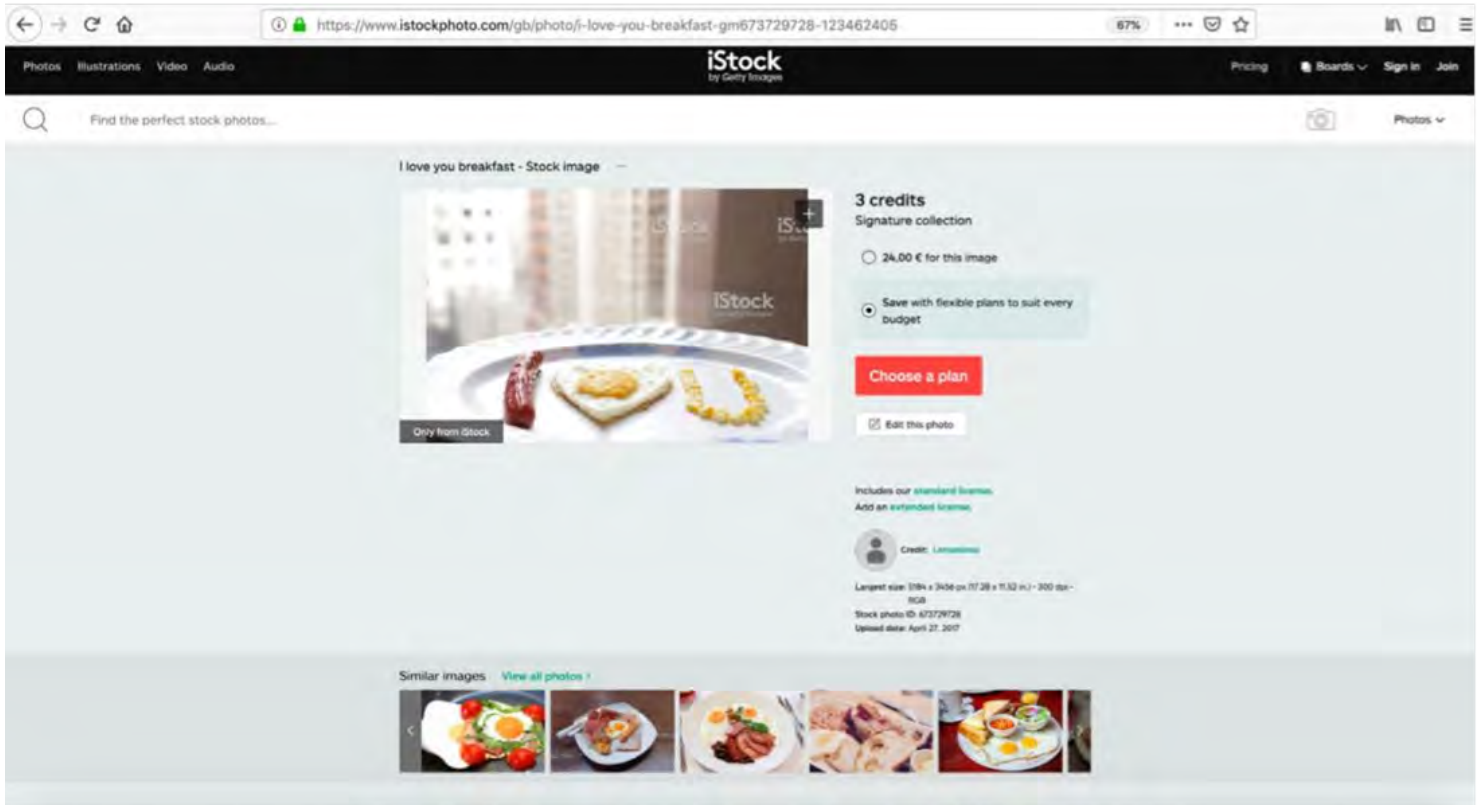
Figure 20: Photo credited to Lensational on iStock by Getty website.
The screenshot was taken by the author in 2019.

Rangan's theoretically deft analysis of the exploitative economic exchanges, discourses, and predetermined aesthetics built into participatory media projects is, to date, the strongest invalidation of their authority to connect with—for the purposes of rescuing and rehabilitating—marginalized subjects.

In the context of the camera projects I studied, Rangan's analysis casts Lensational's relationship to Getty Images, one of the largest image banks in the world, with command over an archive in excess of 200 million assets, in an especially stark light. Paul Frosh has written about the discombobulating effects of the visual content industry on the makers, subjects, and viewers of images in its obfuscation of the lines of power that have brought them together. He admits that "the connection between the production and the distribution of photographs has been increasingly tenuous since the emergence of photography as a media profession" (2003, 192). However, recent trends, which include "the acquisition of historical archives and exclusive reproduction rights by transnational corporations that specialize in 'visual content,'"
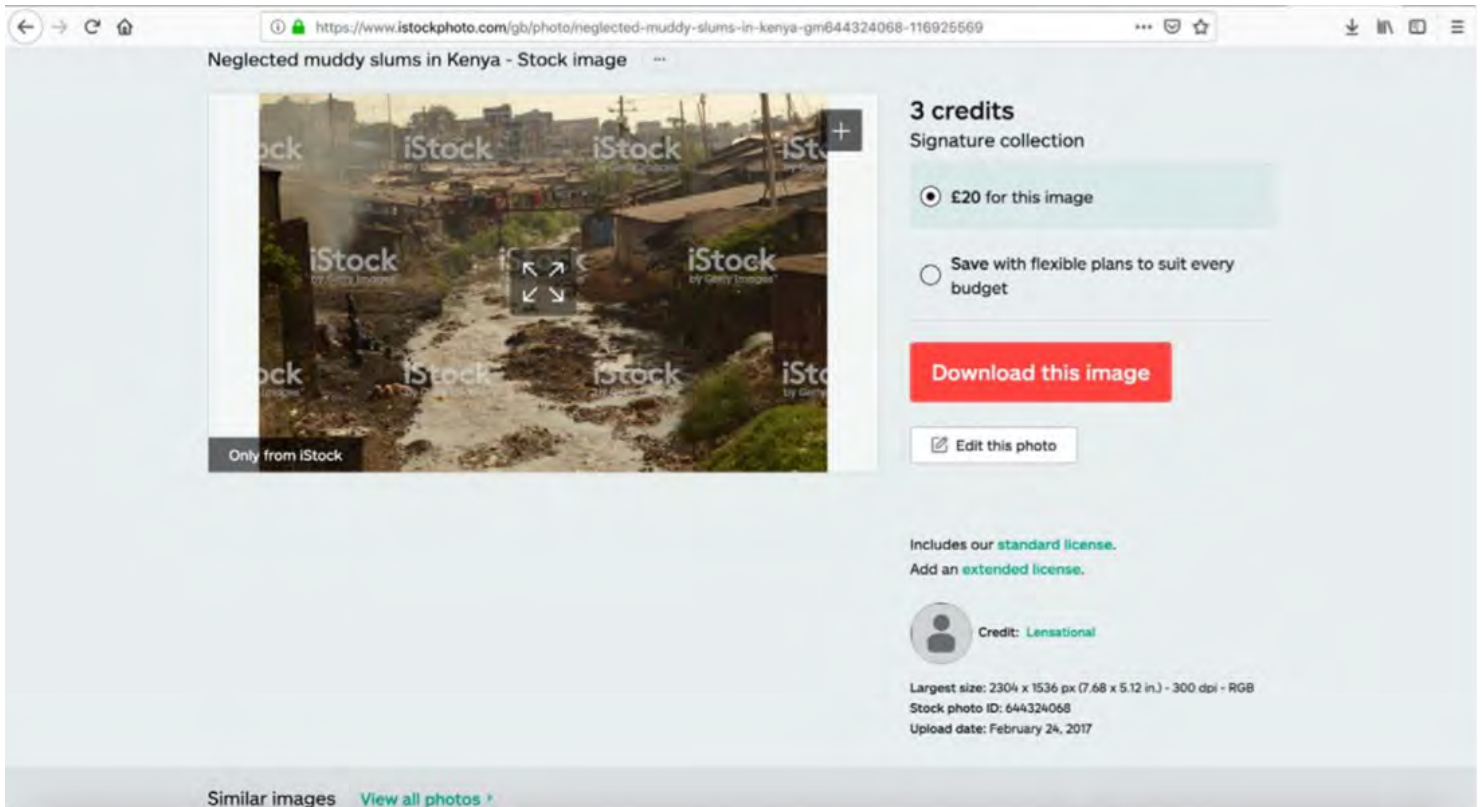
Figure 21: Photo credited to Lensational on iStock by Getty website.
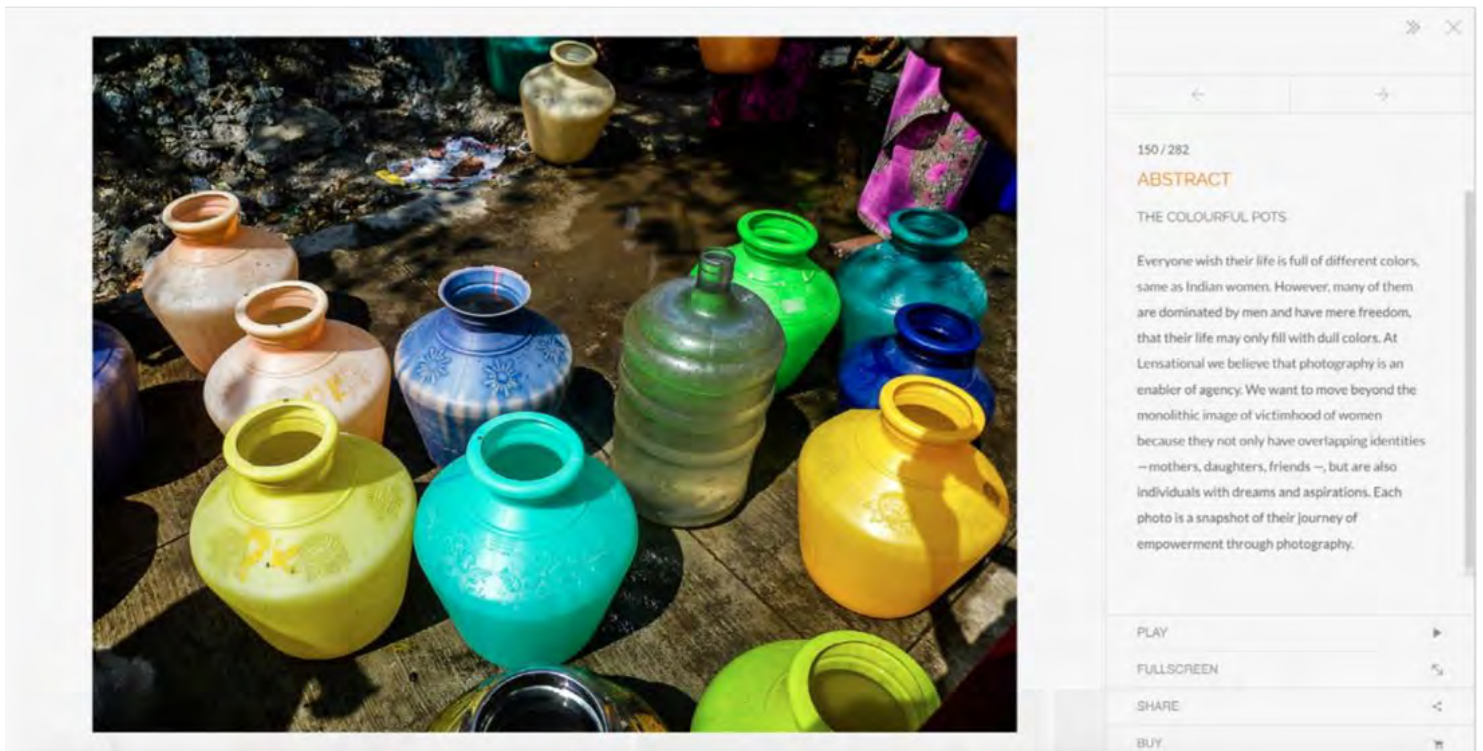The screenshot was taken by the author in 2019.

Figure 22: Photo credited to Lensational Photoshelter page.
The screenshot was taken by the author in 2019.

demand that "the complex material and symbolic specificity of images" entirely give way to "abstract universal, *content.*" An image entering into this industry is thus severed "from the context of its initial production, circulation, and consumption," and reinscribed "within the overarching system of commercial exchange" (Frosh 2003, 192).

Moreover, Frosh insists on linking the visual content industry to imperialism. The former "draws increasing quantities of visual material into its orbit, with the aim of dispersing that material to more and more consumers across the world, to larger and more lucrative markets" (2003, 203). Towards this end, the large stock agencies, while continuing to push and profit from "straightforward" images, have "diversified somewhat from the generic stereotypes of the 1970s and 1980s both to more abstract 'fine art' and conceptual images and to images that address ethnic minorities and other previously underrepresented groups" (2003, 204-205). As such, Lensational's offer of authentic images of and by women in the Global South is dictated by the demands of the industry it is claiming to take on. And ironically, its aim of making these women more visible is undercut by its embrace—by means of an exclusive contract—of Getty Images, a company whose interests, actions, and finances are "hidden from the public that consumes its images" (2003, 208), and certainly also from the women making and appearing in the images.

In fact, Lensational does not follow a consistent policy of crediting every image to the person who took the photograph. On its website and on Getty's iStock page, some photographs are accompanied by a caption that includes the photographer's first name, but many have no named photographer. Although this might be intended to protect the women in cases where the publication of their identities would put them at risk, it means their professional opportunities are entirely tied to Lensational's networks. Sometimes, there is a credit line naming the image's title and photographer, but it does not match the name of the person in the caption underneath. "The Skater, Bangladesh by Shumi" and "Shooting Smile, Bangladesh by Shobe" are, for example, both accompanied by the claim that "50% of revenue will go directly back to Aisha to support her and her family—equivalent to two months' income for them." It has obviously been copy-pasted from a template, and has yet to be corrected.[37] Such an administrative error might seem slight but against the slick competency espoused by Lensational, it signals the replaceability of one girl with another, and thus the overdetermination of the figure of the young brown female subject who is to take a photograph and receive money from its sale.

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37 Lensational. "Skating, Girlhood, Bangladesh." Accessed 4 September 2019. https://lensational.photoshelter.com/gallery-image/Bangladesh/G0000UH1URkUP9C4/I0000JkWcdkERmVM

Figure 23: Lensational Photoshelter page. The screenshot was taken by the author in 2019.
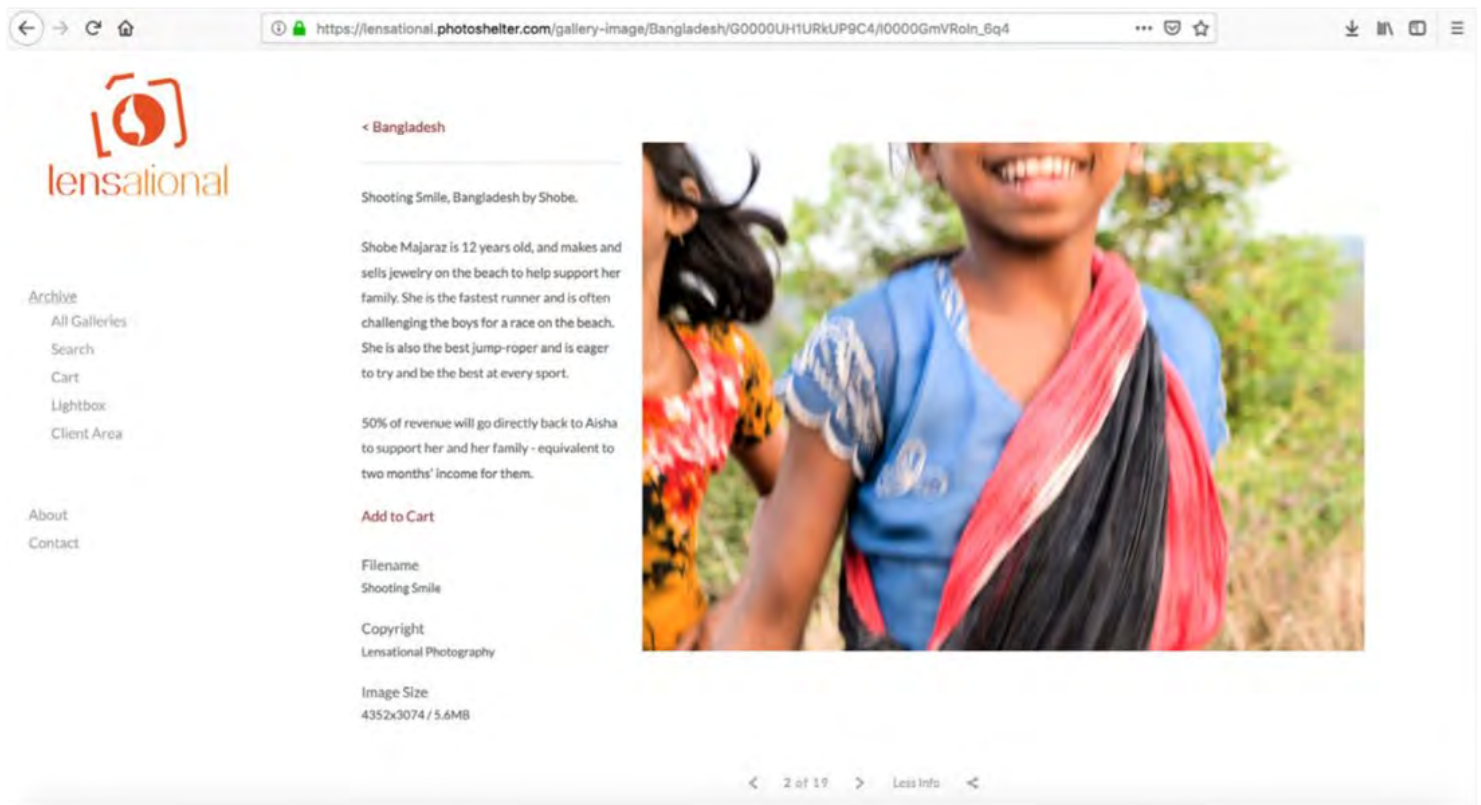

Figure 24: Lensational Photoshelter page. The screenshot was taken by the author in 2019.

If Lensational thus makes itself an obvious target for Rangan's arguments, they can also be brought to bear on "Ladies Only," lauded on *Intersectional Feminism–Desi Style!* for asserting "a unique claim to an authentic representation of the lived realities of Dharavi." Whilst striving "to deconstruct the male gaze as well as the racist, casteist and classist realities the images taken in Dharavi seem to portray," the project is dominated by the organizer's name, photographs, and words.[38]
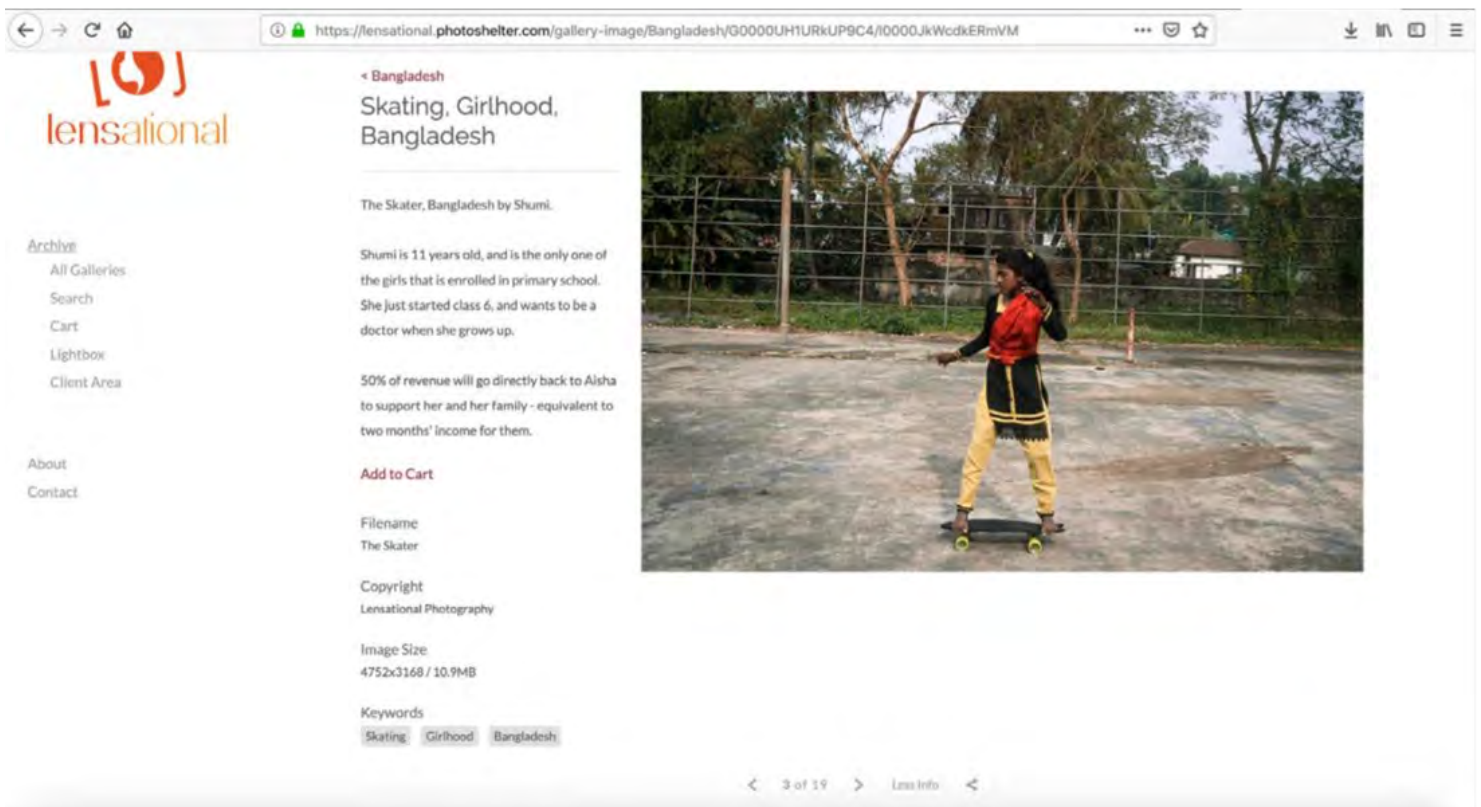
Figure 25: Lensational Photoshelter page. The screenshot was taken by the author in 2019.

This propensity for untrammeled instrumentalization and commodification also courses through PTF's exhibition at Alsisar, which its organizer nonetheless claimed was a complex organizational effort. She told me that "it was one of the first attempts at something like this for the festival, from concept to installation, so we had to work around a lot of challenges in getting it installed." These included improvising on her initial desire to "hang the photos on the walls of the village" after being "advised to do it inside the Palace walls instead," although she did not elaborate on the source and reasons for this advice. They "ended up with a wall of all the photos hung together,

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38 See Ananya, 2017. "Dharavi Art Room – Ladies Only, Stories For All," *Feminism in India*. Accessed 19 July 2019. https://feminisminindia.com/2017/10/25/dharavi-art-room/

which created a mural type of result." She added that "the participants were highly engaged in the process but were not exposed to the final exhibition until after the festival, and unfortunately, I had already left so I did not get to see their reactions."[39]

Figure 26: Excerpt from article on 'Ladies Only – Stories for All' as seen on Feminism India website. The screenshot was taken by the author in 2019.

39 PTF facilitator, email to author, 14 January 2019.

Figure 27 (top): Photographing the Female exhibition at Magnetic Fields Festival 2017 in Alsisar. The photograph was taken by the author's sister.

Figure 28 (left): Photographing the Female exhibition at Magnetic Fields Festival 2017 in Alsisar. The photograph was taken by the author's sister.

Figure 28 - 34: Photographing the Female exhibition at Magnetic Fields Festival 2017 in Alsisar. The photographs were taken by the author's sister.

The lackadaisical approach to installing the exhibition and the admission that its collaborative element was not present throughout perhaps explains how the exhibition came to entail such disconnect. The subject matter of the photographs sat strangely amidst a poolside setting; likewise, some of the photographed women were themselves perched on a deck-chair, standing shyly by the water's edge, or crouching by a bush. They do not seem convinced that they are allowed to be there. The wire, clothes-pegs, and poster-boards used to display the photographs, and their clustering in the quietest corner of the festival, appeared flimsy, temporary, and miserly against the historic and ornate walls and sprawling grounds. Or perhaps it was the other way around, and they instead accentuated all its flaking paint and chipped pillars.

The photographs' subjects and makers were left hanging in mid-air, as if existing beyond time and space. And glances, postures, edges, shadows, and annotations, which might have been playful at the time of making the photos, accumulated a

melancholic, lonely affect, with some even taking on a hint of menace. The printing, enlarging, retouching of their photographs exacerbated their distance from the people, spaces, objects, and networks that provided the meaning and anchoring they did have in the world. All of this happened despite the organizer's insistence that she was allowing "the work of these girls to be seen in a context with established photographers from all over the world," and making "a conscious effort to… not make their lives and work exist in a vacuum."[40] I was told that "the audience generally loved it and showed great interest when passing by," and the very mention of "passing by" suggests a casualness of execution, whereby the attendance and viewing of the photographs was left to chance. Indeed, an attendee of Magnetic Fields told me that she and her friends were herded into the exhibition while waiting for a concert to start, where they distractedly tried to make sense of what registered as a confusing visual experience, in much too short a space of time.

Conclusion

The exposition of old and new tyrannies in this essay is not intended as a rebuke to my colleagues at the conference where I first began to formulate these thoughts, nor to the interlocutors who, in the years that followed, have shared presentations, impressions, documents, and images with me. Rather, it is an effort to keep pace with their projects and to connect them to wider histories and geopolitics, even if this has meant zooming in on slippages and ruptures. And yet, such an exercise need not only be about looking twice at a typo on a webpage or staying with a seemingly casual aside made by a facilitator. It could entail noticing a child's scribbles down the side of an album, or the delighted conspiratorial face of a woman experimenting with the camera in her bedroom mirror. To dwell on these moments and instances is to grasp the contingency of photography, the spark that is produced when the camera is wielded by unexpected hands, or when images circulate in unexpected settings. As such, the work of scholars like Azoulay and Rangan, and the playfulness, skepticism, and irreverence of the *Foot Soldiers* continues to prove generative.

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40 Photographing the Female, "Collaborations." Accessed 21 January 2019. https://photographingthefemale.com/collaborations/

Figure 35: Still from *We are Foot Soldiers*, 2011, 1:26 as seen on YouTube. The screenshot was taken by the author in 2019.

Figure 36: Still from *We are Foot Soldiers*, 2011, 0:57 as seen on YouTube. The screenshot was taken by the author in 2019.

Long live the revolution!

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DASTAVEZI
THE AUDIO-VISUAL
SOUTH ASIA

Searching for *sur* through Sufi-Islamic Devotion

Wajiha Ather Naqvi

Abstract

Drawing on my vocal training experiences from my on-going Hindustani classical music apprenticeship under a *Qawwali* practitioner in Karachi, Pakistan, since 2016, this multi-mediated essay, which includes an audio recording of my performance, demonstrates how specific ideas of Sufi-Islamic devotion are cultivated and embodied in Hindustani classical music through both song lyrics and bodily actions. Through this piece, my attempt is to dispel certain unfounded public misconceptions within Pakistan on music's compatibility with Islam, particularly with respect to the Pakistani state's complicated relationship towards its Hindustani classical music heritage.

Keywords: Hindustani classical music, Islam, South Asia, Pakistan, voice

Introduction

From an active cassette tape culture to a mushrooming underground local music scene to an influx of private Western and Indian music satellite TV channels, most urban youth growing up in Karachi, Pakistan during the 1990s, like myself, were exposed to much musical activity around them. Yet despite the subcontinent's rich heritage of Indo-Islamic devotional music, many Pakistanis continue to attribute music (and dance) primarily to a "Hindu culture." A popular notion heard within the Pakistani cultural

imagination till today is that these traditions are antithetical to Islamic values.[1] It was perhaps due to Islam's allegedly contentious relationship with music and my fascination with such contradictions that I became interested in the anthropology of music from the Islamic world while earning my postgraduate degree in the United States in 2010. After my return to Pakistan, I began vocal training in Hindustani classical music[2] in 2016 under the apprenticeship of a Muslim *Qawwali* practitioner, which eventually led me to embark on a performance career with one of Pakistan's leading music shows, Coke Studio.

Not only was I eager to gain a practical and theoretical understanding of this ancient high-art music, but I had assumed that my natural sense of rhythm and key was perhaps the only prerequisite needed for me to succeed. However, over the course of my training, I realized that my practice was as much about technical competence as it was about acquiring a "new" voice and reconfiguring my knowledge of the Hindustani classical musical tradition, one that was embedded within specific Sufi-Islamic values of knowing and being in the world.

Building on reflections from my own (ongoing) Hindustani classical music apprenticeship in Karachi, Pakistan, which has included the making of an audio recording of my performance, this multi-mediated essay will describe how Sufi-Islamic devotion is embodied and performed in Hindustani classical music. Challenging common misconceptions in Pakistan of Hindustani classical music, which stem from its being termed insufficiently or less "Islamic," I will highlight how certain forms of Sufi-Islamic embodied knowledge have provided a critical vantage point towards the cultivation of my Hindustani "singing voice." Lastly, while these reflections are drawn from my personal experience as situated in Pakistan, the intention is not to overemphasize its Islamic influence, but rather to complicate Pakistan's fractured relationship to its shared Indic/non-Muslim past via Hindustani classical music.

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1 Contrary to the popular notion of music's impermissibility within Islam, music has a controversial status within Islam precisely because of the diverging and diverse opinions within Islamic scholarship on what elements constitute music, and thus on the very usage of the word music itself.

2 Also referred to as North Indian classical or simply North Indian/Hindustani music.

Qawwal Bachche and the search for "s*ur*"

> *"Everybody is blessed with* sur*, but whoever actively seeks* sur*, will be provided its knowledge and blessings by Him. If I take my Allah's name in* sur*, then this is preferred."*

Ustad Naseeruddin Saami (senior member of the Qawwal Bachche*)*

Most scholars on South Asian music history agree that contemporary North Indian classical music (as known today) has evolved broadly out of an overlapping network and performance exchange within elite Mughal courts, Hindu temple music, and Sufi mystical practices, since the 13th century. Barlow and Subramanian write that "this inclusive devotional sociability, and its preoccupation with music, lay at the core of the Hindustani ethos and lasted till the early 20th century" (2007, 1782). Subsequent to the 1947 partition, however, the formation of the two opposing state interests and ideologies of India and Pakistan began to divide and categorize the subcontinent's music along religious and nationalistic lines.

Within Pakistan, the state struggled to own or define Hindustani classical music compared to its folk or *Qawwali* music, particularly due to the former's overt Indic and non-Muslim/Hindu association.[3] (Saeed 2008, 241). Therefore, even though most traditional music from North India and Pakistan is organized around principles of Hindustani classical music: "Hindustani classical music, and *raga* in particular, are concepts that have for the most part been associated with music from present-day North India despite their wide usage in contemporary Pakistan as well" (Ayyagiri 2012, 12). In this regard, my teacher's connections to Hindustani classical music extend to well before partition, reaching back through its 800-year-old ancestral musical lineage, called the *Qawwal Bachche* (Children of the *Qawwal*) which itself can be traced back to the disciple of a 13th century music connoisseur and Sufi poet Hazrat Amir Khusraw[4], and to the shrine of Sufi Saint Hazrat Nizamuddin Awliya, in Delhi. With certain musical practices rooted in the Sufi-Islamic tradition of *sama*[5], they continue to be associated primarily with *Qawwali*, even though their hereditary musical repertoire consists of

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3 This is not to say that Pakistan does not continue to have a small but active community of classical musicians and also a corresponding niche in their audience of high-art music listeners, though they are predominantly heard in private urban-elite spaces/gatherings.

4 Also popularly regarded as the founding father of *Qawwali*.

5 An Arabic word that means "to listen"; it also refers to a Sufi mystical practice that makes use of sound, music, and recitation for the sole purpose of coming closer to God.

other Hindustani classical genres.[6] It is thus important to consider that my personal experience of learning Hindustani classical music from a hereditary Muslim *Qawwali* practitioner in modern-day Pakistan must be viewed from the perspective of the subcontinent's own evolving political and historical contexts. One of the central tenets within this hereditary lineage is a singular focus on attaining a deep knowledge of the *sur* (a single musical note or pitch). In technical terms, to be in *sur* (*sur mein hona*) means that one can sing at the right musical pitch. Yet, simply being able to sing in tune does not represent the multiplicity of meanings associated with *sur*. For instance, understanding *sur* also requires training in diverse knowledge forms, ranging from poetry, language, and philosophy to religious texts.

Most importantly, while a technical understanding of *sur* can be acquired or developed, it is fundamentally entangled with an innate, esoteric sense of sonic knowing that resides, vibrates, and can be experienced within every living being. At its philosophical core, this sound knowledge has the potential to transform humans and to connect deeply with their inner self, mind, and body. For my Muslim teacher, this sound knowledge is also an Islamic knowledge interwoven with man/woman's innate longing to be close to the Divine, i.e. Allah, where the self and Divine are, in fact, two sides of the same coin.

Cultivating a Hindustani voice within a Sufi-Islamic sound-world

According to Weidman, "sonic and material experiences of voice are never independent of the cultural meanings attributed to sound, to the body, and particularly to the voice itself" (Weidman 2015, 233). Though Hindustani classical music is performed with instruments, it primarily uses the voice, i.e., *awaaz.* One of the examples used by my teacher to substantiate music's acceptability within the Islamic tradition is the reference to the Quranic phrase "*Kun Faya Kun"* (Be! And it is) that marks the creation of the world for pious Muslims. *Kun,* which means "existing" or "being" in Arabic, is a divine word that sounded the world into existence. The voice is superior to Muslims, because it embodies the sacred, as the sounded word of God.[7]

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6 For a brief background on the history and contributions of *Qawwal Bachche*, see my article: https://www.dawn.com/news/1497271

7 Both terms, *awaaz* and *sur*, also overlap in musical terminology, as one cannot be expressed without the other: the voice is material proof that *sur* exists.

Most of my lessons take place inside my home, allowing for a relationship based on one-on-one interaction with my teacher. As a hereditary custodian of this specialist music, he is also seen traditionally as the custodian of his students' voices. Much like a sculptor who molds raw material into concrete form, he assumes a responsibility for shaping my "singing voice." During the formative years of my training, I would often grow agitated with my inability to produce certain vocal ornamentations and aesthetics that are characteristic of this musical tradition. "When will I learn how to deliver these sounds?" I often asked. In response, my teacher would temper my sense of frustration by explaining that it would take time and practice to create this voice ("*awaaz banana*") and to put/create musical spaces in the throat ("*gale mein jageh daalna/ bithana*"). He would frequently use phrases such as "*savaarna*" (to beautify), "*sametna*" (to gather/organize), "*nikhaarna*" (to groom) to explain this palpable method of cultivating the voice.

The importance of aesthetics and beauty is integral to the Sufi-Islamic tradition because for many Muslims, all forms of beauty are a reflection of and originate from Allah's infinite existence. Accordingly, "to create beauty is thus an act of both worship and invocation" (Frishkopf and Spinetti 2018, 11). Similarly, the concept of a beautiful voice draws on the same belief (as also reflected in the *Qawwal Bachche*'s understanding of *sur*) in God's divine attributes that are embodied within each of us, as a reminder of God and of our own inner beauty.

Having grown up without formal vocal training, my vocal aesthetic was heavily adopted from listening to particular kinds of American/English popular music that rendered in my voice a more staccato singing style in which the delivery of musical notes is typically quick, short, and independent of each other. To a large extent, this required me to unlearn my self-taught, abrupt, choppy western pop-oriented vocal delivery and to acquire a new understanding of vocal aesthetics and *sur*. This experience made me realize that being able to sing this style of music does not only depend on a person's technical ability to sing in tune but also draws on each individual's own sedimented listening histories and cultural attunement.[8] Most music belonging to the Hindustani classical tradition does not rely on written notation or theory; hence, a primary part of cultivating the voice revolves around active listening, repetition, and memory. A major dimension of my learning depends on repeating, almost imitating my teacher's exact

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8 For example, a discernible stylistic difference in Hindustani classical vocal is the use of longer, connecting notes because each musical note (within a *raag*) has an interdependent harmonious relationship that originates with the first note of the scale, the tonic or root note *sa.* This does not only mean knowing the sounds of each single, distinct note but developing a sensibility based on knowledge of pitch that recognizes smaller, identifiable micro-notes within two singular notes.

vocal delivery, and reciting the same from memory. Attentive listening (to both oneself and one's teacher) is a deliberate part of the ear-training and sound knowledge; such areas of study, in turn, when developed and also practiced with constant repetition, begin to sediment specific vocal behaviors, patterns, and sounds.

Acquiring these vocal behaviors also means engaging with other parts of the body and bodily knowledge through facial expressions, breathwork, hand movements, etc. For instance, knowing when to pause or take a breath, how to use the hands and arms, where to point the head while singing are all critical components for producing the voice itself. As Weidman states, "voices are not only a sonic phenomenon; they are material in the sense that they are produced through bodily actions" (Weidman 2015, 235).

At the same time, this method of attentive listening and the accompanying power of sound/voice draw on my teacher's long-standing ancestral tradition of Sufi-Islamic practices of the *sama* and its corresponding Sufi sound body. According to Kapchan, this sound body is the "affective" dimension of the material body that listens, feels, resonates, creates, and transforms, particularly because of the Sufi belief that the "human body itself contains technologies that remain hidden to the self" (Kapchan 2015, 34-40). Hence, attentive listening is a critical method for understanding *sur* but primarily a spiritual quest to connect with Allah through the self, i.e., through the material voice and body.

Lastly, cultivating this Hindustani voice is just as much about intimately discovering oneself through one's own voice. For instance, I was often told "to pay attention to my own voice" or "know my voice" ("*apni awaaz par fikr karo/apni awaaz ko pehchano*"), which not only meant paying attention to technicalities of pitch but being able to recognize my own unique, individual voice and its relationship to the rest of my body. Eventually, through a reiterative loop of listening, repeating, and vocalizing, one experientially comes to both "know" and "feel" what sounds right when one is performing.

Performing Sufi-Islamic devotion in Hindustani classical music

Most professional practitioners of Hindustani classical music spend many decades of their own life learning its intricate technicalities. Since it is typically performed in front of an audience, many do not start performing in public until they reach an advanced

level of understanding and technical prowess. However, one of my main objectives in learning Hindustani classical music was not to become a professional classical singer but to assist my vocal practice and research.[9] Accordingly, I will now use examples from my own audio recording to explain how I perform Sufi-Islamic devotion in Hindustani classical music. More specifically, I will highlight how it is *both* the lyrical content *and* the particular forms of vocal and bodily behaviors (embedded within a Sufi-Islamic sound world) that accentuate feelings of devotion in Hindustani classical music, from the perspective of a performer.

This traditional composition is called a *sadra*, a type of Hindustani vocal genre performed in a 10-beat rhythmic pattern (called *jhaptaal)*. Its lyrical form is a *hamd* (an Arabic word and type of devotional Islamic poetry that refers to the exclusive praise of God) with words in (old) Hindi, also called *Brajbhasha*. This is one of the prominent literary languages of North India which actually predates the creation of Hindi and Urdu. Given the improvisatory nature of Hindustani classical music, the same compositions can be performed in multiple ways; however, they still need to conform to specific rules associated with each particular *raag.* Known as the "king of morning *raags*" and traditionally performed in the earliest morning hours, this particular composition was taught to me in *raag Bhairon* (or *Bhairav*), which embodies highly devotional and meditative, introspective, and contemplative qualities.[10] *Bhairav* is also one of the names (and manifestations) of Lord Shiva within the Hindu religious tradition.

One of my reasons to record this particular composition (over others that have been taught to me) was its overtly Islamic devotional lyrical form. While reading (and understanding) Quranic scripture is paramount, most non-Arabic speaking Muslims (like myself) continue to experience and interact with the Quran primarily through sound and oral transmission. Since a *hamd* finds its source in the Quran, reciting His praise (which includes the names of God) is in itself an act of Islamic devotion.

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9 The decision to produce this audio recording was made in 2020 during the onset of COVID-19, when almost the entire world was operating under lockdown conditions. This particularly impacted musicians and performing artists as physical performances had come to a complete halt, including my lessons, which had since moved online. Thus, the production process took place distributed across different time zones: recorded in Karachi, mixed in London, and mastered in Germany, thanks to the advantages of remote working made possible by digital technology. This shift from in-person physical to online training of a centuries-old oral music tradition that relies mainly on physical interaction opens future questions about how changing technologies mediate the process of learning, practicing, and/or performing Hindustani classical music itself.

10 "What is more, the *raga* itself exists both as a specifically musical formula (a set of notes that need to be sung in particular orders and ways) […] that conveys a distinct mood and set of associations accompanied by specific instructions as to the correct time or season to stimulate those associations" (Orsini and Schofield 2015, 26).

Outside their prevalence within folk and *Qawwali*, *hamds* are largely heard across Pakistan as popular forms of Islamic devotional poetry and media, dominated by male singers and recited primarily in Pakistan's national language, Urdu. Though reciting *hamd* is encouraged by Islamic scholars, certain orthodox interpretations continue to limit and exclude women's voices as well as the use of instruments. Thus, my decision to record this specific version of a *hamd* also meant challenging existing, fixed (and often arbitrary) notions of authenticity and Islamicness attributed to certain types of Hindustani music, particularly as a female Muslim singer situated in Pakistan.

The audio begins with the sound of the *tanpura*[11]*,* followed by the opening section of a Hindustani classical performance called the *alaap,* as is typical in such performances*.* I start with the tonic *sa* as the first and most critical note learned in Hindustani classical music. It functions as the musical anchor that helps set my own focus and intention for this performance, i.e. to use my *awaaz* to connect with the Divine. I return back to the *sa*[12] at 1:07 after sketching out a brief and specific ordering of notes that carries the overall introspective, reflective mood associated with the *Bhairon* scale. With my own voice echoing in the background, the reverberating drone of the *tanpura* was added to enhance *Bhairon's* devotional mood and morning time cycle, much like the divine sound of *kun,* the earliest reminder of our sonic reality and primordial existence.

As outlined in the previous section, the Hindustani voice is cultivated through different forms of bodily knowledge to deliver a performance. To sing this composition, I use a vocal technique called *ghina*[13] that uses certain pressure points on the top part of the face, between the nose and the forehead, to produce a distinct nasal-textured voice. This specific technique is used throughout the performance, heard particularly in the elongated and melismatic rendering of the phrase "*Allah ho Allah, jall-e-shaan Allah,"* as I both repeat and elaborate on the name of God using longer, continuous notes, sung with a single breath (1:17-1:35). A similar/parallel sonic reference for this type of nasal-voice rendering is heard in the Arabic *maqam* music system, also used in the Islamic call to prayer and other forms of Islamic scriptures such as the Quranic recitation.

I recorded this in a cross-legged position seated on the floor of my home, allowing me to find the right posture to coordinate my voice with the rest of my body.[14] As I start to

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11 A long-necked string instrument used to accompany Hindustani classical music, providing a continuous drone-like sound.

12 In the Hindustani classical music system, the *sa* is the first note (and sound) out of the seven notes in a musical scale, where each sound of the musical note corresponds with its name.

13 Also an Arabic term used for a song or singing.

14 This is also how I practice with my teacher and how Hindustani classical music is typically performed.

sing the melody from 1:18, I gradually begin to raise both of my arms as they move away from my body but with palms open towards the ceiling—much akin to the gesture used in Islamic prayer. The arms gently rise (and fall), like the waves of an ocean swaying back and forth, synchronizing this circular motion with the melody's modulating vocals and lyrical cadence. At the same time, each line of the *hamd* is composed to fit seamlessly within a single breath of each rhythmic cycle, as per the aesthetic style of the *sadra.*

Since this performance was recorded in a single take, the breath is audible after every sung lyric: *Allah ho Allah* (1:46)*.* Breathe. *Jall-e-shaan Allah* (1:50). Breathe. Jall-e-*shaan Allah* (1:55). Breathe. *Tero naam liye meri howe tasallah* (2:05)*.* Breathe. And so forth. The synchronization of voice, body, and breathwork is critical to all Hindustani classical music performances. Here, it is the coordinated movement and synergy of mind and body conducted in that specific moment of time that begins to transform my own subjective experience, enhancing my feelings for and relationship to the Divine. This, as Kapchan explains, is a "body attuned to and transformed by the vibrations of its environment – in this case, one in which the presence of an invisible intelligence (God) is felt" (Kapchan 2015, 38).

 "You are singing for God—sing it with love, sing it with beauty" would be my teacher's response when I would ask how to inculcate feeling in my voice. Though one aspect of this "feeling" is expressed through words and poetry, its material and aesthetic quality for cultivating feeling in the voice (also associated with beauty) involves facial expressions, such as smiling. Therefore, while the words in this *hamd* literally verbalize the Islamic devotion, the voice must be both receptive and trained to evoke the same feeling of sacredness.

Singing a praise of Allah is as much an act of devotion as it is an act of finding joy, exuberance, and exhilaration that enhance my felt relationship and connection with the Divine. In this recording, I smile throughout, but particularly during 2:41-2:48 when I celebrate the gentle falling of raindrops (*rim jhim barse hain*), much like the Divine light that touches all of us. Smiling while singing helped create a certain lightness and buoyancy in the voice, which is then better able to induce emotions of love, warmth, beauty, devotion, and *sur*, all at once.

Conclusion

Through this multi-mediated essay, I have tried to show how my Hindustani music training as an apprentice in a specific hereditary musical lineage called the *Qawwal Bachche* has been cultivated within a specific Sufi-Islamic sound knowledge. This training is also reflected in my own audio recording. Moreover, using examples from my performance, I demonstrate how it is both devotional text *and* the proper Hindustani vocal etiquette of *sur* (including bodily actions) that is ultimately able to enhance the meaning and sacredness of the words. Thus, the overall objective of this piece has been to counter certain unfounded public perceptions within Pakistan about the incompatibility of music and Islam, particularly with respect to Hindustani classical music.

To some readers, this performativity of a Sufi Islamic sound-world within Hindustani classical music might read like a deliberate attempt to Islamicize the past, a re-construction of the modern post-colonial identity, a product of the Islamic Republic's nation-building coming to full fruition. Therefore, it is essential to emphasize and clarify that my intention for this essay has not been to proselytize or favor a Sufi-Islamic narrative, but rather to highlight a plurality or multiplicity of shared practices that have always existed within Hindustani classical music. Most importantly, my intention has been to highlight my personal experiences as a singer and Hindustani classical music apprentice in contemporary Pakistan, where perspectives on overlapping Indic-Islamicate traditions are becoming increasingly marginalized, particularly within the context of rising fundamentalist sentiments and divisive ideologies across both sides of the Indian-Pakistani border.

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Naveena Camera

Vindhya Buthpitiya

Abstract

This visual essay explores the daily life and rhythms of a photography studio in Jaffna in northern Sri Lanka. Here, I reflect on the enduring entanglements of war and everyday image-making practices in the postwar period. The accompanying visuals cast the studio space as one of stillness and movement, where photography exists as an act of communal production and aspiration in a setting marked by political unrest and inequity. Even as advancements in technology and digital photography have further allowed the studio to be integrated into the surveillance, security, and documentation regimes of the state and state-like actors, the work of studio photographers positions them as the determined arbiters of their clients' anticipated futures. The day-to-day routines of studios reflected the lingering effects of war on aspirations for citizenship. When taken together with the possibilities for mobility that are afforded by the Tamil community's displacement and dispersal, as caused by conflict, the role of photography in realizing these hopes becomes apparent.

Keywords: photography, war, studios, Jaffna, Sri Lanka, migration

Figure 1: Rajaratnam at his desk (L), Baby Photo's apprentices at work (R), Jaffna 2018. Photographs by the author.

Introduction

N. Rajaratnam had been taking pictures for over half a century when the *naveena camera* (modern camera) arrived in the Jaffna peninsula of northern Sri Lanka.[1]

By 2014, analogue film photography was rapidly ousted by the powers and possibilities of its digital alternative. The life-long studio photographer had been first mesmerized by the magic of the camera as a young teenager when he witnessed pictures appearing on paper in the darkroom "as if by *current* (electricity)." He soon committed his life and work to the medium by joining a local photography studio as an apprentice. Anointed by his mentor Nicholas of Sellam's Studio (as revealed in a letter of commendation that still hangs on the studio's wall to this date), Rajaratnam *mama* established his own photography studio, Baby Photo, in 1972.

"I named this Baby Studio because photographing babies is what brings me the most joy. The smile of a baby is like the smile of God. The smile of a baby is a true smile, it can move you", Rajaratnam *mama* explained.

The studio's logo, an illustration of a joyful infant, is based on a picture of one of the photographer's three children. Two of them are now grown-up migrants building their own lives and futures in Europe. Snapshots of grandchildren celebrating birthdays in cozy cold-weather living rooms were displayed in a tall glass cabinet housing what remained of a collection of film cameras. The old Mamiyas, Rolleiflexes, and newer Canon film models were now all obsolete as the last of the color labs processing film had closed down some years ago.

By the time I was carrying out fieldwork in 2018, Rajaratnam *mama* had already stopped taking photographs some years earlier. Instead, he rode his scooter to the studio early each morning to greet his patrons and oversee the daily business. Under the elder photographer's watchful eye, Baby's work continued in the hands of a group of young apprentices; two young women who tended to the in-house photography and two young men who undertook more complex outdoor shoots. They deftly wielded Canon DSLR cameras and editing software loaded onto clunky desktop computers to meet the photography needs of a steady stream of clients who passed through the studio each day. Output ranged from speedy identity portraits to elaborate wedding shoots. *Mama* continued to inspect each photograph generated from a small Epson printer placed at his side, before the photos were efficiently sorted into envelopes by

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1 Modern or new camera referring to a digital camera.

his assistants. During quieter times, friends, usually older men from the neighborhood, stopped by for a cup of tea and a chat.

Photography might be understood in terms of its contingency and exorbitance (Pinney 2012, 148, following Benjamin [1931]). For the multiplicity of possibilities and interpretations that it evokes enables an "event of photography" (Azoulay 2012, 23). Azoulay frames photography through the lens of an event that comprises an "infinite series of encounters" (2012, 26). These are concerned not merely with the photographer and the photographed, but with spectators, allowing for an array of social and political uses, appropriations, and re-inscriptions (Azoulay 2012, 26). However, when considering photography as being made up of a communal space, interaction, and an act of producing, especially in times of crisis or instability, what does the medium's capacity to "fix" have to offer its eager patrons? Whether in anchoring desires for things to "come out better" (Pinney 1997, 180) or in giving visual form to aspirations for imagined futures, photography, despite the "noise" of the image (Pinney 2012, 150) in the social "events" and the interface of its creation, offered stillness and resolve amidst uncertainty. Where "noise" is understood through the lens of Benjamin's theorization of photography's "spark of contingency" (2004 [1931], 510), the photographic image might be read as ingrained with unfolding possibility and unruliness (Pinney 2012). These framed visions as suspension or "quotation," as suggested by Sontag (2003, 17), do not imprison the photographic image, but instead serve as a focal point for its contained potentials for mediating between past, present, and future. It gives shape to the simultaneous visualization of memory and prophecy (Pinney 2012).[2]

The images that make up this essay are centered on the quotidian routines and rhythms of this Jaffna photography studio. The image frames project a sense of contained, film reel-like movement and recurrence to evoke sensory details that words and text-based ethnographic descriptions cannot encapsulate beyond repetitive description. I explore the perseverance of these studio spaces and the minutiae of their own everyday "events" in the course of their producing of photography, despite the advent of the digital and the proliferation of personal cameras. The sequencing of still vignettes evokes a cadence of the life and activity of the studio in postwar Jaffna. As a site of community and improvisation, the studio catalyzes desires for mobility and

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2 Following Sontag's claim of the photograph as a "quotation, maxim or proverb" (2003, 17).
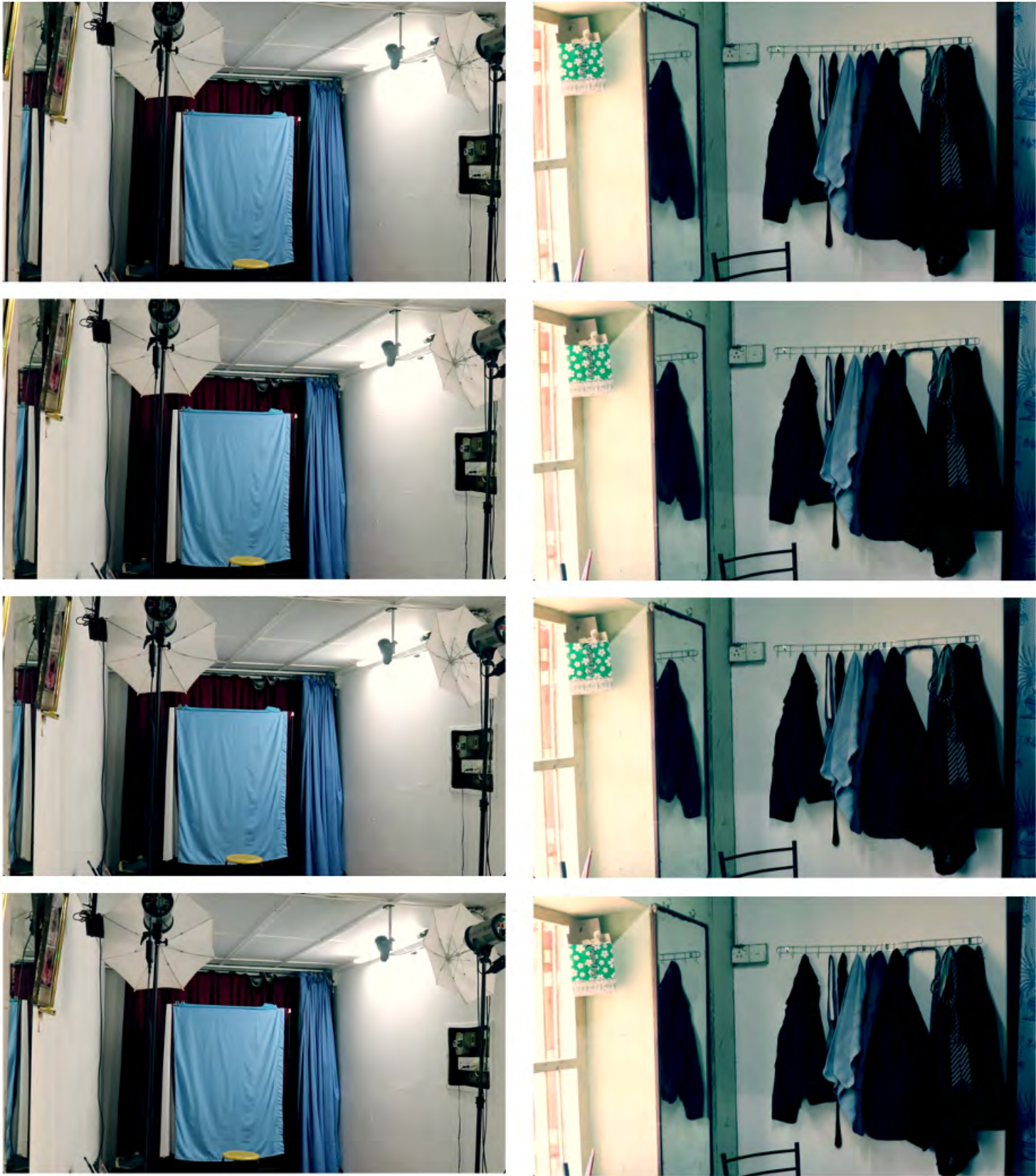
Figure 2: Backdrops for identity photography (L), jacket and tie rack (R), Jaffna 2018. Photographs by the author.

movement (Buthpitiya 2022a). These "events" also disclose the lasting entanglements of war and everyday photography in northern Sri Lanka.

The Studio at War

Sri Lanka's descent into armed conflict would occur shortly after Baby's first beginnings in Thirunalvely. Deepening ethnic tensions and state violence against Sri Lanka's Tamil minority escalated to civil war (1983-2009) (Thiranagama 2013). The armed conflict between the Tamil militancy, dominated by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), and the Sri Lankan government forces wholly re-oriented Jaffna's studios and the character of their photographic production. Through those years, studios remained sites of vibrant activity often despite being regular casualties of war, with their archives and contents being destroyed by shelling or their owners and patrons being forcefully expelled. Many studios failed to survive. Their opulent names, *Sabhas, Gnanams, Colombo, Prabha, Sithralaya, Ruby,* and *Vasana,* lingered only in tantalizing purple ink stamps marking the backs of scant photographs or printed onto receipts and envelopes sometimes containing strips of negatives. The war years had also been notably cruel to the survival of photographs already susceptible to an inhospitable tropical climate (Karinkurayil 2021).

Recurring devastation and frequent displacements had stripped down personal archives to a matter of luck and necessity. While family photographs, both framed for display and preserved in albums, were lost to those compelled to flee their homes urgently or to relocate repeatedly, headshots encased in the laminate of National Identity Cards (NICs) became precious talismans for protection against the interrogations by state security officials (Buthpitiya 2019). The image world of northern Sri Lanka would also become saturated with visuals of death.[3] Where militarism had become entwined with the lives of communities through expansive recruitment practices (Brun 2008; Thiranagama 2013), funerary and memorial practices were politicized in the service of the Tamil militancy's nation- and state-building pursuits (Roberts 1996, 2005; Natali 2008). The mobilization of images of death served an important function in socializing the citizens of the aspirant nation-state, inculcating them with the values and duties of sacrificing oneself for the future of *Tamil Eelam*. The cultural production efforts toward state-building by the LTTE encompassed public

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3 Deborah Poole uses the term "image world" to capture the complexity of the material and social exchange of images, where "seeing" is not merely a matter of the image, but how it is presented (1997, 7).

displays of trophy snaps and atrocity images generated by its broadcast media unit, *Nitharsanam* (Truth/Reality), as well as stylized photographic and painted portraits of "martyrs" who had sacrificed themselves to the cause for a Tamil homeland. Expansive *thuyilam illams*[4] and shrines to martyrs adorned with photographic "honor rolls" and cinematic cut-outs reimag(in)ed the landscape of northern Sri Lanka in a singular vision of and aspiration for *Tamil Eelam.* Such visual practices in the service of state-making enlisted the work of studio photographers; they created portraits and documented martyrs' funerals as a part of their service to the nation and in exchange for the patronage of the aspirant state.

Preparation of memorial portraits by Jaffna's photography studios constitutes an essential part of their business to date. Studios work with many subsidiary practitioners, including digital over-painters and frame-makers who adapt and re-imagine photographs. Even the grainiest identity headshots were transformed into regal representations garlanded in plastic flowers and battery-operated twinkling light bulbs. Where Tamil war casualties continued to be denied by the state, memorial photography practices became more ostentatious with the possibilities afforded by the digital. Photographs were scanned directly and edited swiftly on computers. Offset printed black and white funeral notices were transformed into color or morphed into digitally printed decorative flex banners for public display. Framing shops took orders for ornate frames housing digitally enhanced portraits. This economy was also transnational, with diasporic Tamils enlisting the comparably cost-effective services of local practitioners through personal and social media networks. Clients in Europe and North America would dispatch images by way of messaging applications such as WhatsApp or Viber to be transformed on Photoshop into digital memorial portraits or death notices and banners. These in turn were circulated on the same services or shared on social media platforms such as Facebook to announce the death of a loved one to their dispersed family and friends.

Demands for the production of identity photographs as confirmation of citizenship were central for sustaining Jaffna's studios through the war and postwar periods. The social use of NIC photographs can be analyzed by way of Strassler's examination of Indonesian *pasfotos.* These embodied "the expanding reach of the modern bureaucratic states and the global currency of a semiotic ideology in which the photograph serves as truthful and scientific 'evidence'" (2010, 130). Where ethnic

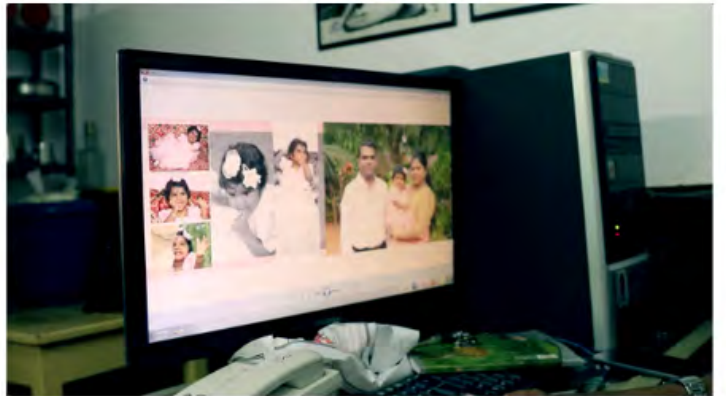---

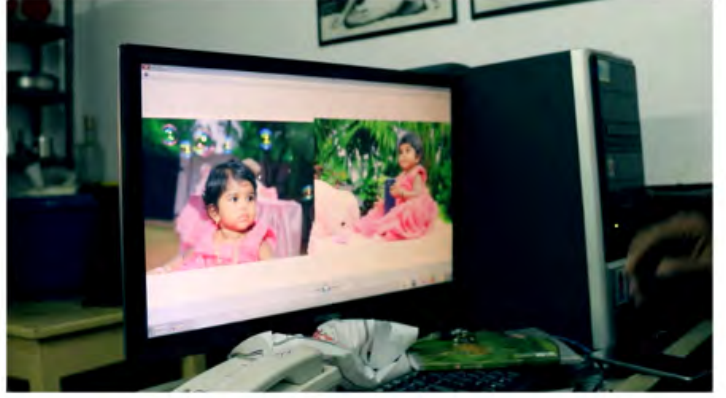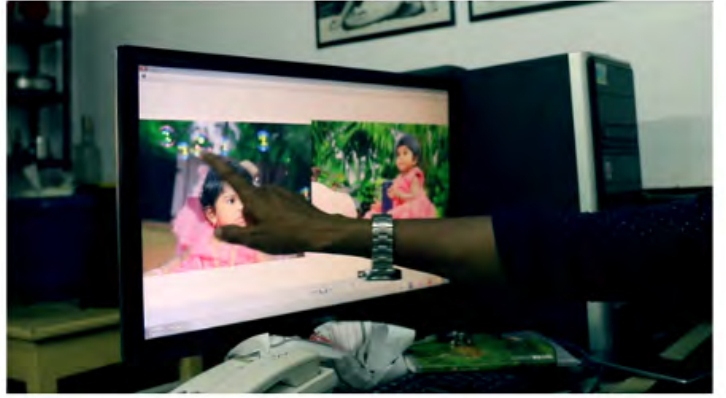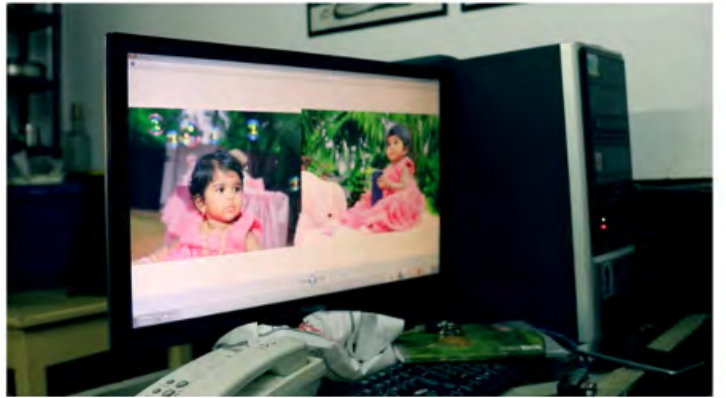4 Tamil for heroes' resting places or LTTE war cemeteries.

Figure 3: Editing suite (L), Apprentices at work (R), Jaffna 2018. Photographs by the author.

conflict persists even after the war ended, the NIC served as confirmation of one's identity and ethnicity. Such an assurance was necessary for enjoying access to state services as well as less restricted freedom of movement given the continued proliferation of checkpoints in the highly militarized northern Sri Lanka. Strassler describes Indonesian *pasfotos* as "a widespread visual idiom for legitimate belonging within the state-authorized national community" that was also readily appropriated for social use (2010, 21). Indeed, the NIC played a significant role in the state's imagining of Sri Lanka as a sovereign republic and identity. Within a highly securitized context of civil war where Tamilness was conflated by the state with that of an "enemy other," the NIC became an extension of one's personhood (legal, ethnic, and otherwise), from which a citizen could not physically separate themselves for fear of the potentially fatal consequences (Jeganathan 2004). Citizens were expected to have their NIC on their person at all times, lest they fall subject to arbitrary arrest or detention by the state security forces on suspicion of their being involved with the Tamil militants. Ironically, it is this necessity to retain one's NIC at all times that resulted in identity photographs and sometimes in the NIC itself being utilized by citizens as a photographic object of protest in response to unresolved cases of the war dead and disappeared (Buthpitiya 2022b).

NICs marked an important shift in the social life of photography in Sri Lanka. Rajaratnam *mama* recalled the government's distribution of cameras to studios to facilitate the issuance of identity cards. After their introduction in 1972, the year Baby was founded, citizens who were otherwise excluded from photography came into possession of a photograph of themselves. These, in turn, would be endlessly transformed by the studios and by their everyday uses and conjugations.

NIC photos were thus variously appropriated: pasted on NICs, exchanged between friends, included in family albums, embellished and reframed as memorial images, and held up in protests evidencing the lives of victims of state terror and violence. These uses highlight the complex ways in which "ideologies and practices of documentation tied to bureaucratic knowledge production also reverberate within the intimate realm of personal and familial memory in the photographic documentation of family rituals," as has been observed by Strassler in the context of Indonesia (2010, 21). Thus, the production of NICs remained an integral part of the photography studios' services. Registered studios are now integrated into the state's biometric identification project

that permitted digital files to be transmitted directly to the Department for Registration of Persons, rendering their material photographic incarnations increasingly obsolete.

Similarly, where life was perpetually at risk of being abruptly extinguished, its celebrations in the form of birthdays, puberty ceremonies,[5] weddings, and family outings were also enthusiastically documented by enlisting the services of studio photographers, given the scarcity of personal cameras. Images were keenly dispatched to family members dispersed both across and beyond the island as the persecuted Tamil community began to flee to perceived safety in Europe, North America, and Australia. These migrations also required a diversity of photographic machinations ranging from passport and visa photographs to the contrived evidence of marital and familial relationships to satiate the skepticism and scrutiny of border regimes. Such social photographic registers of war persist in the fraught "peace" brought about by the state's military victory over the Tamil militancy. It is a peace entangled with transitional justice grievances that are bound to credible allegations of war crimes and crimes against humanity, enforced disappearances, and ongoing state violence against Sri Lanka's political minorities.

Postwar in Cinestyle

During the course of my fieldwork, the studio's clients were mainly seeking out the photographer's intervention for producing identity photographs or documenting significant life events. *Angalum/pengalum paakara padam*[6] or photos circulated as part of arranged marriage proposals were also popular. Young men and women dressed in their finest arrived at the studio to be photographed; the young men occasionally borrowed ties or jackets from the studio's offerings. These photos were passed on to marriage brokers and were circulated locally and internationally, with the most sought-after spouses having "status" (meaning legal residence or citizenship) elsewhere.

Rajaratnam *mama's* reverence for photography was centered on the act of passing on knowledge, as evident in his training of several novices over the years who had gone on to establish their own studios in Jaffna and beyond. This practice held true with the older photographers in Jaffna, who had either inherited their studios or studied in an

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5 Ritual and celebration that follows a girl's first menstruation.

6 Translation from Tamil by the author: Portraits of prospective brides and grooms circulated by marriage brokers.
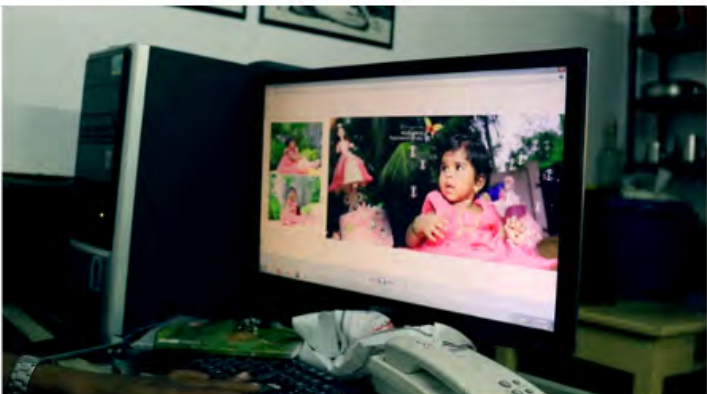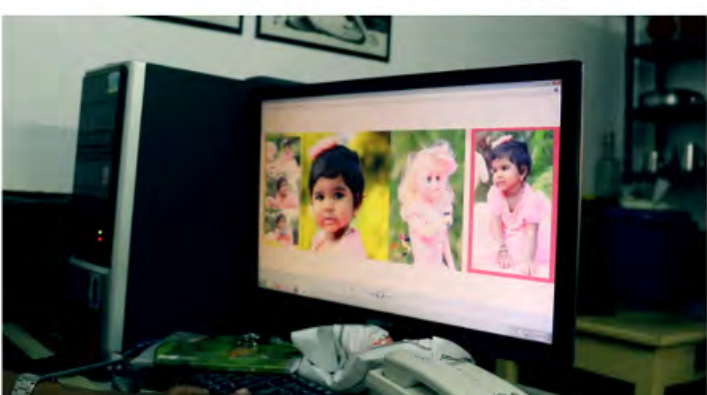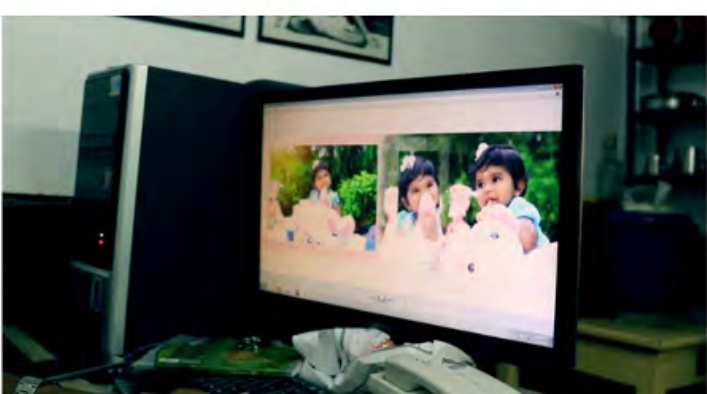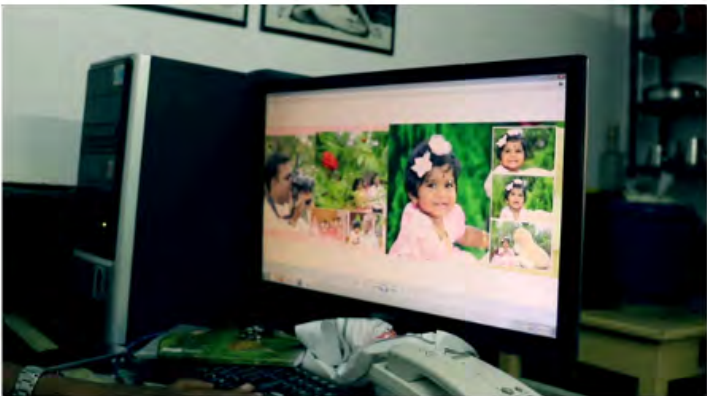
Figure 4: Rajaratnam and friend (L), the editing suite (R), Jaffna 2018. Photographs by the author.

established studio. This system of apprenticeship has waned with the advent of sophisticated digital cameras. Younger photographers in town insisted that clients were prioritizing what camera was used. Clients often inquired into the number of megapixels (the higher, the better) while offering opinions on the brand of the camera (Canon was the preferred choice). These studios were consequently networked into a global vocabulary and market of photographic practice, where tacit brand recognition translated to the possibility of identifying a "good" photograph (see Strassler 2010, 57).

Sopi, the chief among Baby's acolytes, was in charge of the studio's transition into the digital. As a part of this, he undertook lavish pre-wedding, wedding, birthday, and girls' puberty ceremony shoots, as well as Photoshop and related album-making tasks, and managed a Facebook page for the studio, so that prospective clients could view the studio's portfolio online. He also maintained a Facebook page for his own photography services. Sopi was assisted by another young man and two young women who tended to the in-studio photography as well as to various bookkeeping and administrative tasks. Curiously, the women apprentices did not view themselves as "proper photographers" because they did not go out with their cameras to shoot. Photography in this sense appeared to be inseparable from mobility. While this was changing in the case of young women who were sharing their photography on Instagram and self-identifying as photographers, women employed as studio photographers were more reticent about their role as "real" photographers; their work remained confined to studio portraits.

Sopi and his cohort belonged to a new generation of Jaffna photographers. Their interests lay in a kind of photography that dazzled and drew explicitly from South Indian Tamil cinema in what was described and advertised as "cinestyle" photography, informing the aesthetics of wedding photography in particular. Photographers invested in the most expensive and "modern" cameras they could acquire. Prices for their services were advertised in line with the make and model of their cameras. This practice was met with scorn by some older photographers who had been unable to keep up with the rapid succession of technological advances, as well as with the increasingly demanding expectations for "cinestyle" photoshoots.

Young girls who came of age were photographed with the same attention as one would pay to a wedding. This was an important occasion to dress up in grand traditional clothing (sometimes both Western and customary shoots were undertaken) and be pictured either at home or, increasingly, at an external location. In the past, these photographs would be circulated as a part of marriage proposals where girls were

Figure 5: Apprentices at work (L), Rajaratnam and friends (R), Jaffna 2018. Photographs by the author.

married at younger ages. This has now fallen out of fashion since more recent portraits are being commissioned and used. A popular trope in these albums was photographing the girl holding a camera, where she herself posed as a photographer brandishing the potentials and also the required talents for picturing. Girls looking into the camera lens or screen suggested the glamour and "modernity" of the photographic apparatus but also seemed to hint at the possibility of "self-picturing" where these young women were taking control of their own images and futures.

Wedding photography was the most lucrative aspect of studio photography, but it was often the most "complex" given clients' demands and standards. Increasingly, Tamil couples from overseas were also choosing to get married locally. Cost played some part in that, but this was also on account of their being able to celebrate their wedding with their extended family in the "homeland" and with Sri Lanka's scenery as the backdrop. Brides sought out various material markers of Jaffna and "traditional" Tamil culture, including, for example, the inclusion of the symbolic palmyra leaves in their bouquets. Photographers frequently traveled with their clients to scenic locations for shoots, even if it meant that the state's postwar recasting of the visual-material landscape leached into the backdrops of personal photographs. The militarized landscape of northern Sri Lanka had also been transformed into sites for leisure. And concrete proclamations of the state's military victory were aimed predominantly at Sinhalese tourists from the south of the island for whom the northern peninsula had remained out-of-bounds due to war. Sites of wartime violence and devastation along with material remnants of the LTTE's *de facto* state apparatus, including the vast *thuyilam illams*, were razed and built over with grand monuments, army camps and military-run resorts. These spaces would rapidly become the backdrop for diverse everyday photographs, not only in the casual snapping of photos of friends, family, and lovers on increasingly ubiquitous mobile phone cameras for instant dissemination on platforms such as Instagram and Facebook, but for professional photographers documenting life events.

For others, as has been explored in detail by Maunaguru (2019), marriage had become a vital migration strategy. A marriage made possible new citizenship; that, in turn, afforded futures that were more stable or secure elsewhere. Proposal portraits as well as wedding albums that satisfied the demands of immigration regimes were central to this endeavor. Here, the photographer presided over weddings as a second master of ceremonies, directing and producing the kinds of photographic images able to convince immigration officials of the legitimacy of a marriage. With their cameras,

photographers shepherd couples, their family members and priests into persuasive poses and performances to better "authenticate" their participation in tradition as well as in displays of "genuine" intimacy. If identity documents confirming citizenship were a means of navigating precarity while physically moving through the postwar landscape, these supplemented a means of escape through aspirational citizenship. Photographers played a crucial role in mediating these possibilities. The realization of personal ambitions cannot be disentangled here from the impairment of one's present citizenship, which motivated the desire for "status" elsewhere. The wedding photographer's business, as I came to learn, did not end with photography, but also with his "*kai rasi*" (lucky or auspicious hand) and capacity to assemble a wedding album that might convince the strictest of visa regimes that the relationship was legitimate.

Conclusion

"There is a simple way to measure the skill of a photographer," Rajaratnam *mama* mused. "No one should be able to tell what time of day a photograph was taken, whether it was in studio light or sunlight. There is a kind of *moola* (brain implying skill) for that, now it is a *computer moola* (computer brain)! That is also very good. I have seen some very good pictures."

Contemporary studio photographers in Jaffna were mediators of fantasies and futures, whether in helping to make a client resemble their favorite Tamil actor or in capturing a portrait that would make a prospective spouse take note. They also took photos of another kind; exact, biometric, machine-readable, as necessitated by the state. Yet these were also composed with a bit of the photographer's "*kai rasi,*" offering clients the promise and opportunity of passage to a new state and citizenship. In some ways, such "official" requirements have sustained the continued need for photography studios in an age of widely accessible mobile phones and compact digital cameras. However, as this essay has illustrated, studios play a far more significant role in shaping the visual economy of Jaffna's social world as the fixers of not merely pictured life histories, but imagined futures, and aspirations.
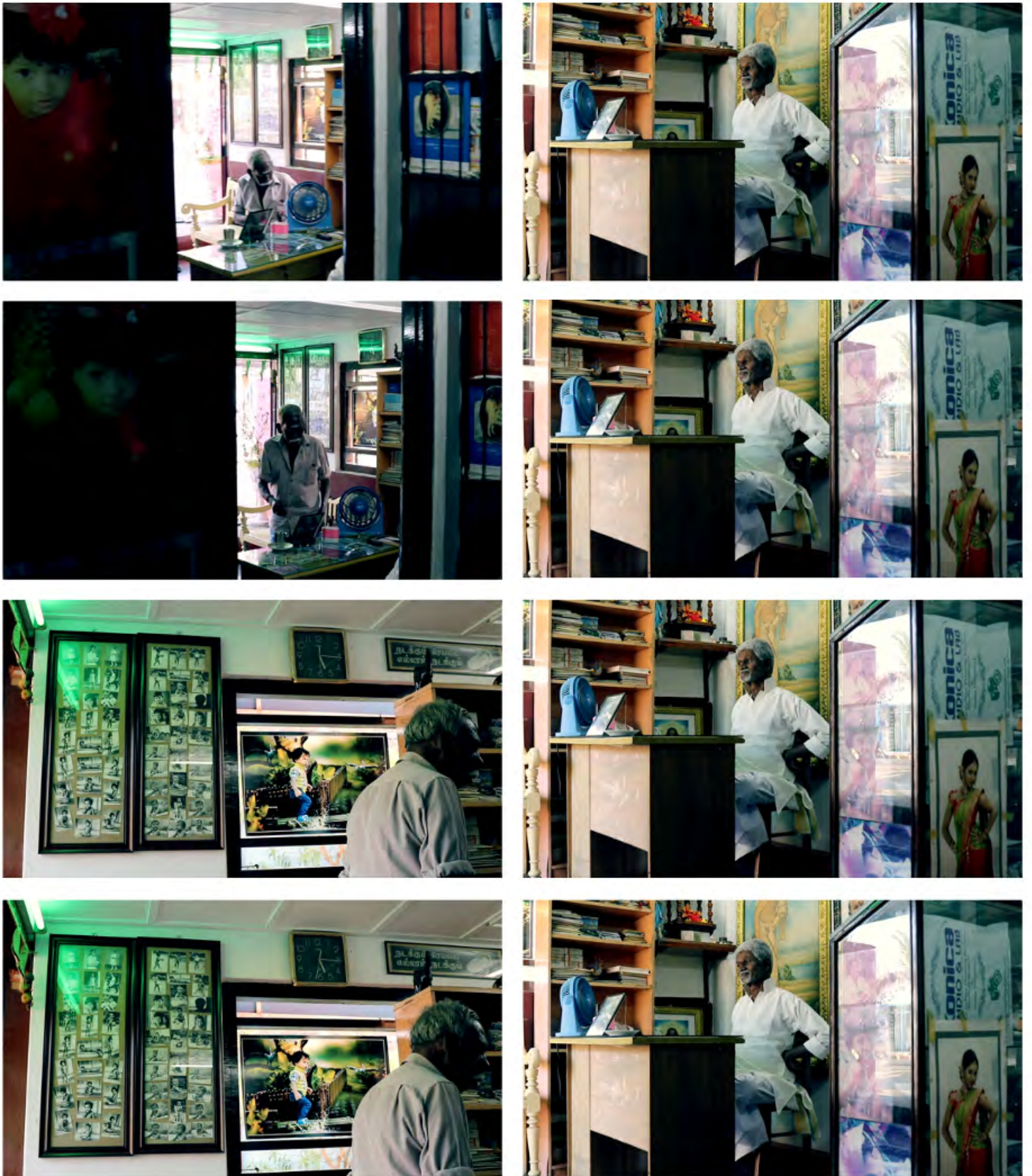
Figure 6: Arumugam takes his leave (L), Rajaratnam listens to music (R), Jaffna 2018. Photographs by the author.

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DASTAVEZI
THE AUDIO-VISUAL
SOUTH ASIA

Recasting Reconciliation through Culture and the Arts

Iffat Fatima

Abstract

This essay elaborates on the process of making the film *Lanka: The Other Side of War and Peace*. On the one hand, it discusses the intricacies of memory and reconciliation in the context of the Sri Lankan Conflict from the filmmaker's personal recollection. On the other hand, it provides a glimpse into the film's political aesthetics, camera work, protagonists, audience, and the conceptualization of the power of documentary film to open our collective imagination and create empathy. (abstract by editors)

Film: https://crossasia-journals.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/index.php/dasta/article/view/19130/18645

I shall not try to change anything that I think or anything that you
think (insofar as I can judge of it) in order to reach a reconciliation
that would be agreeable to all. On the contrary, what I feel like
telling you today is that the world needs real dialogue, that falsehood
is just as much the opposite of dialogue as is silence, and that the
only possible dialogue is the kind between people who remain what they
are and speak their minds.

Albert Camus

I completed and released the documentary film *Lanka — The Other Side of War and Peace* in 2006. The film, while tracing the history of overlapping conflicts in Sri Lanka, explores issues of memory and political violence. In course of making the documentary, I attended a fellowship program at the University of Brandeis entitled Brandeis International Fellowship (2003-2004): *Recasting Reconciliation through Culture and the Arts.* The fellowship aimed to explore the role of culture and the arts in promoting reconciliation among warring parties.

The following is excerpted from the transcript of a conversation conducted during the fellowship program. The conversation focused on my experience in the making of the documentary film *Lanka – The Other Side of War and Peace.* It was an attempt to reflect, to evaluate, and to theorize on the practice of documentary filmmaking: its ethical dimensions, its transformative potential, and its role in processes of dialogue and reconciliation. In the present day, as mass media is manipulated by vested interests, whether ideological, political or economic, information and entertainment coalesce into a spectacle, foreclosing any possibility for critical engagement with issues that impact our world and the people living in it. On the contrary, a documentary is an ever-evolving creative endeavor that has the potential for responding to events and situations in a nuanced and thought-out manner. A good documentary film is designed to tickle the critical sensibility of its viewers and to humanize its subjects by creating empathy for them. The objective is to create space for a sensible and meaningful conversation.

On coming to Sri Lanka

I traveled to Sri Lanka for the first time in January 2000. The tiny island in the Indian Ocean has about 22 million inhabitants (2022), with a majority of those, about 74 percent, being Sinhalese, and the rest mainly Tamil and Muslim. The year 2000 was a time of war and siege, fear and uncertainty, anger and bitterness—a time when checkpoints and bomb blasts were the norm. Coming from Indian-controlled Kashmir, which has experienced unmitigated conflict since 1947, it seemed as though I was shuttling between war zones.

I spent three months working in Colombo at Young Asia Television (YATV). YATV is an independent media house where more than a 100 young men and women worked together, apparently in a spirit of cooperation and friendship, to create television programs for Asian youth. Most of these young men and women were students taking

a break from their education to train as media professionals. Within a few days of my joining, I noticed that those speaking Sinhala and those speaking Tamil formed separate enclaves, did not understand each other's language, and seldom sat together. The Tamils were conscious of being a minority in a Sinhala-dominated country and huddled together. A few Muslims could understand and speak both languages, and they seemed to be moving from one group to the other. All this occurred before the backdrop of a violent ethnic conflict between the majority Sinhalese and the minority Tamils. For decades, the conflict has been relentless and bloody with large-scale killings, enforced disappearances, torture, and displacement—the scars of battle meted everywhere in the form of memorials and cemeteries. War widows and orphans bear testimony to the havoc wreaked on this island country.

Although Sri Lanka is a highly diverse society, the Sri Lankan state is unitary, wherein the Sinhala language and the Buddhist religion have a special status. The Tamils and the Muslims saw Sri Lanka as a Sinhala Buddhist country where the minorities had to compromise and accept the hegemony of a Sinhala majority. They each felt the pressure of being a minority and resented it. Being Tamil meant they could be detained, disappeared, arrested, and killed lawfully under the prevailing regulations for the prevention of terrorism.

Although most Muslims in Sri Lanka (about 7 percent of the total population) are Tamil-speaking, many of them can speak Sinhala quite well, and those in YATV were comfortable speaking English. It was interesting to see these young Muslims struggling to find their bearing within the Sinhala/Tamil polarization by aligning themselves with the majority Sinhalese while remaining conscious of their minority status.

During my three-month stay at YATV, I made the 10-minute video *We the Subjects*, which probed the polarization of identities in Sri Lanka. While conducting research for the video, it became evident that YATV reflected the larger reality of ethnic polarization in Sri Lanka. Although the Sinhalese, the Tamils, and the Muslims live in the same country and work in the same establishments, there are deep divisions that run between them.

I returned to Sri Lanka in April 2002 to work on a project in which I sought to research the prevalent structure of formal education in Sri Lanka and its role in shaping ethnic identities. Education in Sri Lanka is entirely state-controlled and segregated along ethnic and religious lines. This means that Sinhalese, Tamils, and Muslims are educated in separate institutions. Within themselves, these institutions are "islands of solitude,"

where students as well as teachers of each community assemble and group. They have a sense of being bound and committed to the identity into which they are born; they remain exclusive and insulated. Each "island of solitude" is identical in that they mainstream students into the dominant ideologies of their respective group. It was a revelation for me to learn that many students I spoke to, even those living in areas with mixed communities, had never interacted with students from communities other than their own.

In 2002 there were no checkpoints. The presence of armed personnel, which had been so ominous and alarming during my last visit, was minimal. Earlier that year, the warring parties signed a ceasefire agreement ending the two-decade-old civil war. A road known as the A9 highway, which links Sri Lanka's war-torn North with the country's South, was opened to civilian traffic after almost 12 years.

In January 2002, I met Lisa Kois, a lawyer and human rights researcher/activist from the United States, in Colombo. Struck by the potential of that moment in history, Lisa and I decided to take a trip together. So we packed ourselves and our equipment into Lisa's pink jeep and set out to travel from the southernmost point of Sri Lanka to the northernmost, and to make a documentary film in the process. Eventually, two films were made, my *Lanka – The Other Side of War and Peace* and *The Art of Forgetting* by Lisa Kois.

On reconciliation

I feel that justice, or the perception of justice, is something that is imperative for reconciliation. Reconciliation may not be possible in a state of status quo. Something has to change; some transformation has to occur either at an individual or a political level for a process of reconciliation to take place. In this project, I interacted with people who have suffered a significant personal loss due to political violence. Having felt myself the extent of their pain and suffering, reconciliation seemed to me in such cases almost impossible. However, in the very process of articulating their experiences through narrative, ritual, memorializing, art, and other modes, those who have suffered tremendous pain and loss seek validation and healing, which are imperative for reconciliation.

There is also the question of distinguishing between community healing and individual healing. Individual healing is always personal and may or may not be dependent on

community healing. It's a lonely process that tends to become marginalized or even inundated by the politics of community reconciliation. Healing at a personal level need not be permanent; any incident or event can reawaken feelings of pain and anger experienced previously. While traveling and talking to people, I had a disturbing thought: By stirring up memories, were we not renewing palpable and intense pain that many had perhaps buried? However, I could feel that we enabled those we engaged with to talk about and vent their feelings. They spoke, hoping that their voices would reach outward. In fact, many of them spoke about their need to give expression to their emotions, which had not yet found a platform. They make a political decision to assert their sense of injustice and helplessness. It is a decision for their voice to be heard and transmitted and for an injustice suffered in some way to be conveyed with the hope that it may not recur.

On my work

I started making documentary films in the 90s. To be able to work as an independent documentary filmmaker is a struggle but even more so a privilege. It has given me an opportunity to explore issues and subjects that are of interest and important to me. For me, what is most valuable about making documentary films is that it has given me access to individual lives and situations, which is immensely educative and enriching. It's a vantage point that brings one to think and rethink, to make sense of what is happening around one, on one's own terms. To make autonomous choices and create a piece of work in a way one thinks appropriate is both an entitlement and a responsibility. Challenges and risks are part of a process and have to be negotiated as they arise.

As a filmmaker, much of my work looks at cultural overlaps and historical meetings. Culture or artistic expression is not derived from one pure source. Still, it is a living organism, fluid and in a state of motion—interacting and responding to cross-currents, in the process of synthesizing and regenerating itself. It is interesting to unravel these layers and work to present them in an aesthetic form that subtly and poignantly reveals them to those who engage with it. In a dynamic world, ideas, concepts, and thought processes travel and interact in a complex and indeterminate manner—specially in a world of internet connectivity. It happens in the subterranean folds, hidden in the masses. It is complex and not easy to fathom or analyze. As the saying goes, "when a butterfly flaps its wing the vibrations are felt in distant places."

I did a series of films on *Amir Khusro,* the famous 13th century Sufi poet and scholar from the Indian subcontinent. Amir Khusro embodies a multi-dimensional human being engaged with his social milieu at multiple levels. As a poet and an artist, he represents the confluence or the syncretization of the two divergent traditions, Islam and Hinduism. By providing a critique of cultural insularity, the notion that culture is immovable and fixed in time and space, he explored the possibilities of art and culture to be a reconciliation process. Khusro is highly revered by both Muslims and Hindus on the Indian subcontinent, and thousands of devotees throng his tomb in Delhi every day.

On the making of *Lanka – The Other Side of War and Peace*

While doing my project on education and intercommunal relations, the idea for the movie first emerged. Then I was not then thinking of making a film, but I did have a camera and plan to use it for collecting and documenting my impressions while doing my research. After the signing of the ceasefire agreement in 2002, areas hitherto inaccessible were opened for travel, and it seemed like a momentous time when things were ideally poised for a change. I began to see the contours of a film, but it was not well-defined. It was then that I met Lisa Kois, and we discussed the ongoing peace process in Sri Lanka and the possibility of doing a film about the A9 highway, which connects the country's North and South. For years it had been a zone of a bloody war between the government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Parts of it were controlled by the LTTE and parts by the government of Sri Lanka. It was opened to civilian traffic after a peace accord had been signed, generating a lot of hope and optimism. It became the highway to peace. The idea of making a film on the A9 and collaborating with Lisa Kois, a human rights lawyer, seemed very exciting to me. I imagined a short film on our travel experience through an area opened after years of war.

During this period, Lisa was living in the South of Sri Lanka. She had worked on human rights issues in Sri Lanka during the period 1987-1989 when the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) led insurrection had plunged Sri Lanka into three years of violence and terror, during which thousands of Sinhala youth had been disappeared, tortured, and killed. We talked about the complete silencing of that period. The commission reports had implicated many politicians, military, and other officials involved in the ongoing peace process. It seemed ironic. My optimism and hope in the peace process was tarnished, and the complexity of issues confronting Sri Lanka came to the fore. I began

seeing the connections in the use of violence in politics for the perpetuation and assertion of power. An idea for a more significant film, which could traverse the South and the North, started to emerge: a film that could substantially contribute to the ongoing debates over peace and reconciliation in Sri Lanka.

Embarking on this film was different. I always used to have with me a professional cameraperson and a sound technician. Here we were limited to maybe two or three women. We had a high-end digital camera, a microphone, a tripod. We kept a low profile, minimizing the spectacle of a film crew.

But we kept coming up with more and more ideas. We were following a road. We were looking at life along the route. We were observing. We were filming. We were talking to people. We would go to places with stories to tell—stories of violence—and we would stop. We would sit. We would look around. We would start asking questions. These questions would lead us to other places, other people, and new stories to tell.

On memories and moments from the filming

Something that stands out in my mind is the beauty of the southern part of Sri Lanka and the sense of it being settled. The sea... the feel of the sea… even the smell of it. It has been there; it is continuing, it is beautiful. People are going along with their lives. Those lovely sights… the pottery shops. All these and much more. They come as images, as pleasing images. The sound of the sea rings nicely in my ears.

And then I think of the complete contrast to it in the North.

The A9 highway was both a physical and an emotional strain. This was a highway on which a bloody war had been fought for 20 years. The road was long and war-torn, arid, and dusty. I felt the strain of traveling with the camera as we kept stopping at regular intervals. The sun was scorching hot, and our bodies were coated with dust. We had to stay alert to our surroundings, which were littered with the remnants of war. There was devastation and destruction. Bombed, bullet-ridden, abandoned houses, ruins of temples and shrines, destroyed schools with small children in their white uniforms curiously peering out, rows and rows of headless and distorted Palmyrah trees on both sides of the highway. Signs of death—flak jackets, destroyed tanks, unexploded shells. After every half kilometer: warning signs for landmines, detonated explosives, and for some undetonated, as well. It was all highly volatile and overwhelming. My gaze kept shifting from one object to another—it seemed like a scenario recreated for a film.

There were many other travelers with different objectives looking at the same images. Along the way, at several points, many of them would stop and take photographs—it was war tourism and quite disorienting.

While driving on the A9 highway through the LTTE-controlled area, the militaristic and totalitarian nature of the LTTE struck me. There were visible signs of it in the form of large billboards displaying the tiger (LTTE emblem), the architecture of memorials, cemeteries, shrines, all fetishizing martyrdom. Everything was owned and controlled by the LTTE, even the food joints, guest houses and buses.

But there were also some beautiful moments in the North… when someone would just talk to us, when we would just enter someone's house. It's this thing about the camera. It opens up these spaces where you can have intense moments with people which are really wonderful. If there is one thing about documentary filmmaking that attracts me, it is this privileged access to people's lives. People just open up and are willing to participate in a sort of experience with you. I really love that. Those moments stand out.

Like Sansi Nona from Matara, in the South. I remember Sansi Nona. How could I not? She is such a force, such a tremendous force, there is something so very intense in the way she talks. Having deeply suffered state violence, she understood the destructive repercussions of suppressed memory. She spontaneously responded to our project. She took it. She owned it in a way. She shared it.

Interview: Sansi Nona from Matara, South Sri Lanka

It's not just my children who fell prey. I think in this Kottagoda area alone, the throats of thousands of children were slashed, and their bodies were put into sacks. I think the child next door to our house also was taken, he was 18 or 22. His neck was cut, and he was put into a sack. His mother is still crazy. This government should be [held] responsible for all these forms of injustices. I pray that in the future, our future generations don't have to face these types of injustices ever again. I cannot talk much more because I feel like something has happened to my chest. Stop here; something could happen to me; I have high blood pressure. When I keep thinking of these things, something might happen to me… That's all I have to say, I can't say anything more, my head is hurting, just thinking about it since morning. I had almost erased it from my mind previously, for the last ten or twelve years, but today it feels like everything has

been let out again. Because of that, I can't talk much. I remembered my child, my precious child. I pray that he may attain Nirvana. I will not talk anymore. My talk is now over. I hope that this does not happen to other children and to mothers like me. I hope that he's born as my son in all my future lives. They killed my child, who was a blessing to the house. They killed my best child, my best child. I always say curse them. I don't care five cents for anyone in the army because it was the Sinhala who killed the Sinhala. The Sinhala killed these Sinhala. I saw a boy who was forced to put his neck on top of the well and it was cut with a knife. I pray that such things will not be seen again. If I talk anymore, I don't know what will happen to me because I have pressure. I took medicine in the morning because I had to talk with you. I won't talk anymore. I'll stop here. I won't talk. (47:34)

You think of these things—war, violence, destruction. You read about them. You discuss them. But the experience is different. When you meet people, when you enter their homes, when you enter their lives, when you are actually seeing and experiencing them at that level, then these things don't remain abstract issues. Then it becomes the people, what they are experiencing, and nothing else matters. The impact of it is so real. State crises and crises of democracy, majority/minority crises, all these things seem to be intellectual debates. Still, the impact is on such a deep emotional level. Like that woman in the North who lives in a shell of a house. She's saying that only "the government and the Tigers know what the war is about. All we know is run, run, run, and we have no idea what it's all about. It's crazy." There is this saying or proverb, "When two elephants fight, the crops are bound to get crushed," which, in some ways, legitimizes it. You know, some people have to die. Some people have to be killed. It's just that these things happen. The striking reality of what that means, what it entails, that's something that has stayed with me.

On dilemmas, ethical and otherwise

People shared so much. They handed us these precious gifts—pieces of themselves, their stories, their pain. And we had to find a way to honor what they had given us. In some ways, I think an aspect of that honoring came through the questions we asked; or the mere fact that we were asking. The fact that we wanted to know, that we wanted to talk, that we wanted to listen and document. That alive and potent process, in itself, was essential and central to our objective of reaching out with the camera. It couldn't be fueled exclusively by the imperative of the final film. There was a certain level of

acknowledgement and validation conferred through our presence and our purpose. In the context of political violence, in the context of the abuse of state power, in the context of so much silent suffering, there is dignity in being able to tell your story. There is dignity in having someone listen.

There was always a choice that we presented. And we worked hard to create spaces in which people didn't feel coerced. But there was not always the time; there was not always the attention. And we didn't know what, exactly, the interpreters were saying— or how they were saying it. We were asking people to remember. Not just to remember but to remember intentionally and to narrate an act of violence perpetrated against them. We were asking people to engage in an intensely political act—they were consciously choosing not only to narrate an act of violence, but they were also exposing the perpetrators of the acts of violence—the perpetrators, who continued to wield power. In doing so, they were holding those accountable for the acts of violence committed by them. There is a personal decision involved when people speak about these things. They do make a personal choice, and in making that choice, they seek accountability and justice not just for themselves but for all those impacted by the acts of violence.

On the power of the medium

In talking about themselves, I imagine those who are victims of violence acquire agency; in a way, I think they are aware of it. Especially when they are talking to a camera. The camera does come with a certain amount of power. However, if you honestly explain your objectives and then leave the choice to the person to tell whatever they want to within that context, I suppose it's a mutual relationship at that moment. I think that, in a way, they seize that moment to express something that lies suppressed. In some ways, maybe it empowers them. It occurs at that moment, when they are narrating their stories to the camera. I think they somehow willfully appropriate the camera's power; they acquire agency. It gets them out of their victimhood in a way. Once the film is made, the agency's power has been transferred there, into the film. When you say it's a powerful film, what do you mean? Essentially, the power of this agency is reflected in the movie.

Then there is its audience. Even if it's only for the period during which the film is watched and the viewer participates in that moment, I think there is a transfer. This means, in a sense, that the camera has empowered the subject, and then you hope

that the viewer feels impacted and empowered by the story. Empowered enough to communicate the story. I believe that one creates some sort of space and an understanding, perhaps, in people's minds. I think that, within that moment, perhaps, something happens, even in terms of just watching. You are putting something out there and trusting that something will remain. I suppose this is what one hopes for, aspires to with filmmaking. It becomes a medium to transfer a message or power from here … to there. It's a moment-to-moment transfer. I guess that is what, in some way, justifies the camera's intrusion into people's lives.

On being an outsider

At some level, I'm not sure I understand, or for that matter, accept, the dichotomization of insider and outsider. You are one or the other. It is crucial to locate oneself in one's context and examine and understand one's subjective position within that context. And I do believe that one's location must inform one's choices about whether and how one engages within that context. But that position, that location, is not static. It's subjective. It's relational. It does not exist—I do not exist—outside that ever-changing context. At any given moment, I am neither insider nor outsider, and I am both. I do not speak Sinhala. I do not speak Tamil. Does this make me an outsider in Sri Lanka? In most ways, yes. But spoken language is merely the most obvious indicator of belonging. But it's not as simple as that. Language is more than the words that we speak. Language is the ability to understand and read unspoken signs that define community—a silent dialogue—the dialogue in which one engages and interacts in making films. Silent dialogue sounds rather dramatic, but there may be something to it. There is exchange. There is sharing, listening, and caring, which is simultaneously intuitive, conscious, and deliberate.

In certain situations, the insider becomes an outsider: traitor, terrorist, informant, fanatic, conspirator, rebel, collaborator, and s/he is killed or imprisoned or disappeared. What does this do to the notions of insider and outsider?

On the intention of the film

I keep coming back to Alex Boraine's wonderful phrase, "the intentional act of remembering." I think that was and still is the intention… to do that ourselves, and to ask others to do that with us.

The film is largely an act of recalling and remembering decades of violence in Sri Lanka by bringing the warring communities face to face with their own practice of violence. In doing so, our objective is to facilitate a conversation in the public arena, within and between communities separated by geographic, linguistic and ethnic differences, and to stimulate a discussion and dialogue between parties to the conflict.

In the film, we wanted to complicate the rosy and relatively simplistic notion of peace that hovered around us in 2002. As hopeful as it was, there was something unreal, and at times disingenuous, in the discourse about peace in Sri Lanka. Anyone who offered a critique was labelled a spoiler. There was intense pressure to conform and not to rock the peace boat. And yet, there was so much to critique. There were so many voices that were not being heard. There was so much that had not been addressed about the past. How do you make peace in situations marked by deception and hypocrisy?

Dialogue has been a crucial motivating factor in this work. This dialogue happens on at least three levels. The first is the dialogue between the people we worked with and ourselves. This entails the process of describing our work to them, the way we frame the issues, etc. The fact that we say *we think these memories are important*. *We believe they deserve space in the public debate*. These are all part of the exchange. The stories that people tell us in response are—first and foremost—a level of dialogue. The second dialogue is between the filmmaker—as embodied in the film, and the various audiences who will see the film. The final level of dialogue, we hope, is the dialogue that takes place *afterward*. Some of this will be facilitated dialogue in controlled settings. Some, we hope, will occur in people's homes, in social settings, on the bus, at school, maybe in the press… Who knows. We just want to get people talking—really talking.

Post script

In April 2003, the peace talks between the government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE broke down, and the peace process stalled. In July 2006, after a fragile four-year ceasefire, the war resumed. It formally ended on May 18, 2009 with the killing of the LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran. The Sri Lankan Army gained control over the entire territory held by the LTTE in the North and East. Tens of thousands of civilians are believed to have been killed in the final months of the battle. The government has denied allegations by the U.N. and human rights groups of committing war crimes and abuses

during the final offensive against the Tamil Tigers and ignored international demands for an independent investigation.

After the war, I travelled to Sri Lanka in 2015. Much has changed. The 2004 tsunami devastated large parts of the southern coastline. The LTTE has been vanquished, and post-war reconstruction reshaped much of the country.

After all these years, traveling on the A9 highway from Colombo to Jaffna was surreal. The highway, rebuilt at a tremendous cost, is completely transformed. All traces of years of strife are erased, and a pall of normalcy was deliberately left hanging over it. The changes are most dramatic on the 100-kilometer stretch that runs through the Vanni, the site of many bloody battles for over 25 years. Along with the Tamil Tigers and tens of thousands of civilian lives, every memorial, every cemetery, every shrine along the road is destroyed. It was frightening. The road on both sides overlooks flat land. What has happened to the slashed Palmyra trees with bullet holes in them?

Nothing of the war remains there, having been entirely dissolved in asphalt and paved with pebbles and stones. Except the huge water tank scarred by bullets—a poignant reminder of the deep scars in the collective body of the Tamil survivors. After decades of displacement, death, and destruction, they struggle to put together the shredded threads of their lives. As new episodes of violence begin to surface, large parts of the past become erased from the public domain and public discourse. As Milan Kundera says, "The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting." The film *Lanka – The Other Side of War and Peace* remains a valuable account of personal narratives, images, spaces, and places linked to Sri Lanka's long history of violent conflict, which is being officially and deliberately obliterated from public discourse.

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

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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.