



shaina anand

BY ASHOK SUKUMARAN

When I first met you in 2000, you were among the few young people I had come across who would talk clearly about ‘the 1990s’. How did you come to have such clarity about a time of great change, and what experiences informed this?

There are many overlapping experiences, a lot of them linked to film. The first 15 or so years of my life had been middle-class suburban living in Bombay, with my many imaginations fuelled by liberal parenting. But in the early 1990s, just as our families and others were saying it was time for a

broader ‘liberalisation’, I discovered other kinds of politics, often through watching and then making films.

I joined the Xavier Institute of Communications to study film and video while I was doing my BA in history. By 1995, at the age of 19, I was working with the film director Saeed Mirza, doing mostly scripts to begin with. Then in 1997 I travelled through India for a documentary film project with him, which led to a book project, and so on. By 1998 I was familiar with activist movements in the city. As IPMC (the Indian People’s Media Collective), we

organised a large anti-nuclear concert, Peace Together, among other things. Then, around 1999, I was witness to the peak and subsequent fall of a key diasporic movement in the UK. I had friends in the ‘Asian Underground’ music scene, which was when I first felt the force of a transnational, immigrant-based South Asian culture.

So through the 1990s I was lucky to have a range of experiences of ‘globalisation’, and crucially, had the time to reflect on them. For example, one of the earliest projects I did with Saeed was to write a screenplay for a film called *Bombay Ice Cream*. This was in 1995, Saeed had just finished *Naseem*, and he spoke to me about a script he was writing. I was immediately riveted because here was a tormented leftist trying to make sense of the first few years of economic liberalisation.

I ended up writing most of the screenplay, because Saeed liked the first few scenes I wrote. It was a dark film, based on a real-life incident where an actor’s car ran over six people sleeping on the pavement (this was long before the Salman Khan accident). Essentially the film was about the slow transformation and ‘redemption’ of the ‘hero’, Nikhil. After the accident, Nikhil’s father puts him to work at his post-production and special effects studio. There, he grows to believe in the idea that a liberalised India can be better for one and all. Which, of course, soothes his guilt. At the same time, there is a parallel story about the taxi driver who was run over and killed, and the quest for justice that his surviving younger brother is determined to get. The screenplay had several Robert Altman-type takes, with scenes that we intended to shoot during real Bombay celebrity dos and launches. The end was also full of portent, with the launch of the *Naya India*, *Naya Daur* campaign (India Shining meets *Mile Sur Mera Tumhara* meets Nehru’s ‘tryst with destiny’) at a giant media event on Chowpatty, featuring laser strobes and VJ Ruby Bhatia. As it all reaches a climax, the cab driver’s brother stabs Nikhil on stage ... the song plays on. However, like many of Saeed’s projects, *Bombay Ice Cream* was never made.

Rustle TV 2004 cable
TV, video (varied)

We should talk more about these unrealised and unfinished projects, as a way of following your growth intellectually, beyond specific media. Did these ‘unrealised professions’ perhaps help to open a wider terrain of interest, in which other projects and approaches would eventually flourish? Yes, you could say that this whole journey through film is unfinished and therefore ongoing. There are various reasons why it came to be like this, and they have to do with global moments as well as personal timetables. One thing that came out of the period of travelling with Saeed was *Beta Days and Better Nights*, a book project. This was a kind of travelogue that followed his team (in which I was an assistant director) on a nationwide jaunt to ‘meet the ordinary Indian’ and test the Nehruvian dream 50 years after Independence. *Beta Days* was essentially a critique of the documentary process.

It was 1997 and there were 17 of us on the trip as crew, in one Tempo Traveler and three Sumos. The series had a budget of Rs 99 lakhs (a grant from the government to commemorate 50 years of independence) and aimed to visit every state in India. I was 21, and definitely growing emotionally and intellectually from the experience of the journey. But at the same time I was having deep misgivings about what documentary film-making on that scale could achieve. Among the first things that one questioned was the nature of the technology – giant beta cameras, mics, a boom operator, sound recordist, assistant sound



recordist, all mobilised to speak to one villager.

I must say here that I believe Saeed is an extremely sensitive man, whose *insaniyat* quotient is more than most people I know. But the questions about our methods and the impact that a film crew, with all its associations, can have on its ‘subjects’ would not leave my mind.

So the book, which was funded by a Majlis fellowship and co-written with Shai Heredia (who was also on the trip), was a kind of meta-critique of our own condition as aspiring film-makers. A lot of the raw footage was revisited, and our extensive logs and transcripts of the footage were our primary source material.

About 350 pages of the book were written by mid-1999, then I got an Inlaks scholarship to study in the US and left with the book half-finished. For personal and pragmatic reasons, the book was never completed. I now see that entire process – of being on a documentary crew and then trying to evaluate it critically – as central to what I do, but at the time the unfinished book was a source of great angst. Recently, in 2007, I put up the entire 300-plus pages online. It makes up only part of our journey and is unedited, but it’s out there now.

When you left the US in 2000, not knowing how you could work there and hating the cold in Philadelphia, you returned to India with a lot of ideas and,

from my point of view, the important understanding that DV [digital video] was cheap and accessible enough, even here, to seed independent media practices. What happened when you returned? What kind of milieu did you find yourself in?

I’d basically dropped out of film school and hitchhiked through Europe. Seattle and Indymedia had happened; back home in Bombay a surreal dotcom boom and bust had been and gone; the internet had become stronger.

In all this, the idea that one could have a little DV camera, and shoot and edit your own films on a home (or almost) computer, was gaining ground. So after doing my first ‘commercial’ documentary for Doordarshan I bought my first camera in 2001: a used Sony TRV for Rs 50,000. By then I was editing on my own, on a computer (that would haunt me with disk crashes for the next five years) bought with money you won in a design prize in the US. I was living with my parents, working out of a room I shared with my sister.

When 9/11 happened, I had gone through various other projects, including a series of installations called *Kesri Plaza* (a mall), which was a take on a decade of saffronisation by the Hindu right-wing and globalisation. That day I found myself watching the events in the US live on TV and, by what had become a kind of habit, started filming it off the set. Over the next few weeks, some small demonstrations were organised in the city against the US reaction. Slowly, as I was also a participant, I began a systematic documentation of the various kinds of political actions that were happening in Bombay. At the same time, I continued shooting the TV coverage of the unfolding events.

This ‘comparative’ study of the domestic consumption of such images versus what was left of an outdoor ‘public’ culture of dialogue and protest turned into the larger documentary project *Tellavision Mumbai*. Afghanistan was attacked in mid-October, and it was soon apparent that this public culture was quite thin. Much of it was down to the usual suspects – the Communist CPI (ML), old trade union solidarity committees, the Gandhians,



the Khilafats, leftist journalists, the usual lawyers, and so on – who were coming out into semi-public meetings and *dharnas*. I followed this, with a camera, for almost a year (also through Gujarat).

Eventually, the film project ‘failed’ because I could never edit it into a coherent or hopeful image. The map was there, but what emerged was not a useful vision. It was turning into a lament on the death of the left, which was not at all what I wanted to do. So, as a film-maker with no film left to make, I had to stop after three years of trying really hard, with basically no budget. All the creative cutting and editing skills that I could bring to it could not present a ‘critical public culture’ where there really wasn’t one. My ‘wider audience’ would not get to see a holistic vision, and the converted would not get any answers to the malaise.

Kiosk of Someone Else's Dreams
2007 [with CAMP]
touchscreen,
personal computers,
wireless router,
decorative lighting,
video, custom
software, web
cameras, radio,
antenna (varied)

At last, I'm happy to say, many of the archives are going to be available soon through an online video archiving project we are working on, Pad.ma (Public Access Digital Media Archive). This will also free the video material from the fixity of ending up as a finite film. A lot of it is still quite watchable, and is becoming valuable as a record of the times.

Somehow, while all this was going on, you set up ChitraKarkhana, a non-funded unit that does various kinds of media production: short videos, events and the well-known 'distributed media' projects *RustleTV* and *WICityTV*, as well as other works with FM radio, street electrical systems, security systems, and so on. These interventions inhabit a space that is fragile, legally grey and which already includes the notion of temporariness, as well as the possibility of failure – as 'art' and otherwise. For me, this is



Capital Circus, Chapter 1
2008 CCTV, CCTV footage (21min)

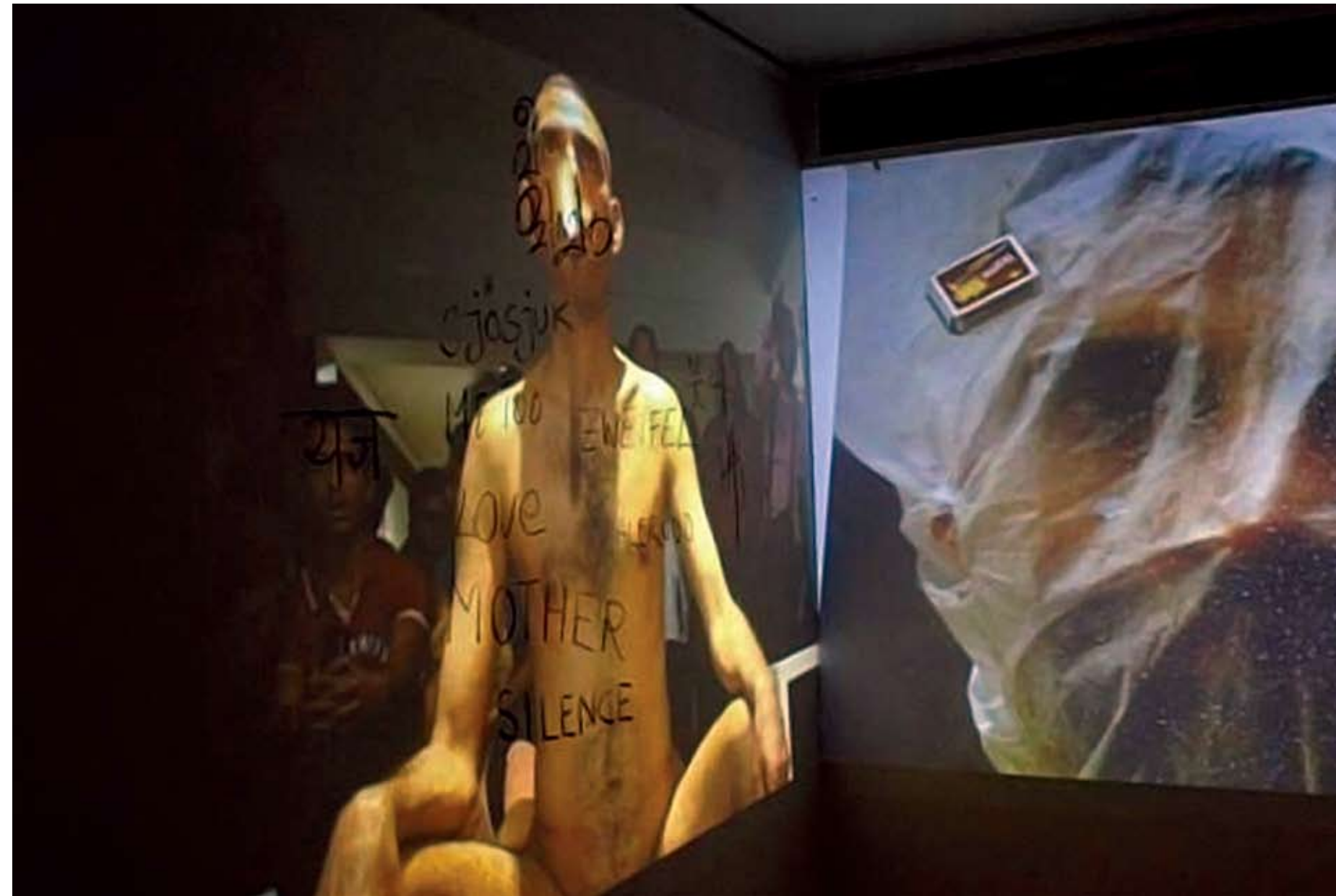
their strength, in that they are utopian but they also work through specific realities and risks. You are among the few people I know who actually builds alternative media systems, or radical 'desiring machines', on the ground.

In a recent project at a Khoj residency (*KhirkeeYaan*, 2006) you did something that was quite simple and yet which suddenly made clear two different things: that television can be looked from, instead of at; and that surveillance technologies allow for new inversions of image media, at almost trivial cost. What is your sense of being such an 'artist' now – after going through what was clearly a non-traditional training and initiation as an artist?

Well, making art is a kind of privileged position, in which various forms of expression can be explored with relative freedom. I'm interested in what I can do with this privilege. In that sense, I think both of us have similar intentions and approaches to the art world: we share a suspicion of its traditional modes of production and distribution but also acknowledge that we have been taken in and been allowed to challenge the limits of what art may mean or do.

We discussed the privilege question recently on a panel that had an interesting title, 'Privilege Escalation'. The term comes from computer systems, where a certain agent obtains more privileges than are normally allowed and can cause changes in the system itself. Similarly, it appears we are both interested in exceeding our existing and obvious privileges and wish to continue, in this or that guise, various utopian, challenging, and unfinishable productions.

This is also the reason for CAMP, which is a more organised platform in collaboration with Khoj. Hopefully, we are now in a position to ask serious questions of ourselves, and also of the art world that we are embedded in. This is also perhaps the question for Khoj: how to continue and expand the good work that it has been doing for the past decade. I hope CAMP will be part of the answer.



sushil kumar

BY ATUL BHALLA