

COLLECTIVISING CINEMA

The Story of *Ektara*

RINCHIN and MAHEEN for EKTARA COLLECTIVE

Ektara Collective is an independent, autonomous, non-funded group of individuals. The purpose of this group is to combine creative efforts and imagination and collaborate to make films that are content-wise and aesthetically located in their contextual realities and experiences.

Its difficult to say when exactly we came together as a Collective or how many we are. Many people were doing different things in different places. It is a mix of middle and working class lives that all came together to try to find a platform to tell our own stories. For many their involvement is political, for some their life experience and for some the need of artistic expression which brought them together.

But we all believed that we needed to create a space to make cinema that allowed us to tell peoples stories and gave dignity to different lives and struggles that are rarely represented in mainstream cinema but are a part of our reality.

Whether it was through translating classic or relevant work from other languages to Hindi and local language or making our own film the idea was to bring art closer to people and to also create our own works of art. As we started a number of us were based in Madhya Pradesh but as we grow people who have become a part of the collective are spread across geographical locations.

Who does not like to hear or tell a story? When all of us came together at *Ektara*, that we would make fiction was the most natural choice for us. For most of us fiction was something that we were used to doing in terms of telling/writing/reading stories, in doing theatre and so in cinema too we wanted to make fiction. Easier said than done.

But fiction films are most often seen as requiring big budgets, a professional trained cast and crew, lots of equipment among many other such impossible things. Obviously these are out-of-reach for many of us. BUT if only some can make them, they can choose to tell whatever stories they want to tell, and depict reality in whichever way they want to. And this way is limited to a certain class, certain aspirations that time and again reiterate certain stereotypical notions of caste, class, gender, sexuality and reality.

So *if* it were possible, then we would tell stories that had more of our own to offer.

And with all the *ifs* and the *buts*, we were going to do fiction films, A fiction film - with a story, dialogues, actors, music, lights, camera, action and all of that.

But, could we do it? Even amongst us, some of us never thought we could make fiction because we didn't have the resources, it seemed too complicated, it seemed too distant. But when we started off, we realised that it wasn't impossible and now two films down the line, a third one on its way, and many more in our heads we are happy we started on this journey.

Politics, content, form, aesthetics

Stories always have a life of their own, but they don't emerge from a void. They come from the political and social context of the people who tell it. How they tell it, what their emphasis is on, and what they leave out, depends on the politics and the perspective of the story teller. If we speak about cinema, then even the cinematic language that is used, comes from within that context. We believe that art is rarely objective. In fact, no work of art is neutral. What stories one chooses to tell, about who and how, are not just artistic decisions but also choices that reflect a point of view and a political position - how one sees the world, what one thinks about it, what are one's struggles and from which direction does one see the possibility of change, and in some cases, what is one's own role in it.

The work of *Ektara* is reflective of the politics of the people involved in it. The cinema that comes out of it therefore affects their content, form and even the process. And this is dynamic; it is continuously changing and evolving.

For us, the content of our stories was something that came from lived experience. That these were stories that needed to be told, we have all along felt confident about. But the way in which this content would be put out was something that posed a challenge especially in cinema. How would we counteract the prevalent aesthetics and the imagery which itself has a politics of its own. How would we subvert and break the ways in which people are represented. Who would our protagonists be, how would they look, speak. To some extent it was not so much as *not* knowing what and how we wanted our images to be, but what we had to evolve in terms of execution and technical skills to be able to implement our vision. And with each film we feel that we have been moving forward.

We usually work at two levels. Firstly, we select or put together *A story*. The story that is selected would have the potential to or would already embody within it the values - political, philosophical and artistic. Meaning it would have to be a good story. This is then opened to people who may/

would be possibly interested in taking it forward. Here, the story is reconstructed and adapted to the social and historical context where it is to be played out. This makes for a narrative that is layered and nuanced and firmly rooted.

The film *Chanda ke Joot* was a very short story written by a young girl based on her own experiences of going to school which was worked on as a script.

Jaadui Machchi was a story that was originally about a girl who lived by the Brahmaputra struggling between the reality of her existence and what she believes in. The film *Jaadui Machchi* was made with the residents of Bhilpura, a small *basti* located on the banks of the river Narmada in the Hoshangabad district of Madhya Pradesh. The story though already written, resonated with them and they felt that many parts of the story reflected their life experience. While working on the script with them, another layer was added to the script, that of the struggle against privatization and control over fishing. There is already a history of such a struggle in the region and this found its way into the script. This was not a coincidence, it was an active choice that the people making the film collectively made.

The amalgamation of these elements is what finally gives the film its content.

Just as the content has to be rooted, the *form, aesthetic and visual imagery* too has to be organic. It is imperative that aesthetic emerges from within the space where the story is located. To impose or import an aesthetic would be contradictory to the purpose of the exercise for the simple reason that it would take away from the history and the culture of the people and the spaces they occupy. Thus, visual and sound elements within the spaces that enhance the script are identified. While these elements are illustrative of the life of the people, they also have to hold a deeper significance on which the narrative can base itself as it unfolds. For this a careful study of spaces both external and internal is needed. How are they used, how are they approached, how are they used at different times of the day, who can access them, how inclusive or exclusive they are, what their nature is, how private and how public. Where we felt that we don't know enough, we observe. Based on these, locations where the different parts of the script could be best played out are identified. All this then fed into the visual design and representation so that they hold the same meaning and add to that part of the narrative. In the film *Chanda Ke Joot*, the school, the colony and even the playground in it are all places that exclude Chanda and people like her and restrict their access. They are either enclosed and she finds herself trapped in them or she is confronted with barriers when she tries to access them. Spatially, the film is constantly negotiating these boundaries along with Chanda and with her we as the audience grapple with the concept of inclusion and exclusion.

The camera is seen as an internal component of the script. It is used as a part of the milieu, which does not seek to showcase it but to become a participant in the story telling. Thus it is as affected as the characters and the plot. Because the camera is functioning from within the framework of the story, there is a conscious effort to avoid being visually exotic or dramatic, so as not to take attention

away from or supersede the narrative. The stylization then comes from the revelation of the ordinary details, which comprise everyday life within a given space and the point of view that is adopted to systematically reveal the plot and its effect on the characters. The frame is constructed around the composition and the shot's subsequent action rather than the composition being constructed within a frame. This is where the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction begin to blur. This is what defines the aesthetic of the film in terms of its composition, lensing, shot and light design.

Once the script is broken down into scenes and shots, we try to maintain a chronology of shooting it. We try but we don't always succeed. A lot of us have doubts about whether these shots will get put together properly. These fears are confirmed when we finally arrive at the edit table. The editors, who lend themselves to the process, work with long sessions of feedback, many patient and impatient hearings of innumerable views and suggestions. Rules of continuity, space and time jumps are all revisited and revised.

The pace and rhythm of the life that people have played out in the story determine the pace and the rhythm of the edit. After all the turbulence it slowly comes together, and the story becomes whole again with new life. If the boundaries of fiction and non-fiction had blurred during the shoot, they disappear during the edit.

Acting and actors

In most mainstream cinema the actors are usually removed from the characters that they represent and then there is acting involved to get the accent and the look right. While we do believe in the craft of acting, it has to be noted that the constant representation of one particular kind of look, that too of the more privileged class and caste, is what we get to see. How women and people of different genders and sexualities, are represented is an even greater cause for concern. The kind of 'look' and imagery that is constructed, creates a mythical world even while telling a real story. For example, when an upper class affluent actor puts on an accent to play a character that is rural or belonging to another caste/ class background, it creates a different kind of reality, a different aspiration in the minds of the viewer, relegating to the background all other aesthetics. When people play characters that are like them in the film it results in having different looking faces, skin tones and accents that are usually kept away from mainstream cinema.

Further, many of us want to act. Acting is also a form of creative expression, but opportunities to do so are limited. To be able to create a platform for us to act in films that tell our own story also then becomes a source of creative and political self-expression. Also for viewers to see stories of their lives being enacted by people like them and not distant stars creates a sense of self-pride that is very valuable.

A worker, while seeing one such film remarked, "It makes me feel good. I can do *majdoori* and then also do this. It makes me feel complete."

This is our film, about us and by us generates a deep sense of pride and ownership.

"That so many people would put so much effort into making something on our stories in your own way. I never thought it would be possible" says Chandrakala Jagat, a migrant worker who plays the role of the story teller in *Jaadui Machchi*. The story she tells in the film is based on a folk tale that she would tell to her grandchildren. Though it was further embellished and added to by others for the film, the way she tells it and the expressions that she uses portrays her vision of the world. Thereby by making the story unique.

It is also important to note that most people in the films are people who have not acted before and though their roles may be close to their lives, they are still roles and there is an engagement with the craft of acting. They spend time on understanding the story, improvising their dialogue. Many times they would reject a prewritten dialogue, "this character would will not speak like this" and rework it in their own way. There was rigour in practicing and learning their lines. In the film *Jaadui Machchi*, almost all the actors work hard for a living and so they took time out at night, memorizing dialogues while making *chappatis*, cleaning nets and sitting at their shops. Many who couldn't read were helped by others who read their dialogues for them.

In this process there is a whole different level of investment. Characters are simulated in situations that are not even a part of the script, changes in action are suggested and details added, dialogues are written and rewritten. People are constantly carving, moulding and perfecting the characters that they will play and themselves to play the characters they mould.

Learning dialogues is one thing, performing it for the camera is another. Getting over the shyness and acting when many people were watching was probably the biggest hurdle that the actors in our films faced. But once people got into the flow of acting they started enjoying it and were even asking for retakes till they got the perfect shot. Sometimes the scene and the real life of the actors would be so close that we would all forget it was a scene. These moments were truly humbling for us. In one of our films, *Jaadui Machchi* (The Magical Fish), the last scene was that of a meeting where villagers were organising themselves against privatization. The person who is called in to organise, is actually an activist who plays himself, and somewhere we all forgot it was a *scene* and people started to react and talk as if it was reality. And that reflected on the screen. And the scene continued even after we had stopped filming and flowed into real life.

Resources

Money is considered a very important part of any endeavour. It often determines whether the endeavour would be undertaken or not. While this was not the most important consideration for us,

we did need some money. And so we wrote and spoke to people who we knew and many who we didn't.

All the collaborators worked on a voluntary basis without any monetary remuneration. In the process where it is important to relate and interact with each other as equal, there is no question of have some people in the group paid and others not. The financial requirements for the shoot and the post production were met by raising money through individual contributions. Ektara does not take any kind of institutional funding. Institutional funding with externally imposed agenda driven controls is contradictory to a creative process where control has to come from within the group and not outside of it. There is no lower limit for making a financial contribution but yes, there is an upper limit. As a rule, no individual can contribute more the five thousand rupees to Ektara Collective. This ensures that more people know and become a part of the process and the ownership becomes extensive, broad based and collective.

People contributed not just money but also time, skills, equipment - bulbs, lenses, filters, batteries, costumes, furniture, utensils, paint, innovative ideas, technical workarounds, encouragement and several other things.

Accounts are meticulously maintained and shared at the end of the project with contributors and/or anyone who wishes to know.

In order to maintain autonomy and independence of the creative process and the people involved in it, all collaborators work voluntarily.

There is a common notion that only work that is paid for is valued and if it cannot be paid for then you cannot demand quality from it. This notion does not hold true in cases where people value work itself as against value of the work. In fact in such cases it would be undermining to consider its worth merely in terms of money. We have seen this in every project that we have undertaken. The time and the effort to see them through maybe more but in none of them has the quality of production been compromised. When people work collectively, they give their best and expect the same from their counterparts. This also comes from a culture where people are used to working and contributing physical and skill based labour. They are able to both appreciate and respect work and skills of others not as a commodity or a service but also as a means of expression.

The Collective Process

The choice of being a part of an Ektara film is made by the people who will finally be executing the film, each one deciding how and what they would want to be involved in. The process is not governed by one or two individuals who will assign people a task but by that person who chooses a task and becomes the implementer of it along with others who have made similar decisions. Once

this choice is made, we work together with others, ideating and sharing the responsibilities of conceptualization, administration, putting into practice and implementation. It is important to note that the process is one of selection, not exclusion and the selection is controlled by the people.

In both *Chanda Ke Joote* and *Jaadui Machchi*, most of the cast and much of the crew were from the *basti* itself. Other technical and non technical people came from across the country and made the films. The process was a collaborative and evolving one where ideas about the script, dialogues, shoot and music were shared and discussed with the people of the *basti* before they were finalized and eventually executed.

Working through a collective process does not mean not having a common vision. It also does not mean that anyone can walk in at anytime and randomly hazard a suggestion (which happens quite a lot!). What it means is that everyone is invested in the whole idea as a whole even while they do what they are specifically doing or interested in doing. Each of us has to be responsible for the process in its entirety. In a large team may be not everyone one will be interested in doing everything but at least some will be and will shoulder the responsibility whether together or in turns. The others will add what they can.

This amounts to the centralization of thought and decentralization of work. Not everyone takes every decision. While we work together, there has been enough of an understanding and trust built - that when a decision is made, it is in keeping with the common vision. So sometimes a person who may have been central in choosing the cast and characters for the film, or in working on the script would be content in doing crowd management and would still feel a part of the direction team, with complete confidence that the other team members will take the shot in keeping with the script.

While making *Jaadui Machchi*, we approached the people of Bhilpura and spent time there starting with the children reading out the story, then explaining about the collective and showing some of our old work. The adults soon became a part of these discussions. There were a lot of questions about how this film would be made, doubts raised about whether it would be possible without stars and trained actors, the finances etc. Among the crew there were some who had joined us for the first time. Some took to the process easily, others found it more challenging and we all dealt with our doubts and fears together and sometimes alone, same as the people of the community did. As and when the need called for we discussed our doubts, answered questions and when we finally reached a common plane and understanding, we started working with the story.

There were times while making the film where if something went wrong or away from the collective vision there would be uneasiness. 'It's not coming out like *our film*', people would say on seeing rushes. Or if some things happened on shoot where one person dominated it would create a strain felt by everyone, which needed to be addressed. This was done in group (emergency!) meetings. This happened a few time in the beginning, but as we moved ahead things fell into place. It is essential

that we as individuals be open to an exchange not just of ideas but also of critique. It is also most important to keep communicating with each other and leave all channels of communication open.

Not all of us are familiar with the collective process. We all have different working styles and there is often a reluctance to let go of control. It took time for all of us to settle down, there were differences on many things. But there was nothing that a good healthy fight and argument and a few sulks can't cure. It was all a part of the process. As things got more streamlined, we learnt from mistakes, things get better, we work more closely. We work more efficiently. We work more.

Collective directorial credits

The films made by *Ektara* are a product of a truly collective effort where each person involved contributes her/his own unique vision, skill and perspective to it, guiding and often maneuvering it to reach its logical completion. Since the vision is a collective one, the directorial acknowledgements are also shared and taken as *Ektara*.

The important difference of individualized work vis-a-vis collective work is of ownership among other things. In the former the final decision to keep what different people bring, lies with an individual who accepts/ rejects and finally owns it. On the other hand when people feel ownership of the process then what they bring is what enhances the vision. The process becomes one of addition and integration rather than subtraction and exclusion. Actually even if it starts off as the vision of a few people it gets added to and becomes a collective one. It also breaks the grand auteur theory, which to a certain extent is a very male and classist concept where one person's vision has to be executed by many and all ideas and efforts are submissive to his fancy. This person then gets credited as a genius and the talent, acumen and contribution of others who are 'merely' carrying out this vision shrinks to the background.

A lot of times we have been asked about whether a collective process would block creativity, and if having no one director or person calling the shots would add to confusion and compromise the final output. This can be both true and untrue. We believe that any process, like making a film, is intrinsically a collaborative one. People don't just execute orders without adding or contributing to it.

But for this to happen it also needs to be a conscious decision to create a process that allows for it. There is no doubt that such a process would be more time and labour intensive. It *has* to be because it seeks to develop a dialectic, which has the ability to refine itself based on logical arguments to produce a synthesis of ideas and synergy in execution through collective consensus. It also creates a space and platform for everyone to be able to express their particular expertise with the understanding that it is equally important to the larger creative process.

Working together and making cinema:

As the process evolves, so did we. We settle into a rhythm of working with each other and together, understanding our peculiarities and ways of functioning and pushing each other to perform better. Innovation, experimentation and invention are the order of the day. What we lack in physical resource, we make up for with human resource. When resources are limited we push our creative and mental resources to the limit finding options, alternatives and possibilities that wouldn't have occurred to us before.

There are people who come up with these and working and reworking them along with others to make them viable almost becomes customary. Right from making portable and low-power-consumption lights (which someone who has an engineering degree and teaches school children helped us with), to working with a woman potter who runs a ration shop to make clay toys, to getting a local reclusive poet to write lyrics, the fisherman to give boats and nets and shots along with fish, and having a young boy coaxing his goat to give us a shot, every one contributes to grounding the film.

Locations are revisited, new ones found; clothes were borrowed for costumes, altered and stitched, selection of people for different roles, practice and rehearsals; dressing up the locations etc is all done together.

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hen there are people who take time out to join the process. In Jaadui Machchi it was the migrant worker who is also a storyteller in her community, who traveled out of her town to tell one for the camera; the activist who played himself; the thekedaar who otherwise teaches children in the city and has a keen interest in theatre.

Then there are the people who've trained to make film trying to break free from some of the their learnt ideas of art; technical people who were trying to make do with as less technology as possible; camera people dealing with writers who are trying to understand the difference between *saying* it and *showing* it; actors who are feeling cheated that a camera shrinks the world into a frame and only captures what is in it and sound people dealing with on shot chatter, trying to explain that the mikes can capture whispers outside the camera's frame as clearly as the actors dialogues.

It is mayhem.

But not for long. The actors get to know what a frame is, and always stay within it, the children catch on the quickest.

The trained filmmakers who in the beginning are concerned about composition, learn to see people in the story and not just the perfect composition, and those solely interested in the story, learn the language of visuals.

While making these *films* there are several collaborators who come in after the shoot, including the editors, sound designers and the musicians. They too accede to the collective process, understanding it, taking up the space it allows and giving it their creative inputs.

They work in a house full of people through several feedback sessions, while grumbling about the on shoot tardiness and lack of concern for post production.

Of course everyone still may have doubts and suggestions about what could have been different, but it has only given us the confidence of making the process better and rectifying the mistakes. The experience has made us firmer in the belief that this way we are enriching our creativity not taking away from it.

What brings us together at a broader level in some senses is a common ideology but our sensibilities and artistic expression may all be different. So When we come together, we come with our differences and similarities All this plays out and what emerges is something novel. What binds us together is our receptiveness to work with each other and realise this novelty, every time we birth a film.

So while the films get made, we as a collective get made too.

And we say this very hesitatingly but perhaps in some small way we too may be contributing to cinema.