

# SOME LIKE IT COLLECTIVE

EKTARA COLLECTIVE HAS BROKEN  
FILMMAKING ORTHODOXIES TO PRODUCE  
DISTINCTIVE, GRIPPING STORIES OF JOY  
AND RESISTANCE. BUT WHAT DOES IT TAKE  
TO MAKE A FILM COLLECTIVELY?

BY SYED SAAD AHMED

In film school, we imbibed the movies of Godard, Truffaut, and Bresson along with heady helpings of film theory. Steeped in the French New Wave, we believed that to be ‘real’ filmmakers, we must be auteurs—all 50 of us, marching to the beat of our own cinematic drums.

However, when it came to actually making films, our professors lumped us into groups of five, with no clear division of roles. Our auteurial visions dissonated and crashed, all the way from the script to the edit table. Voices and tempers rose as often as the clapboard. By the end of the course, having navigated many a detritus of directorial dreams, I firmly believed that five auteurs do not a film make. The filmmaking hierarchy, with a director at the top, seemed logical—almost like the natural order of things.

Little did I know then that this belief would be broken many years later in an urban village in Delhi. At a makeshift screening venue, I saw *Turup* (*Checkmate*, 2017), a film about three women in Bhopal against a backdrop of simmering social and religious tensions. Few films have engrossed me as thoroughly. I also marvelled at how effortlessly it wove in social and political commentary in a riotously entertaining narrative! As the credits rolled, what shocked me even more

was that a group—and not an individual—had made the film: Ektara Collective.

It added up though. An individual director might not have as coherently packed so many



On the set of *TURUP*.

layers and nuances into *Turup*'s 72-minute runtime. As I saw more of the collective's films, I began noticing how their collaborative efforts shaped the storytelling—form as well as content.

So, what does it take for a group to direct or write a film [*Hotel Raahgir*'s (2020) credits list 18 scriptwriters!] without one person at the helm? Maheen Mirza, one of Ektara's founding members, explains, “We have an intense process of consensus-building, involving workshops, readings, and feedback sessions. At least seven people vet and agree upon the script. Since we come from different backgrounds, our experiences add additional layers to the story. There inevitably are differences, and it takes time to find common ground, but dialogues need not be polarised. This process also flattens hierarchies.”

“During the shoot, different people oversee different departments, such as production, lighting, sound, etc.,” says Sushil, who has also been a member of Ektara since its inception. “But we encourage crew members to go beyond their responsibilities; that instils a sense of ownership for the whole film. While I mostly work in production, I also contributed to the sound for *Hotel Raahgir* and the editing of *Ek Jagah Apni* (*A Place of Our Own*, 2022). Maheen often asks other crew members how a shot should be framed or where the camera should be placed. Some might think that sitting on edits is boring, but we ask people to participate there too.”

Sushil used to work in an NGO in Bhopal to earn a living. But in his 40s, with encouragement from other collective members, he went to Delhi to formally study filmmaking. He now makes films full-time for nonprofits across India. The Ektara training has come in handy—he scripts, directs, records sound on location, and even edits himself when budgets are limited. The only thing he prefers not to do is shoot because he finds handheld shots tricky.

While taking on multiple responsibilities is a hallmark of indie filmmaking, how does a set function without a chain of command? Maheen compares it to Mughal architecture—buildings are made up of different spaces for different functions. But everything is interconnected through arches, so you can pass through them. People are expected to resolve creative differences during the scripting stage, but during the shoot as well, they can share suggestions with those who are responsible for a particular department. However, decision-making is the latter's prerogative. These decisions, in turn, often involve practical considerations, such as rain disrupting exterior shots or a constrained space for an interior shot.

For Sawni, 22, this is one of the biggest joys of working with Ektara. Her association with the collective began around 2018, when she took part in a lighting workshop they had organised. She was married off at the age of 18, but with Ektara members' support, she defied the societal expectation of becoming a homemaker and went to Mumbai to study and work.

"In Mumbai, they often treated me like a labourer working on a film rather than a filmmaker," she says. "People did not talk across departments or to juniors. Our meals were also separate and of lower quality than those for other crew members, or served beside the toilet. There are usually few women in lighting departments and I was not allowed to handle certain types of lights. My looks and body language marked me as an outsider and some people made derisive remarks." It was a sharp contrast from her filmmaking experience at Ektara, where she felt like she was part of a team and got to learn new things.

This facet of Ektara's collective filmmaking is a paradigm shift—more than the creative aspects. Filmmaking is largely considered an artistic endeavour of a gifted individual, giving short shrift to the extensive labour and material conditions required to translate it onto celluloid. That is why a few directors, scriptwriters, and actors are celebrated, while most crew members remain anonymous.

This privileging of 'art' and the hierarchy it engenders often comes with an abusive work environment. While many mainstream production houses and auteurs are infamous for their work culture, the situation is not necessarily different in indie cinema. A few years ago, a celebrated indie filmmaker put out a call for an assistant director on social media. The undefined workload and hours they expected their assistant to put up with, under the guise of professionalism, were surprising, given their cinematic portrayal of labour issues.

In this milieu, Ektara provides a much-needed alternative. The collective took shape in 2009–2010. Many of its founding members belonged to cultural and people's movements. In the face of repression, there was a lull in these movements, prompting them to explore other avenues. Their backgrounds were different not

only in terms of identity, but also the art forms they were associated with—writing, theatre, music, etc. Besides, not all of them could read and write. Cinema offered them the opportunity to integrate different forms of expression. While the collective's core comprises 6-7 members, the cast and crew for each film keep changing.

They began by dubbing Iranian films in Hindi for screenings in Bhopal, the collective's



A scene from TURUP.

base. Their first production was *Chanda Ke Joote* (*Chanda's Shoes*), released in 2011. It is based on a comic strip by Chanda, a Gond adivasi girl in Bhopal, in which she recounts her experiences of going to school. They followed it up with *Jadui Machchi* (*Fishy Magic*) in 2013.

"The movie was an unlearning experience for many of us," says Maheen. "For example, how do you light a space? Mainstream productions and genre-driven films take a lot of shortcuts. They give sci-fi films a green cast and slums a yellow tint. Or they light up poverty, not people. Another convention is to show drama through handheld shots, but it can unfold in other ways too."

"So, we had to learn how to let the aesthetic emerge organically from the story rather than superimposing preconceived notions. It made us rethink the contrast ratio, tonality, shot design, and pacing," she adds. "*Jadui Machchi* was shot in Bhilpura (a settlement along the banks of the Narmada in the state of Madhya Pradesh) and its residents acted in the film.

Living next to the river imbues an unhurried rhythm to people's lives; we learnt how to integrate that into the film's pacing."

"We work with untrained actors," says Sushil. "To accommodate their natural flow, Maheen changes the camera position rather than asking them to do things differently." Amateur actors are standard in indie cinema, but what I found more interesting is how embedded their films are in the communities they shoot in, from the story to the mise-en-scène. In *Turup*, for example, a tea shop where the crew took breaks became a key shooting location, and the radio the shop owner played became part of the film's sound design.

"On the set of *Jadui Machchi*, the women from Bhilpura who were part of our film asked to stop the shoot at 4 pm as they got water supply then," recounts Sushil. "All of us men, including those in the production, were wondering what to do, when Rinchin (a founding member of Ektara) asked where they filled the water, took their pots, and left. That made me understand what it means to work collectively. When we initially arrived in Bhilpura, people were suspicious about our motives. But over time, they became an integral part of the production. That is why the opening credits say 'Ektara and the people of Bhilpura present'. After the wrap, they cooked fish for us and gave us ₹2,000, saying we had worked hard on the film."

This collectivist spirit comes with its own problems, especially given their work with non-actors and limited budgets. They used to rely on crowdfunding, but took no more than ₹5,000 from a single donor, so that no one person owned a movie. Maheen says, "People from various socioeconomic strata contributed to our films. A workers' union in Kanpur donated ₹5,000. But Covid broke everyone's back. Labourers in India cannot sustain themselves beyond a few days if they don't get work. How does one bring cinema into this?"

The pandemic forced them to diversify their funding streams—they applied for artist fellowships, conducted workshops, and even approached a producer. They share the money they receive from screenings among team members, with those from humble backgrounds getting paid first. Some also work on a voluntary basis.

Sushil recounted the many logistical challenges they face: water running out in the middle of the night before a 5 am call time, cramped shooting spaces requiring extensive people management, and the fusing of an expensive light almost derailing a shoot.

Sawni says, "There were many people in the crew from my neighbourhood and sometimes, we would not get along. People would argue over things like someone not folding a blanket and stop talking to each other. Maheen and Rinchin would have to intervene, but we even made them cry at times."

"We have a lot of fights," comments Maheen.

"We have ideological differences, of course,

but people also bicker about meals

and breaks. A problem that has

haunted us in every film is

some crew members not

washing dishes after meals.

Once, we even had to call

off a shoot because of it!

Usually, men don't wash

vessels and women don't

do camerawork. But

to disrupt hierarchies,

we need to do things

we haven't before. So,

we handhold women in

operating cameras and men

in washing dishes."

A set where everyone washes dishes together? Take that, Truffaut! 🍳

(The interviews for this article were in both English and Hindi, so some of the quotes are translations or paraphrases.)

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— SAWNI, EKTARA COLLECTIVE