

*dates.sites: PROJECT CINEMA CITY Bombay/Mumbai*, a Majlis project, concept and text: Madhusree Dutta, design and graphics: Shilpa Gupta and Madhusree Dutta, Tulika Books, New Delhi, 2012, 240 pages, Rs 995.

Time and space are the chief stuff of conventional history-writing. The book *dates.sites* by Madhusree Dutta takes such a framework, and with admirable brevity as the title suggests. This book, then, is a book of history but not quite as we know it. Chronology is at the centre of the conventional historical enterprise – one that the book takes as an organising principle, organising the chapters by consecutive decades. Timelines have been the most trusted instruments of professional historians; in recent years, documentation has also gained popularity. Both these are also devices that this book uses. But there the similarity ends. Timelines and genealogical charts in the hands of professional historians are the building blocks of master-narratives of world, regional or national histories. Documentation means taking files from an archive, editing and printing them in sequence to accord fixity and construct authoritative accounts. The author of this book has subverted both these instruments: the timeline and documentation. She has made the timeline a flexible and dynamic instrument – a line that is anything but a straight line. It is jagged and ragged; it zigzags and segues into arrows and circles. She has also unravelled the narrative into discrete facts to hold them in multiple simultaneous inter-relationships, to present the possibilities of plural and dialogic narratives – to make, unmake and remake, in a seemingly unending process that goes beyond what we see and read. We get a book that its covers cannot contain; its bits and pieces spill into other dates and sites that are suggested, provoked and, at times, vaguely signalled to.

The author calls this book a scrapbook. Conventionally, a scrapbook is a personal record of usually family history, but it often includes resonances of public events in that much-discussed and quite inevitable interplay of private and public. The book uses the techniques of a scrapbook but it by no means tells a personal story; it does not speak to the private/public separation of spheres at all. It tells us the story of a city and an industry, of events and institutions, of structures and processes, of mentalities and perceptions, of shifts and changes – but in ways so unpredictable as to seem almost like personal whimsy. Yet it has an organising format, albeit one that is loose and porous. It presents itself simultaneously as the skeletal and the fleshed, as bare and furbished, like a beautifully decorated glass building whose pipes, pillars and rods can be seen along with artefacts and tapestry. I use the metaphor to convey the light and transparent mood of the book.

To return for a moment to the main point, however, timelines and documents construct (or, one should say, seek to construct) grand narratives that are the sinews of history-writing. Thus, world historical events – and these may pertain to space in varying and different scales – are the constituent elements of timelines and documentation. This book on twentieth-

century Bombay/Mumbai skims over (if it even signals, which in some of these cases it does not) events such as the two world wars, India's independence, the creation of the state of Maharashtra, liberalisation, the Mumbai riots, and other such events which structure official history. It thus moves away from the grand not just into 'little' history or 'local' history, as it is variously called, but into a playful mode – inviting the reader to write his or her own history; to allow entry and exit of historical facts without guard or ceremony; to remember, to memorise or to memorialise at will.

So with the sites in the book. The book is purportedly about Bombay/Mumbai and its cinema industry, but it allows seemingly random inter-relationships among sites within the city – thus ports, docks, chawls and cinema halls jostle one another. It also relates to sites outside – to other cities of other cinemas and other modernities. However, it needs to be said that the apparently random is not without a schema. The chapters, as I have already mentioned, are organised according to decades: ten decades from the 1900s to the 1990s. Each chapter within that chronological frame dawdles along a winding path with many twists and turns, images and texts, suggestions and possibilities, with arrows and circles making momentary connections, images that are connected and sometimes not connected either to each other or to snippets of text. But within these discrete items of texts and images, each decade has a focus: the 1900s trail water (Mumbai is an island), thus ports and docks; the 1910s connect us over land – trains, roads, trades; the 1920s write, especially by hand, as in letters and envelopes; the 1930s speak of cities and modernity, though in ways that simultaneously admit recognition and provoke misrecognition – the textile industry, the other major industry of the city, is a recurrent theme up to this point; the 1940s are especially whimsical, given the context of war and independence, focusing on the princely states (perhaps to mark their passing); the 1950s frame the middle class, growing in confidence and recording themselves in photographs; the 1960s focus on industry in general, especially the emergent public sector; the 1970s dream the American dream as well as chart the movements of people; the 1980s showcase rising consumerism; and the 1990s, predictably, are more about identities and identity politics.<sup>1</sup>

I will not immodestly take the credit of a trained historian's eye and claim that I arrived at this framework by myself. The organisation of the book is by no means evident, nor by any means so neat. In each case there are byways and alleys – and culs-de-sac for the unwary. Without private help and prompting and many conversations with the author, many of these would not merely by process of systematic browsing have jumped off the page to me.

The archive, and the power of or from the state it embodies, has provoked considerable discussion in recent years. This has prompted serious rethinking of the idea and practice of archiving. The author of this volume does not wish to accede to the archives its power – a power that lies in the holding of the

'originals' of documents as they are in their making, of their own time. What she has done, in order to take that power away, is to laboriously create a new archive! But this archive is denied the boundedness of a repository; it is robbed of the comfort of contemporaneity. And, most radically, as part of the fall-out, the author has destabilised the very concept of the original. In this archive, the copy is the document. Clearly, this is related to *not just* the technologies of reproduction; we are not talking of digital copies of originals, of newfangled technologies of making copies from originals, but of copies without an 'original' to which they have reference. By introducing the idea of a copy that has no original, the author is not just subverting the original – she is in effect *abolishing* the 'original'. That this has huge implications for institutional archives, everyday archiving practices, copyright laws and other such mundane matters, goes without saying.

This book, then, is more about archives – about the relationship between sources and writing history, and thinking about history, than a history itself. This is why I said at the beginning that it is not quite a history book as we know it. It is a history but not quite, a book but not quite – a seemingly impossible project. Those of us who have been keen watchers of Madhusree Dutta's films will see in this seeming impossibility, clear traces of her earlier oeuvre. The book is a bit like a film script: it invites you to read and see simultaneously; to *translate* as it were from the page to the screen; to include in that seeing what the writer may see, what the director may see. It is to the creation of such jigsaws through juxtapositions of her frames that Madhusree has always been attracted. This book too is all about juxtapositions: of text and text, image and image, image and text. The joints are the grids of interpretation.

And perhaps because of this nature, it is not and cannot be a history book. The title *dates.sites* – its unadorned abruptness and the use of the lower case – should be the first red light for readers who expect a history of Bombay cinema in its pages. It does however suggest, prompt, even prod, new and different histories.

It seems to me as though this new kind of archiving signals to the possibility of a new kind of history of the cinema. One that is not limited to the film as text alone, as situated only in a discursive field of ideas and social change, of only the eyes that see the moving image. It is a much wider vision of the cinema. In this archive we see an industry that involves many producers of many sorts: stuntmen and women, wig makers, craftsmen of sets, painters of posters, lightboys, and other large clusters of people. We also see many consumers of many sorts – not only those who *see* films but also, for instance, those who process junk stock. A history of cinema that involves hands, legs and bodies, huts, sheds and buildings, roads, docks and airports, trade and financial networks, and sprawls across and beyond the city and its peoples. How do we write about films which take all these into account? Is it the same to write about their past and their present? How do we concep-

tualise their future, a future that is not just about a new language but also about people who have to print its grammar books? I am not sure we know. And we need to know, especially now that we are celebrating 100 years of Indian cinema across the country. This calls, I propose, for serious rethinking on the part of professional scholars of film.

Madhusree Dutta has been for some time working on the idea of *the past* and what, in this new age, we should do with it. Not because history has ended but precisely because it has not. A major earlier engagement with history was in her film, *Scribbles with Akka*. In it she had approached the past, memory and history in a simultaneous continuity and as 'scribbles'. From 'scribbles', then, to 'scraps'. This cinema history scrapbook is another offering from her to the community of historians which asks them to relearn their trade. This is not entirely out of fit with feminist (and other) attempts to rewrite history from the margins. But the 'artisanal toolbox' this author offers (her own description of the book) flirts and plays with and challenges even the new post-feminist canons of history-writing. The uneasy marriage of archiving and history-writing, which has lasted more than a century despite periodic ups and downs, is now in very deep waters indeed.

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