



FILM

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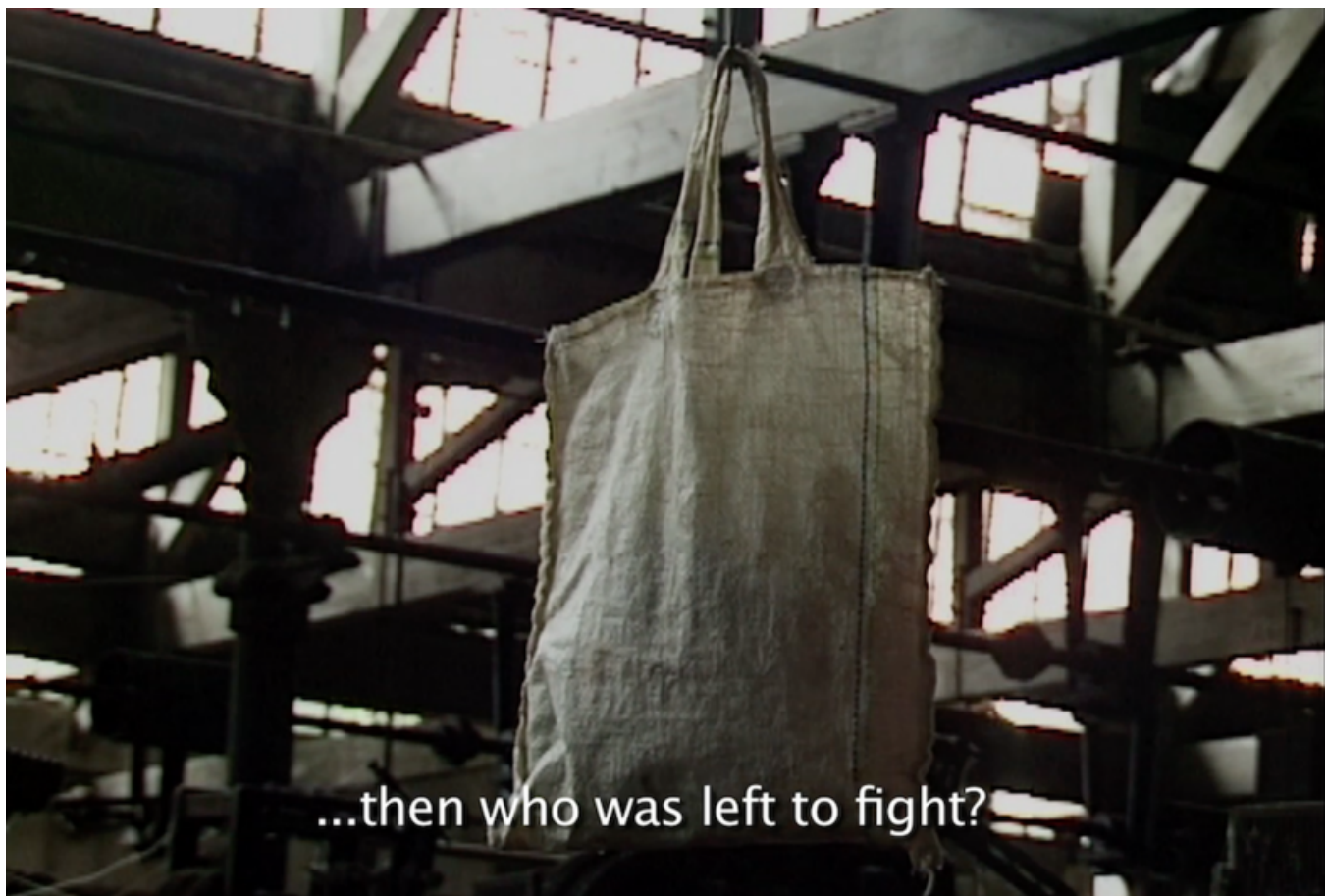
Rahul Jain, *Machines*, 2016, DCP, color, sound, 75 minutes.

WHEN THE FIRST PANDEMIC WAVE swept through India last year, television stations briefly turned their attention from the elite's fever dreams of jingoism and celebrity to the

nightmarish condition of the working poor. It wasn't so much the virus as the government response. Days after Prime Minister Narendra Modi declared a lockdown on March 24, there was a vast exodus of workers, who fled cities for their villages, largely on foot. More than 130 million lost their jobs overnight; wages had been so low and protections so scarce that they lacked even a few days' savings. "The images of this restive and seething mass," the sociologist Jan Breman caustically reflected, "at least made the low-key presence of these footloose laborers visible to the urban citizenship hitherto unaware of the sheer size and vulnerability of this alien workforce in their midst." The social activist Harsh Mander wagered it was "probably the greatest humanitarian crisis" most Indians would see in their lifetime.

Commentators spoke in hushed tones of a "crisis" of "migrant workers." Yet this mass expulsion only proved that an economic regime that prizes "labor flexibility" above all was operating properly. As multinational companies know only too well, India's workplace standards are among the world's worst. The problem is not laws per se, though they have steadily eroded since 1991, when the Congress party kicked over the rotting corpse of state capitalism and locked in an embrace—till the bitter end, it seems—with the IMF. That relatively few workers were directly affected by this change points to the real problem. Seven decades after independence, a vast majority of Indians toil in the "informal sector"—that is, under patrimonial arrangements, without stable wages or workplace protections, often in debt bondage. They were never covered by laws to begin with.

What is it like to work in an Indian factory? Three documentaries (all currently streaming for free) begin to answer this troubling question. Anjali Monteiro and KP Jayasankar's Saacha: The Loom (2001) is an elegy for Mumbai's shuttered cotton mills woven around the lives of two men, a poet and a painter. Rahul Roy's The Factory (2015) chronicles a landmark 2012–15 strike at an automobile factory near New Delhi. Rahul Jain's Machines (2016) unfolds amid the sordid interiors of a textile sweatshop in Gujarat. As with Chinese activist cinema, these are for the most part works of witness, recording struggles and injustices that politicians and the mainstream media ignores. Together, they offer a tracking shot of India's landscape of labor. The picture that emerges is disquieting and frequently shocking.



Anjali Monteiro and KP Jayasankar, *Saacha (The Loom)* 2001, DCP, color, sound, 49 minutes 15 seconds.

Injustice is a given of the films. All recount what Marxist historian Christopher Hill termed “the experience of defeat.” This is most evident in *Saacha*, which looks back at the heyday of Mumbai’s cotton mills, once the beating heart of a vast working-class community. (The film was recently screened at the fourth Kochi-Muziris Biennale, where I first saw it). In 1982, a legendary—and poorly strategized—textile strike was crushed, with more than 150,000 workers fired. Today, “prime mill lands are used for apartments, offices, discos,” an intertitle notes. (Near the end, there are shots of the malls and shopping centers that have been erected in these areas.) This once-thriving world is conjured, from the inside, by the late Narayan Surve, a wonderful Marathi poet who was abandoned on the streets as an infant and adopted by a millworker in whose footsteps he followed, jobbing as a doffer boy and joining the union’s cultural wing. An outsider’s view is provided by Sudhir Patwardhan, whose warm and labyrinthine paintings of working-class areas the camera periodically revisits.

The fifty-minute documentary combines interviews with the two artists with brief sequences inside the dingy textile mills still in operation. One ends with an image of a derelict, rusted machine. While memories are recollected with tenderness and humor, the industry's decline hangs over all like a dark cloud. "For me, the early years were the site of a kind of class struggle," Patwardhan says in conclusion, mourning "the textile strike and the general loss of confidence in labor that followed." For his part, Surve is uncowed:

Soon they dragged even the hand to the market
 How will it do to sit with folded hands now?
 So I got up, go out of the slums
 Whisper in the ears of factories
 We've got to move ahead now



Rahul Roy, *The Factory*, 2015, DCP, color, sound, 120 minutes.

If *Saacha* is an act of militant nostalgia, Roy's *The Factory* catches history on the move. Compressing three years of footage into two hours, the film tells the story of an agitation at the Japanese-owned Maruti Suzuki car-manufacturing plant in Manesar, an industrial enclave outside New Delhi. (There has been widespread labor unrest in India's automobile

industry, the world's sixth largest, since the 2000s.) The narrative opens in mid-2013, a year after a massive strike ended in a violent confrontation in which one manager perished. 2,400 workers were fired, and 148 were charged with murder.

Against the backdrop of their trial, Roy speaks to dismissed employees rallying public support, their family members in distant villages, the lawyers fighting their case, and other assorted activists taking up the cause. (The Manesar strike got national attention.) While he attends demonstrations and court sessions, he is more drawn to the lulls in between events, when people wait anxiously and talk with their guard down. There are also more choreographed segments, in which workers explain, sometimes with the aid of a whiteboard, the factory's Taylorist management—which they were striking to change. We learn that a car has to be assembled in exactly fifty-five seconds; that staff are docked a part of their salary for showing up a minute late; that lunch and tea breaks are strictly regimented. The splicing of the workday into minute chunks makes for a bitter contrast with the amorphous, ever-deferred timeline of the trial. Throughout, Roy is alert to moments of politicization. In some of the film's most gripping scenes, workers reflect on how the union transformed them. "Earlier, our thinking was that they are owners, they are educated, so they have the right to boss us around," one man says, huddled in his cramped quarters while cooking on a wretched stove placed on the floor. "However, now we understand that the company exists because of our labor."

The state intervened to crush the agitation in Manesar. Police launched a smear campaign against the union, branding it "Maoist," and politicians made their support for Japanese capital clear. In the end, no one was reinstated, and thirteen workers were sentenced to life. "The entire trial was farcical as the outcome was predecided," the Peoples Union for Democratic Rights (PUDR) concluded in its critique of the judgment. "The driving force was to tame the active union members by giving them the harshest possible punishment."



Rahul Jain, *Machines*, 2016, DCP, color, sound, 75 minutes.

Factory finds hope in a struggle that brings labor and civil society together, even if the story ends in brutal defeat. *Machines* offers an altogether bleaker vision. This seventy-minute documentary is set in a sweatshop in Sachin, Gujarat, where there is nothing in the way of safety standards or work regulations. Jain surveys the bowels of the unhygienic, barely lit premises like a detective sizing up a crime scene, occasionally pausing for tense interviews. The camera is generally on the move, as if unable to bear any sight for too long, though from time to time it lingers on an image—an adolescent nimbly folding cloth, patterned fabric rushing out of a loom—transfixed by its unaccountable beauty.

Shifts at the factory, which are twelve hours long, pay 210 rupees (roughly \$4). Most of the men are migrants from Uttar Pradesh trapped in peonage; there is also child labor, which the proprietor does not hide. The workers appear as infernal creatures, strong but emaciated, barefoot, wearing rags—why should a textile mill pay for uniforms? Visibly beaten down by their ceaseless toil, they operate looms with their bare hands, sometimes nodding off on the line, when not lugging around huge loads of cloth and dye. “God gave us hands, so we have to work,” run the film’s first spoken words. “Some do work that requires physical strength. Some use their mind . . . Here, I need both strength and brains,

or I would break my hands and legs.” Other than the power looms, there is not a trace of modern technology, not even ramps. It seems the ceiling has a hole: Water pours through when it rains.

In the absence of formal structures, migrants are left to the mercy of their contractor, who boasts of physically assaulting subordinates. It is a situation they have come to accept. “Nobody is exploiting me,” one man says. “Exploitation would mean that I am being forced to work here.” An older employee, sitting on what appears to be a slag heap outdoors, calls for solidarity in a speech of astonishing passion: “The workers are now lambs, but together they can be lions.” Still, he admits that a union is unlikely: “When the laborers do unite, the leader is usually killed.”

Machines ends with a tense segment in which some laborers confront Jain about why he’s filming their suffering. One man even takes out his phone and starts recording the director. If this is a confession of artistic doubt, it also points to the central ethic of the film, which the documentaries of Roy and Monteiro and Jayasankar share. Each registers the perspective of workers, something the mainstream media conspicuously fails to do. Locked into cycles of debt, worn down by drudgerous jobs, their hopes of a decent life all but extinguished, they look at us searchingly. It can be hard to return their gaze.

— Ratik Asokan

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