

DEEPA DHANRAJ 

KYA HUA IS SHAHAR KO?

WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO THIS CITY?

क्या हुआ इस शहर को?



KYA HUA IS SHAHAR KO?/WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO THIS CITY? HISTORY, CONTEXT AND REFLECTIONS ON RE-SCREENING A POLITICAL FILM

"In the early 1980s, new forms of militant Hindu processions around the Ganesh festival began to be held in Hyderabad, my city. Every year during the processions, riots would break out and people would be killed. We began filming the procession in 1984, when riots started and a curfew was imposed for twenty-two days. We found that political parties, both Hindu and Muslim, had deliberately engineered the riots to ensure that the chief minister won a vote of confidence in the assembly. While it was important to understand that the riots in which people lost their homes and lives were cynically created, it was also crucial to

understand the history of these conflicts and to show how a communal consciousness was being manufactured before our eyes. Today this has been consolidated into fundamentalism. In so many ways, what we were filming in the 1980s was prophetic. Hindu fundamentalists destroyed the Babri Mosque in 1992, and in 2002, 2,000 Muslims were killed in a pogrom in Gujarat." Deepa Dhanraj, January 2013

27 years after its initial completion as a 16mm print, WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO THIS CITY? is now made available as a digital copy. The re-circulation of a film like WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO THIS

CITY? has film archival and political dimensions. Each consistent archiving and film restoration practice ensures the availability of historical material and provides it for film histories being written and lineages perceivable for generations to come. Nevertheless, we might want to add a series of questions to this urge to rescue something otherwise lost. Not to doubt the value of the cinematic material but to open out paths for sincere inquiries into actively renewed relationships with a creative and political film-project of the past.

How do we project and view this film today? What might the film evoke in those who lived through the period it reflects on and what does it propose for a younger generation? To which time, to which context, to which politics does it belong or how does it transcend those parameters and pose questions towards the making of politics, and of political film, on a wider geopolitical platform? How to meet the concerns that inspired the film then and extend those to the urgencies of now?

This booklet and the DVD extras developed through such questions, through Deepa Dhanraj herself revisiting this older work of hers and the arising possibility to re-contextualize the project that led to the final film, to think back and ahead. The material offered here is but a starting point and is meant to add to all other responses and relations the film might evoke in its viewers. It came together in the way that memories resurface. Papers and images were found in various personal archives after processes of digging were provoked through re-engaging, with the

film itself, with the impetus to make it and the challenges in realizing it.

The significance of WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO THIS CITY? has never been in doubt. It is a record not only of Hyderabad's political past but also of wider developments within the nation state of India and how these have taken shape within a post-colonial and global scenario. It might very well be the only audio-visual record of communal violence and its political context in the mid 1980s. It surely is the only independent, non-state funded documentary film engaging with the specific events it follows and analyses. Furthermore, in hindsight WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO THIS CITY? can be valued as pioneering and prophetic in capturing a particular political vocabulary of supremacist politics, which in subsequent years established itself firmly as Hindutva ideology and shaped the political landscape in India and arguably in South Asia. The film's careful exploration of relations between religion, politics and violence engendered through state bodies endows it with a global and contemporary currency. The film's timelessness however lies also in its cinematic politics of similarly being in the midst of events, procedures and rhetoric unfolding while also responding to a moment of urgency with analyses, respect and craft.

The making of WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO THIS CITY? with and for the activist collective *Hyderabad Ekta* was utterly crucial and consequently so are the group member's memories for this new release of the film. Their thoughts, as well as the presented fragments of *Ekta's* documents, present their activ-



ist work as carving out or maintaining “a secular space within which one can function and intervene.”

Although the film was finished in 1986, India’s film censorship authority initially refused the required certificate. Private screenings were held while the judgment was appealed, resulting in the certificate being issued nine months later and the film consequently shown from the beginning of 1987. For approximately three years the film was screened extensively, through *Hyderabad Ekta* and other organisations. There were screenings at universities and in film clubs, in Hyderabad and across India. As a result, the director’s own film copy became so worn out only to weather additional damage due to difficulties of storing a 16mm print; an extant VHS copy was almost impossible to watch due to poor image and sound quality. Hence for many years this film was not available for screenings in India. Nevertheless, many filmmakers in today’s India recall the film and regard its lasting influence as an inspiration for their own film-political efforts.

In 1987 *WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO THIS CITY?* was also shown at the International Forum of New Cinema,

part of the Berlin Film Festival. For most films shown at the festival a German subtitled print is created and this subtitled copy stays with the Arsenal film archive. So it is here where the film led a somewhat exilic life and survived in screenable condition. *Living Archive – Archive Work as a Contemporary Artistic and Curatorial Practice* provided an occasion and support to revive the film. Ultimately the digital restoration involved the 16mm print of the Arsenal archive, the 16mm print from Deepa Dhanraj, the original 16mm image negative and parts of the sound track on magnetic tapes. Previously anticipated as mission impossible G.V Somashekhar, the sound recordist, went to Bombay to locate the negative. Through the network of lab technicians whom he had known from over 20 years ago and who enthusiastically joined the tenacious search, he traced the sale of the original Modern 16 Cinelab to Adlabs and further to Reliance Entertainment, where the retrieval yielded fruit. The restoration was funded by the Goethe-Institute in New Delhi and the support of the Berlinale Forum – International Forum of New Cinema. The DVD production is realised in the context of *Living Archive – Archive Work as a Contemporary Artistic and Curatorial Practice*, a project by Arsenal – Institute for Film and Video Art, funded by the German Federal Cultural Foundation and the Stiftung Deutsche Klassenlotterie Berlin.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES



Deepa Dhanraj
Director

Deepa Dhanraj was born and grew up in Hyderabad and retains strong ties with the city’s political landscape. She has been involved with the Indian women’s movement

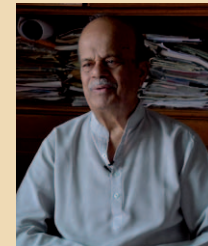
since the 1970s and is particularly engaged in questions of political participation, education, health and alternative juridical practices such as those initiated by women’s Adalats (courts) and Jamaats (councils). Her work as a film director, writer, when giving workshops and lectures, locally and internationally, is in continuous dialogue with political groups; whereby she develops her distinct style of making work in alliance with and returning her films to existing constituencies. She studied English literature and journalism, worked initially as an assistant for feature films and in 1980 she founded the film collective *Yugantar* (together with Abha Bhaiya, Meera Rao and Navroze Contractor). *Yugantar* produced four films during the early 1980s, which are significant markers of feminist film practice in India. An interest in women’s political organisation and forms of speech stayed with Deepa Dhanraj and she is currently involved in an oral history project, which addresses questions of trauma, memory and subject formation of Muslim women post the experience of communal violence.

FILMS: MOLKARIN (Maid Servant), India 1981, 25 min; TAMBAKOO CHAAKILA OOB ALI, India 1982, 25 min; SUDESHA, India 1983, 30 min; IDHI KATHA MATRAMENA (Is this Just a Story?), India 1983, 25 min; MODERN BRIDES, co-directed by Happy Luchsinger, India 1984, 28 min; MANY WAYS TO GOD, India 1985, 30 min; KYA HUA IS SHAHAR KO? (What Has Happened to this City?), India 1986, 95 min; SOMETHING LIKE A WAR, India 1991, 52 min; GIRIJA, India 1992, 25 min; DISABILITY IN YOUR EYES, India 1993, 35 min; THE LEGACY OF MALTHUS, India 1994, 50 min; TIME TO LISTEN, India 1996, 50 min; AVVA BUWA KATHA (Women’s Food Stories), India 1999, 30 min; NARI ADALAT, India 2000, 30 min; TAKING OFFICE, India 2001, 72 min; LOVE IN TIME OF AIDS, India 2006, 30 min; THE ADVOCATE, India 2007, 120 min; BADE NIRALE LOG, India 2007, 40 min; JEEVAN JYOTHI, India 2008, 55 min; CHAITANYA, India 2008, 54 min; ENOUGH OF THIS SILENCE, India 2008, 74 min; INVOKING JUSTICE, India 2011, 86 min.



Navroze Contractor
Cinematographer

Navroze Contractor studied Fine Arts (Painting and Photography) at M.S. University of Baroda and film directing and cinematography at the Film and Television Institute of India, Pune, photography with Bhupendra Karia, Pune, cinematography with Laszlo Kovacs in the USA, and video production at Sony Corporation, Tokyo, Japan. He has been the cinematographer for many award-winning feature films, is one of the important contributors to the documentary scene, worldwide and has shot most of Deepa Dhanraj’s work. He is also a still photographer known for his work on jazz musicians and he has published a book based on his experiences of working on the documentary film *THE DREAMS OF THE DRAGON’S CHILDREN* with the director Pierre Hoffmann. He conducts film and photography workshops for primary school children and at university level. He recently directed the documentary *JHARU KATHA* [Broom Stories] (India 2011).



Keshav Rao Jadhav
Script and
Commentary

Keshav Rao Jadhav was born and grew up in Hyderabad’s Old City and lived there till very recently. He was one of the founders of *Hyderabad Ekta*, its chairman and a leading figure for the group’s activities in the Old City to counter anti-communal politics. He was politically active since age 15, has been a member of the Socialist party since his school days and has long been engaged in activities for a separate state of Telangana. He was General Secretary of the National Union of Students of India, the Socialist party student wing, National Convener of the Total Revolution movement led by Jayaprakash Narayan against corruption and is currently the Vice President of the Socialist party. He is the editor of a political journal called *Mankind*, which was started by the socialist leader Ram Manohar Lohia and he taught English at Osmania University.

Biographical Notes on interviewees for DVD extras:



Vasanth Kannabiran

has been involved in questions of civil liberties, feminist and communalist politics since the 1960s. She has worked for the rights of political dissidents together with her husband K. G. Kannabiran, a lawyer and leading civil and democratic rights activist; she was a member of *Stree Shakti Sangathan* (one of the first feminist research and activist collectives), a founding member of *Hyderabad Ekta* and of the women's program at the Deccan Development Society. She set up the radical women's collective *Asmita*, which connects diverse groups of women addressing women's rights, secularism and the meaning of peace for women in Andhra Pradesh. She taught English literature and is a well known feminist writer and poet with many publications to her credit in English and in Telugu.



Rama Melkote

was a member of *Stree Shakti Sangathan* (feminist research and activist collective) and *Hyderabad Ekta*; she co-founded Anveshi, Research Centre for Women's Studies during the mid 1980s of which she is now the

General Secretary and was Vice President of the Indian Association for Women Studies. Academically and politically she has continuously been involved in feminist politics and human rights since the 1960s when she studied for her doctorate in Paris at the Sorbonne. Recently she was part of the Hyderabad Forum for Justice working towards the release of imprisoned young Muslim men. She retired as Professor of International Relations and Political Science from Osmania University; she taught, researched and still publishes widely with a special interest in the politics of conflict, peace and development in the African region.



Vithal Rajan

studied political economy at the LSE in London. During the 1970s he served as a mediator in Belfast, on behalf of the church and was a founding faculty member of the School of Peace Studies at Bradford University.

He was founder of the Deccan Development Society, member of *Hyderabad Ekta* and founder of COVA (the Confederation of Voluntary Associations) an organisation that developed out of *Hyderabad Ekta*. Vithal Rajan has been an advisor to many grassroots community development projects and is engaged in questions of sustainable agriculture. He was Chair of World Studies, International School of Geneva; Director of the World-Wide Fund for Nature International, Switzerland; and Executive Director for the Right Livelihood Award Foundation, Sweden (also known as the Alternative Nobel Prize) and is a member of Transcend Global Peace Network. He is now retired, spends his time writing and has published *Holmes of the Raj*, Random House India, 2010; *The Year of High Treason*, Rupa Books, 2011.

Keshav Rao Jadhav

see previous page

All conversations were conducted by Deepa Dhanraj and Nicole Wolf and filmed by Navroze Contractor, between 29th to 31st April 2013, in Hyderabad, editing by Deepa Dhanraj and Vasanth Kumar.

1) Notes on Hyderabad's history



Hyderabad's integration into the Indian Union is linked to a series of actual and virtual battlefields which provoked large-scale violence and becomes a crucial background to Hyderabad state and the city's future.

Hindu communalist forces begin to stir unrest during the late 30s with the Arya Samaj and Hindu Mahasabha running their own branches within the state of Hyderabad. The staging of satyagrahas, anti-reform agitation and violent riots seeks to mobilise a Hindu majority, while the Nizam tries to defend its position with support of armed volunteers, the so called Razakars.²

Hyderabad's past, or the city Hyderabad that many people remember, is often described through its "ganga-jamni tehzeeb", its cosmopolitan culture. The existence of relative "communal harmony for most parts of its pre-independence history of 358 years"¹ is particularly commented on in many writings and the self evident syncretism of Hindu and Muslim rituals, attire, festivals, people of different communities moving in and out of each other's houses, studying and working together is a common memory and one that marks people's particular relationship with this city.

Increasing unrest is noted from the 1930s onwards. However, the memory of an urban space as a locality where different communities could not only live side by side but actively participate in each other's lives, continues to a degree up to the 1980s.

The shift from Hyderabad as a princely state under the rule of the Nizam, to its semi-independent status in the 1930s and post partition to

In June 1947, one week after the British announced the partition of the sub-continent, the Nizam declared that he would join neither India nor Pakistan but choose independence to avoid riots. Overall an estimated 15 million people are forced into migration and exile as a consequence of the newly drawn borders that created India and Pakistan; up to 1 million people were killed in the process.

October 1947 sees a standstill agreement concerning the annexation or independence of Hyderabad.

It is followed in 1948 by an economic blockade of Hyderabad and New Delhi asking for a plebiscite to decide Hyderabad's future, which is not accepted by the Nizam.

September 1948: "Police Action". The Indian army enters and occupies

¹ Unnamed correspondent 2010. "Communal Riots in Hyderabad: Understanding the Causes", in *Economic and Political Weekly*, April 24, 2010, Vol.XLV, No 17, p. 14.

² Kooiman, Dick 2002. *Communalism and the Indian Princely States. Travancore, Baroda and Hyderabad in the 1930s*. New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, p. 220.

Hyderabad within one week. According to the inquiry of the Congressman Pandit Sunderlal, called by the Nehru Government, the violence that ensued following the army's invasion included looting of houses, arson attacks, desecration of mosques, forcible conversions and seizure of houses and lands, also enacted by the Army and the police.³ Loss of life is estimated between 27,000 and 40,000.⁴

The communist uprising in Telangana is violently suppressed at the same time.

After Hyderabad's integration into the Indian Union the demography of the city Hyderabad changes rapidly: Entrepreneurial and bureaucratic middle class Muslims migrate to Pakistan leaving a middle and lower class that gradually experiences unemployment, illiteracy and general reverse social mobility, particularly in the Old City. Refugees escaping the violence through "police action" from the rural areas migrate to the city in the hope for work opportunities, thus creating poor neighbourhoods and a community of people without prior relationships.⁵

1950 – the Constitution of India becomes the constitution of Hyderabad with the Nizam as governor until 1956

1956 – Hyderabad state is partitioned on linguistic grounds into Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra and Karnataka

1975–77 – Emergency rule is declared by Indira Gandhi and has devastat-

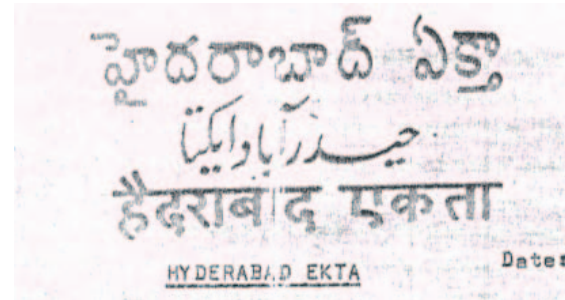
ing effects on Hyderabad as a stronghold of the Congress Party. Civil Rights are violated and many political activists are arrested or go underground.

Before and after the Emergency rule Andhra Pradesh is a place of vibrant political resistance. The Telangana armed struggle, the Dalit movement, women's groups and the radical student movement have a strong presence and articulate a diverse critique of hierarchical and power structures. Their resentment against authoritarian politics gains widespread support. Groups like *Hyderabad Ekta* arise out of this sense of possibility and struggle.

1978 – Rameeza Bee, a Muslim woman is raped by policemen and both she and her husband are subsequently killed. The incident sparks civil protest with people from different communities attacking police stations and protesting. Fresh memories of widespread attack on human rights during the Emergency rule further fuels people's outrage.

The different accounts of this incident highlight the politics of narration: The police murder of a Muslim couple are variously described as having sparked communal riots or as having been interpreted as communalist in its aftermath and hence used by political parties to redefine civil protest into communal conflict.

2) Hyderabad Ekta – working towards a secular space of intervention



For about ten weeks, from 22, July to almost the end of September, large parts of Hyderabad were swept by waves of communal violence followed by a continuous period of curfew. It left 41 people dead (mostly poor), 230 reportedly injured, about 250 shops looted and burnt and countless people losing their livelihood. Both the intensity of incidents and their implications promoted this investigation by *Hyderabad Ekta*.

Hyderabad Ekta is a forum that stands for secular inter-vention to counter the increasing sectarian strife in the City. Consisting of concerned groups and individuals, it is not associated with any political party. The team constituted by Hyderabad Ekta visited select localities in the affected parts in a span of eight weeks. The localities include Ranjan Colony, Bashaarat Nagar, Anjiah Nagar, Tan Bund, Kasaratta, Taapachabutra, Moghul-Ka-Nala, Kale Pathar, Khilwat and Baharupiya Galli. Members of the team were also witness to the Pankha procession on 3rd September and the Ganesh Immersion procession on 9th September – When major disturbances took place. Following is the report of the team.

³ Banaji, Jairus 2013. *Fascism: Essays on Europe and India*. Gurgaon: Three Essays Collective, p. 220.

⁴ For a more detailed and recently published analysis see: Hyder, Mohammed 2012. *October Coup: A Memoir of the Struggle for Hyderabad*. New Delhi: Roli Books.

⁵ Moid, M.A. unpublished. *Muslim Perceptions and responses in Post Police Action Contexts in Hyderabad*. Unpublished paper, courtesy M.A. Moid, p. 3. See also: M.A. Moid: *Three Movements and the Muslim Situation in Hyderabad*. Unpublished paper, courtesy M.A. Moid.



courtesy of Hyderabad Ekta

“It is the old city, the backward part of the twin cities, that is usually affected by communal conflict. (...) It consists of twelve wards of the Hyderabad Municipal Corporation. It constitutes 41 percent of the Hyderabad Metropolis in which more than 45 percent of the population live. One of the most congested parts of the city, here about 15,000 people live in every square kilometre. The old city is one of the most neglected parts of the corporation areas. Civic amenities like drainage, water facilities, medical facilities, electric lights etc. are poorest here. No worthwhile medical facilities are available. Schooling is the worst with few scattered government schools and fewer private schools. Despite its area and population (more than 40 and 45 per cent respectively), the Municipal Corporation of Hyderabad never allocates more than 25 per cent of its development expenditure to the old city. The Quli-Utub Shahi Development Authority, which was formed with much fanfare in 1980, has now become a farcical gimmick to be used when needed by politicians.

About 45 per cent of the population in the old city are Muslims. They include different sects of Islam, with Sunnis being the largest. Among the Hindus, it is the backward castes who constitute the majority. An overwhelming majority of the population in both the communities are dependent on daily wages. Irregular and casual labour largely drawn from the old city is employed in the industries located at the periphery of new Hyderabad. Hawkers, vegetable and fruit vendors, rickshaw pullers, auto drivers, small time traders, construction workers, and other self-employed people engaged in a number of occupations constitute the bulk of the population. Almost all of them are daily wage earners with uncertain incomes. It is the poorest of the city that face the brunt of both the communal violence and the curfew.

Communal riots in Hyderabad have become a recurring phenomenon since early 1978. They have close relationships with the political turmoil in the state whether it is a matter of Chief Ministership of an individual or elections to Assembly

and Parliament. Not only the powerful communal parties but also the major political parties (professedly secular) that have aligned with them at sometime or other, are responsible for the growth of communal tension in the city. The 1st test round of riots took place in the background of the events leading to the overthrow of the N.T.R. Government and its subsequent reinstatement.

On 21st July, Bonalu, a Hindu religious procession, was stoned while passing a mosque, and simultaneously stabbing incidents and looting took place in a large area stretching from Khilwat to Jalal Kuncha. One Hindu was killed. The following day some participants of a Hindu procession went berserk and a number of shops were attacked. One shop was looted while a number of people were stabbed. The processionists caught hold of an old man and threw him into the Musi, which resulted in his death. An old woman who was attacked in the Begum Bazar area in the presence of armed police dies in the Osmania Hospital later. The police opened fire in the air several times all along the route of the pro-

cession. Curfew was imposed in 24 police station areas of the city. But it was lifted on the following Friday to facilitate prayers. Predictably about 200 people, out of a crowd of 7,000 coming out of the mosque, led by a half-dozen slogan shouting rowdies indulged in a stabbing spree and looting in the Charminar, Las Bazar and Chowk areas. A number of people were stabbed and some of them died later. The police opened fire in which seven people were injured. Curfew was re-imposed, to be eventually lifted almost thirty days later in the last week of August. Our committee investigated specific incidents of stabbing in Ranjan Colony, of police high handedness in Muqul-pura and the effect of the curfew in Kasaratta areas during this period.”

Hyderabad Ekta's report from 1984 continues the recounting of events that the film WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO THIS CITY? follows so vividly: NT Rama Rao of the Telugu Desam Party is removed from power while in the US for a heart operation and Nadendla Bhaskara Rao of the Congress party is sworn in unconstitutionally. Subsequently a

stand off between the Majlis-e-Ittehad-ul-Muslimeen (MIM) and the Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leads to violence between Muslim and Hindu communities, which serve the interests of the Congress party in power on national level. As the situation deteriorates it buys time for the Congress party to engineer defections to prevent NT Rama Rao from returning as Chief Minister. The civil protest that the unconstitutional act, ordered by the central government, provoked was hence re-written as communal rioting.

Like other written and oral accounts about Hyderabad's socio-political and economic situation, *Hyderabad Ekta* stresses the administrative neglect and active deprivation of Hyderabad's Old City. While it was once the seat of the Nizam and the Muslim princely state's municipal organisations it now lacks schools, hospitals and many other amenities. Upward mobility through available employment became much more difficult than in other parts of the city. This feeds the fact that the Old City increasingly became the arena for political parties to assert their power and suffers the most from it.⁶

Tensions and insecurity have been on the rise since 1978, with communal violence being stirred, pre-planned, ill investigated if not furthered by the police. Innocent men are imprisoned instead of culprits, furthering the devastating economic effect that unrest and extended curfew situations have par-

ticularly for the working class in the Old City. This very situation becomes the impetus for a group of people to think of ways to intervene.

COVA (Confederation of Voluntary Organisations), an organisation initiated by former members of *Hyderabad Ekta*, described how *Ekta* came into being:

“Against the backdrop of the riots that took place in 1978, a few progressive individuals took the initiative of building a platform for communal harmony. Keshav Rao Jadhav and M. T. Khan organized a meeting in the Old City, which was attended by over a hundred people; the platform was initially named the Old City Peoples' Conference. Its main objective was to restore communal peace. Secular and progressive individuals and groups, who were shocked at the way a secular mass agitation (the protest against the rape of Rameeza Bee) was converted into a communal riot initiated this platform. After two years of work, and several consultations with like-minded people on the other side of the Musi, an organization was formed – *Hyderabad Ekta*. Part of its campaigning drew the people's attention to the fact that in riots it was the common people who were the victims, and nothing happened to the leaders of the communal parties. *Ekta* also campaigned that if riots were to be prevented, the government and the police machinery could easily do so, provided the political will was there.”⁷

the river Musi (see: Unnamed correspondent 2010. “Communal Riots in Hyderabad: Understanding the Causes”, in *Economic and Political Weekly*, April 24, 2010, Vol XLV, No 17, p. 16.).

Vasanth Kannabiran and others describe *Hyderabad Ekta* as a vibrant and important organisation during the 1980s. Next to the significance of merely connecting to people in the Old City, their activities consisted of organising meetings, talks and discussions, which are remembered as packed, with serious and lively discussions and always leading to plans for action. They distributed pamphlets and led demonstrations. A few members of *Stree Shakti Sanghatana* such as Lalita K, Rama Melkote and Vasanth Kannabiran decided to join *Ekta* and bring their feminist perspectives on questions of civil rights, experiences of conflict and violence and the organisation of political movements, into the purview of *Ekta*. Their conscious effort to talk to women, who often had to keep running the household while husbands were detained, were crucial to *Ekta's* pursuits.

The memories of *Ekta's* interventions as explicitly political are key to their work. Even or especially while their activities were partly relief work, they decisively did not understand their activities as charity. It was vital for *Ekta* members to not be institutionalized, to not be related to any political parties but be sustained by voluntary efforts only. Rama Melkote describes how through the networks some of them had in the rest of the city they were able to provide food or transport to hospitals. With much of the relief and compensation work being either non-existent or polarised and taken up by

communist parties it became a crucial ideological statement to function as a secular body. *Ekta* was present in the Old City during times of violence and curfew and hence bearing witness to people's stories who were otherwise totally cut off. *Ekta* listened and noted occurrences in detail and was thus in many ways doing work that the police failed to accomplish, namely filing and following up on First Information Reports (FIRs). *Ekta* also issued demands for further investigation into violent incidents, for the release of those meaninglessly arrested and for compensation of income during curfew time, which they forwarded to the police and the municipality. Their reports repeatedly refer to how elections were rigged, how small incidents were used to stir communal passions and how political patronage furthers a division of “our people” and “their people”.

Many remember the time of intense activities during the 1980s as a difficult period due to the extreme violence they witnessed daily and the immense challenges in countering the influential networks of the communal political parties who were able to use their connections and hereby increase their impact. Vasanth Kannabiran stressed how one woman addressed precisely the fact that what was needed was the bailing out of jail of their men who could then work and earn money thus relieving them from being dependent on what she saw as charity. While *Ekta* addressed the police and administration they did not succeed in this task. At the

⁶ The changing economic outlook of the Old City started already before independence with the last Nizam Osman Ali Khan shifting the seat of the administration from Purani Haveli in the Old City to King Kothi palace in the new city north of

⁷ COVA 2005, A Study of Communal Conflict and Peace Initiatives in Hyderabad: Past and

Present. In collaboration with Aman Trust, New Delhi, p. 26.

same time, *Ekta's* activities are remembered as creating a strong presence in the Old City that people respected and listened to and remember to this day. The fact that communal tensions steadily, though with interruptions, increased and that the Old City is today ever more ghettoised and separated from the rest of the city, is not seen to be a failure of *Ekta's* endeavours nor does it seem to have lessened the worth of their efforts.

The lack of a sustained presence, the struggle to counter much stronger political party networks, the insurmountable impunity of government and police forces, the observation that *Ekta* was seen as partial to Muslims by some Hindus while it lacked significant support from a wealthier Muslim middle and upper class, are only a few of the self-reflections that were present even then. Another factor raised is that from the late 1980s political movements started to become NGOs and hence the nature of political work changed quite substantially with voluntary work decreasing and activist work depending on funding, a contested move.

“A milk vendor, Eshwar, who does not belong to the locality was knifed to death in this area in the forenoon of 20th September 1984. He was walking towards Kalapathar from Bahadurpura, along the broad street scattered with newly constructed houses on either side. Most of the houses are either half finished or unoccupied. It was in this place that his assailants caught up with him and killed him. He died within a couple of hours, after giving a dying declaration to the magistrate in which he clearly men-

tioned the names of his killers. Thus the police knew who had killed him, and there was no need to effect any large-scale arrests on suspicion. But what the police did is very different. At about mid-day they raided Kalapathar area. They entered houses, beat women, and arrested 138 men and boys, including a sub registrar of the municipal corporation of Hyderabad, Mr. Khaja Hussain. (...)“

(*Ekta* Report 1984)

It is in this background that Hyderabad Ekta demands:

- 1 A judicial inquiry into the torture and illegal custody at Bolarum police station
- 2 Immediate suspension of police officials (...) and constables (...), pending inquiry into their conduct
- 3 Appointment of a citizen's council to oversee the enforcement of curfew and supply of essential commodities during curfew
- 4 Appointment of special commissioner for relief in communal disturbances
- 5 Shifting at least 50% of the government offices and residents of ministers and senior government officials to the Old City
- 6 Measures to improve civic administration and development of the Old City

Hyderabad Ekta also appeals to all democratic and secular forces to actively intervene in the deteriorating situations and help stem the rot that has set in the life of the city.

(*Ekta* report, not dated)

3) Making films in alliance — between urgency, analysis and lyricism



“Far from pouring oil into the flames of religious fanaticism, KYA HUA IS SHAHAR KO? is suited to smother them, because it shows the true villains and the real victims. This is precisely the kind of film that should be shown in regions with religious tension and elsewhere as protection against the virus of religious fanaticism that threatens the unity and the mental health of the nation. Instead, it's gathering dust in the censor's office.” Ammu Joseph, *Indian Express*, 6 June 1986

“While the radio announcer's mellow voice talks of the noisy scenes in the Assembly between Nadendla Bhaskar Rao's supporters and NTR's men, a thin old man smokes a cigarette on his bal-

cony in the Old City, as police jeeps go on their rounds in the empty narrow lanes, and policemen with whistles and lathis [wooden truncheons] send women lingering at their doorways scurrying inside. Little girls play a traditional game with little pebbles to fight the boredom of staying indoors. 'This curfew is worse than a Jailkhava, a prison,' says a young man, who cannot go out and earn and so has no way of feeding his wife and child. 'I have never fought with anybody. I'm not even interested in all this, but I'm still caught here. I went out when curfew was lifted, and before I could come back it was suddenly reimposed so the police caught me and beat me up.'” Jyoti Punwani, *The Sunday Observer*, 3 August 1986



Ammu Joseph's above-mentioned commentary, which appeared in the information flyer of the 1987 International Forum of New Cinema, points to the challenge faced by a documentary film about violence between religious communities, and to what *KYA HUA IS SHAHAR KO?* achieved cinematically and politically. Jyoti Punwani, a journalist who continues to report on communal violence in Bombay, underscores the special character of the film as it calmly observes life in the Old City during the weeks of curfew.

Those living in the most impoverished urban district of Hyderabad, received information about the end of the curfew solely over the radio, their only connection to the outside world. Radio became a lifeline and the sonic-cinematic link between those whose existence grows more and more precarious

with each additional day they are deprived of the possibility of working and earning a living. The calm observation of different households during the time of curfew, women preparing food over fire or a gas stove, families gathering on the verandas in front of their houses, the old man standing and listening, conveys an intense atmosphere of waiting and of "not knowing what happens tomorrow". The film thereby creates a contemplative space for facets of the riots that are often neglected.

"We are hearing that it is all politically motivated, but we don't know what is the truth. Nor have we had an opportunity to understand it. Everyone is struggling to survive, where is the time to understand all this? We feel terrified. I escaped just now from a terrify-



ing moment, the sweat on my body has not yet dried." testimony in the film

The act of bearing witness and hence constituting people as witnesses of their own experiences can become a starting point for both sides to address and reflect on the unfolding. It seems to have connected those in front and behind the camera in trying to understand **WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO THIS CITY?**, what has gone wrong?

Making films in alliance

"At the screenings in Bombay, viewers raised a number of questions. What were the filmmakers doing there, apart from making the film? The eternal dilemma of the documentary maker or journalist's relationship with her/his subject is explained by Jadhav's involvement – the film is just one of

Ekta's activities. In addition, Deepa and Navroze spent two months with the people in the area getting to know them." Punwani 1986

The impetus for the film can be related to what Deepa Dhanraj often described as a sense of loss when remembering a city known for its "ganga-jamni tehzeeb," its cosmopolitan and syncretic culture. She shared a desire for retaining a sense of the possibility of a composite culture with members of *Hyderabad Ekta*, a group whose work combines research into the wider historical conditions that have fostered the political climate ensuing in the late 70s and early 80s, with a presence "on the ground." Their knowledge of party interests on the one hand and living conditions of the Old City's inhabitants on the other and importantly their atten-

tion to the wider implications of engineered riots and law and order situations, provided an entry point for Deepa Dhanraj and Navroze Contractor when they decided to make the film.

As with Deepa Dhanraj's first four films made within the film collective Yugantar⁸, and all of her subsequent film work, *WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO THIS CITY?* became a film made in alliance with an "already existing constituency." This allowed an immediate connection to a political discourse directly invested on a grassroots level and a possibility, and responsibility, for the film to feed back into this context. The political of Deepa Dhanraj's work is characterised by this very engagement. From the outset and throughout the filmmaking process her filmmaking is invested in the questions, urgencies, hesitations or resistances of a group, often itself composed of varied positions.

As a constellation of secular minded activists seeking to intervene in an increasingly communalist and class divided urban environment *Hyderabad Ekta* also saw the making of a film as a chance to bring together the various strands and complexities of their work and was hence similarly invested in what kind of film could and should be made.

How to see the violence erupting within a wider context of increasing communalisation? How to address communal divides in relation to the political maneuverings of political parties, the exploitation of economic factors, and the interplay between religion and violence? How to create a narrative and

sentiment that would be accountable and accessible to different communities in the Old City so that it could be used to instigate discussions without alienating participants? How to understand and create a secular space while respecting religious and political affiliations? The destitution of people's livelihoods through periods of curfew as one crucial cornerstone of *Ekta's* concern, through relief work but also through their address of administrative bodies, gave impetus to those striking scenes recounted above. Aided by *Ekta*, the small film team was able to stay in the Old City for two months, including the time under curfew.

Reflecting and responding to these concerns, tensions and debates and reframing them into camera and directorial work generated a political articulation enriched and deepened by the collective and embedded process.

Urgency, analysis and lyricism

WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO THIS CITY? is not easily classifiable into one of the modalities of documentary form often deployed today. Archive material and off-camera commentary provide the viewers with information on the history of the city as a background to Hyderabad's situation in the 1980s. One-on-one interviews with the antagonistic political leaders of the Majlis-e-Itehad-ul-Muslimeen (MIM) and the Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) are followed by scenes of their public appearances capturing the atmospheres they engender. Close up re-



cords of political speeches and hate campaigns alternate with respectful observations of the labour and craft activities that strive in the old city, the baking, embroidering, framing or carrier jobs that sustain lives. There are scenes of the actual outbreak of violence in the streets and the looting of shops, witness testimonies from both religious groups, images of ruined houses and the above mentioned impressions of life subdued under curfew. This balance between being both in the midst of events as they occur while never being voyeuristic, and achieving an analysis of a historical moment unfolding at the time is particularly striking. It succeeds in conducting a cinematic exploration that unveils the rhetoric of political speech fuelling communalist divides. And it does so at a time when the now famil-

iar political rhetoric of what in hindsight can be called early examples of Hindutva ideology had not been articulated in such clear terms.

WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO THIS CITY? thus had to develop a political vocabulary under difficult and often dangerous working conditions. While the development of events demanded day by day decisions about what was most urgent to shoot over the course of two months, the kind of filming that took place speaks of a conceptualisation throughout and not only in the editing and postproduction phase. The calm editing of the film manages to expose the volatile situation as a politically staged spectacle while also tracking how narrative constructions of "us" and "them" manifest themselves step by step, aided by the very same spectacles and precarious economic conditions.

⁸ MOLKARIN (Maid Servant, India 1981), TAMBAKU CHAAKILA OOB ALI (Tobacco Ember, India 1982),

SUDESHA (India 1983) and IDHI KATHA MATRAMENA (Is this Just a Story?, India 1983).

Navroze Contractor's intent camera work is impressive, for example when he films – guerrilla-style, from the politicians' podium – the Ganesh procession turning violent. He continued filming even after being hit by a stone thrown at his head; the image goes black for a moment as the camera falls but continues to shoot. A few out of focus shaky images follow before the camera zooms back onto the violent chaos that developed out of a religious procession. This scene however appears seamlessly within the otherwise steady observations, avoiding the spectacle that could have been made of it, rather stressing a certain concentration that is sensible throughout the film. The astounding closeness of the camera to both politicians, described by Jyoti Punwani as "making you feel you are almost inside their skull" while they address crowds of people, intrigues through its exposition of their respective appeal. The cinematography stresses the differing individual character of their persuasion; MIM's Salauddin Owaisi as "Monarch of the Night" (Punwani) and BJP's Tiger Narendra more glaring presence and address during daytime processions.

Conspicuous is also the respect with which the camera approaches the protagonists. Pain and suffering is shown though with considerate distance. The cinematography's capacity to put each individual "in the proper light" (Navroze Contractor) is especially displayed when it shows those affected by the violence in the Old City.

Each portrait appears like a carefully thought through mise-en-scene, not to fictionalize but to display a dignified image of any ordinary person.

A film of its time with high resonance today

Navroze Contractor and Deepa Dhanraj recount how during the filming they only encountered two other film cameras; one owned by the police and one owned by the only National Television Channel existent at the time. The latter shooting the Telugu Desam Party leader NTR being sworn in again after the postponed Assembly elections had finally taken place. While a press card issued for one day was illegally re-dated daily, allowing access into areas under curfew, Navroze Contractor also describes how the camera often acted as a license. The contemporary omnipresence of cameras but also the scepticism with which many people respond to being filmed, including how particularly politicians currently guard their image, speaks of a radically different mediascape during the making of the film. Only during the general elections in 1989 were electronic media massively introduced in electoral campaigns for wide circulation.⁹

This also places WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO THIS CITY? in a context of independent documentary filmmaking where this act of bearing witness and collecting testimonies created the only alternative representation of an event. It might speak of the less spectacular media context of its time but it is com-

mendable that the film does not draw its strength from the suffering of victims, the capitalising on spectacular images of violence or the stylisation of constellations of victims and perpetrators. Especially today their restrained approach has timely and global relevance. The film's precise look at diverse forms of expression of Hindu nationalism, including the exploitation of religious rituals to aggressively separate a Hindu group from the Muslim "Others" is ever more relevant.

In hindsight the film captures an early moment of what was to come:

1984 was not only the time of the genocidal Sikh riots in Delhi but also the founding of the Shri Ramjanmahoomi Mukti Yagna Samiti (the committee for sacrifice for the liberation of Lord Ram's birthplace).

"[...] In September 1985 a series of processions and marches to Ayodhya was launched from twenty-five places in North India. In February 1986 the campaign yielded its first results when the Faizabad District Court decided to open the Babri Masjid for Hindu worship. This was celebrated by the VHP as a major step toward the Hindu nation."¹⁰

The RSS led this very campaign from 1986–1992 until in 1992, Hindu militants destroyed the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya. Rioting followed in Bombay. In 2002, the murders of Muslims in Gujarat were not only a sign of the consolidation of the BJP and its na-

tionalistic strategies but was soon declared by many human rights organisations as genocide. This expression of an increasingly effective public exclusion of religious groups, with the goal of a purely Hindu nation, has only worsened, leading to the creation of extremely deprived slum areas in Gujarat, Bombay, Hyderabad and elsewhere.

COVA reports how Muslims living in the Old City of Hyderabad today have revised their sense of "normalcy." Constant tension and unease, living with anger and grief, the unpredictability of life economically and politically, and seeing oneself in a decisively other situation than new city inhabitants, are all part of this revision. The increasing ghettoisation of the Old City, the stark division of communities, the institutional and systematic discrimination of the Muslim population often expressed through unjustified and wide scale arrests of young Muslim men after incidents of violence and the felt impact of South Asian political or global events such as 9/11 which concludes with (un)easy associations between Islam and Terror, furthers and testifies to individual accounts listed by COVA.¹¹ The fact that one had got used to the predictability of the current media representation's casting of Muslims as culprits, terrorists, or generally a problematic minority became apparent and was commented on by Muslim men watching WHAT HAS

⁹ Blom Hansen, Thomas 1999. *The saffron wave: democracy and Hindu nationalism*. Princeton,

New Jersey: Princeton University Press, p. 146.

¹⁰ Blom Hansen, p. 155.

¹¹ COVA, p. 14. See also *Teachers Solidarity*, a group of teachers from Jamia Millia Islamia University (Delhi) investigating prejudiced and false judicial procedures following the police killing of one of their students (www.teacherssolidarity.org) and

Communalism Combat, a monthly to bi-monthly magazine focusing on communalism and Human Rights, members of which are also engaged in legal support activities (<http://www.sabrang.com/cc/archive.htm>).



HAPPENED TO THIS CITY? in April 2013, two months after a bomb blast in Hyderabad (21st February 2013) had again led to the media and the police targeting Muslim youth in the Old City by default.

Beyond its immediate local and national context, WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO THIS CITY? strikes through its structural focus on fundamentalist and fascist strategies, the mobilisation of popular support, the processes of creating an "other" as the enemy and the impunity of state actors and sovereign governmentalities. In this it transcends its immediate context and signifies globally-- historically, today and most likely, if unfortunately, for the foreseeable future.

Credits

KYA HUA IS SHAHAR KO?
(What Has Happened to this City?)

India 1986, 95 min, 16mm, 1:1,37, color

Directed by: Deepa Dhanraj

Script, commentary: Keshav Rao Jadhav

Director of photography: Navroze Contractor

Editor: Maniam

Sound: G. V. Somashekhar

Music: Navroze Contractor

Narrator: Sushma Ahuja

Original film material: Negative Kodak Eastman, 100ASA (daylight), 320ASA (night), Print stock Kodak. All film material including sound negatives produced as INDU, from Hindustan Photo Films (Ooty, Tamil Nadu), Government Public Sector company.

Production Company:

Deccan Development Society, Hyderabad, India

World Premiere:

January 1987, International Film Festival of India.

Fifty years after its foundation, **Arsenal – Institute for Film and Video Art** boasts a film collection of over 8,000 titles. It reflects half a century of non-mainstream international film art and the living history of a Berlin institution whose structure is unique in the world. The collection comprises films from all over and of every genre, length and format. Arsenal considers its collection a "Living Archive" which only has a relevance in relation to the beholder.

The "Living Archive – Archive Work as a Contemporary Artistic and Curatorial Practice" project began in June 2011. Over 40 curators, filmmakers, artists and researchers were invited from Germany and across the world to develop projects around our archive holdings. The idea was to consciously initiate projects that would carry out archival work as part of their development, so as to link research, preservation and publication in the context of contemporary curatorial and artistic practice. Living Archive thus represents the attempt to undertake archival work that does not serve self-preservation only but is contemporary, creates something new and enables new approaches.

This DVD is realized in the context of "Living Archive – Archive Work as a Contemporary Artistic and Curatorial Practice", a project by Arsenal – Institute for Film and Video Art.

BONUS MATERIAL

Video Interviews with Deepa Dhanraj as well as Keshav Rao Jadhav, Vasanth Kannabiran, Rama Melkote and Vithal Rajan; members of *Hyderabad Ekta*, political activist group and collaborators for the film (India 2013, 70 min).

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