

Saacha: The Loom An Ethnographic Film
Professor Anjali Monteiro, K.P. Jaysankar
Module 7

TISS, Mumbai

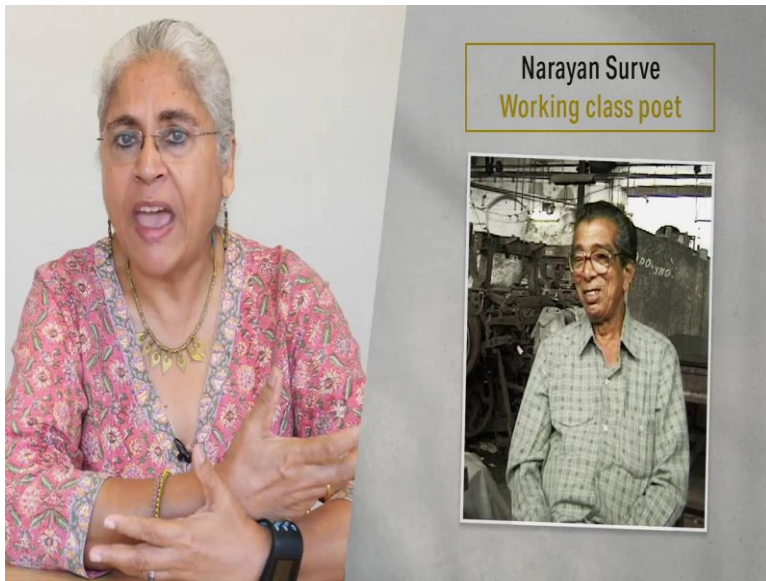
Professor Anjali Monteiro: The film Sacha was which we made in 2000 was born out of a kind of angst, the kind of questioning of the city of the Mumbai our relationship with the city and you know the rapidly changing space that we were almost sort of feeling lost within as you know whole lot of events from the 1980s onwards were kind of moving the city in a direction that was making it almost an unrecognisable space.

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So you have the textile strike in the early 80s, you have the rise of right-wing political parties, you have, the trade union movement that is sort of getting decimated and the kind of cosmopolitan, secular energy is that for us was something that drew us to the city because we are first-generation migrants to the city, that was some way getting dissipated. And we wanted to explore this space of the city and some way to explore it in collaboration with other actors.

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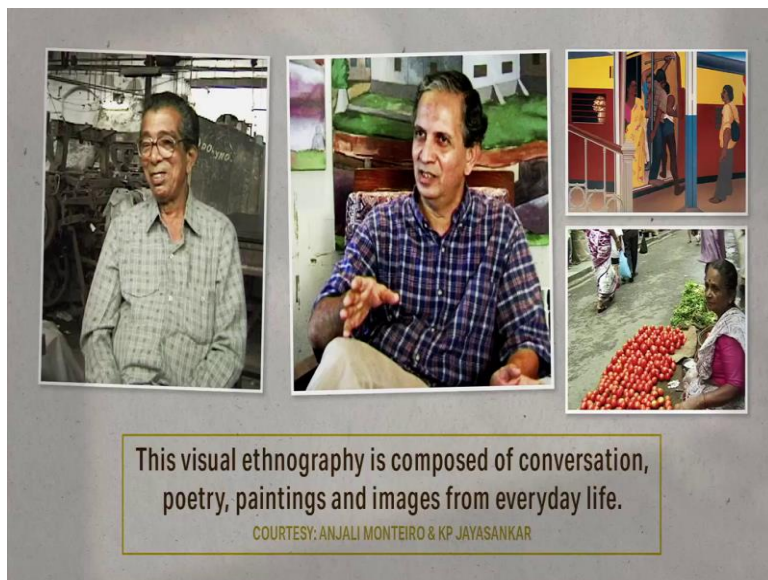
So, the film actually brings together the poetry of Narayan Surve who is what he calls himself a working-class poet, somebody who has abandoned by on the roadside by his mother when he was an infant picked up by a mill worker, became a child labour in the mills and then became a part of the left movement and without much formal education rose to be to be one of the most powerful Marathi poets of our time of all times I would say and the precursor of Dalit poetry.

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And on the other hand, you have Sudhir Patwardhan who is a doctor radiologist coming from a very different social location, and yet you know what kind of relating to working-class life in a very interesting way in a very self-reflexive way.

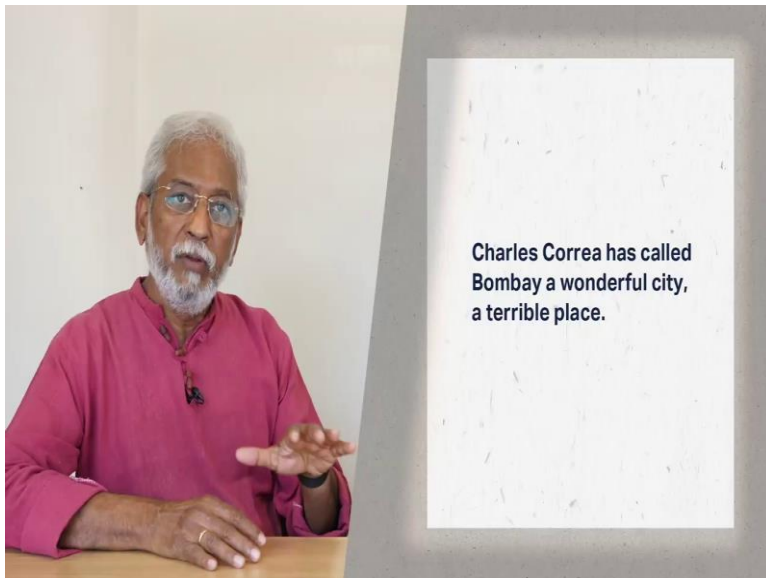
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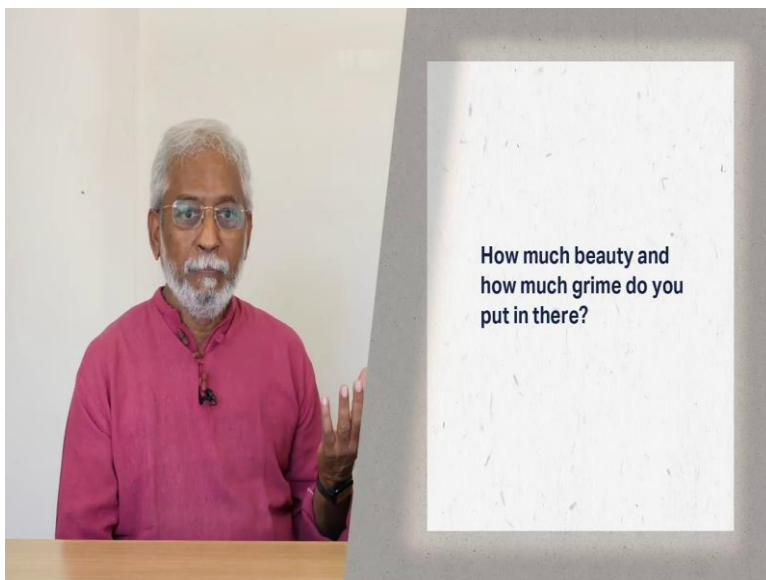
So, in the film we bring together this poetry, these images and our own experience of the city in terms of how we imagine it and in terms of trying to maybe at one level hold onto a city that was disappearing, look at spaces that which were very much a part of a growing up in the city. So, that is how this film brings together these three different strands, the poet, the painter and our images of the city.

Professor K. P. Jayasankar: So when we kind of wanted to document the city, there were a lot of dilemmas. Bombay is a city of contrast, city of so many antinomies, our experience of the city are imagination of the city and our ambivalent relationship with the city.

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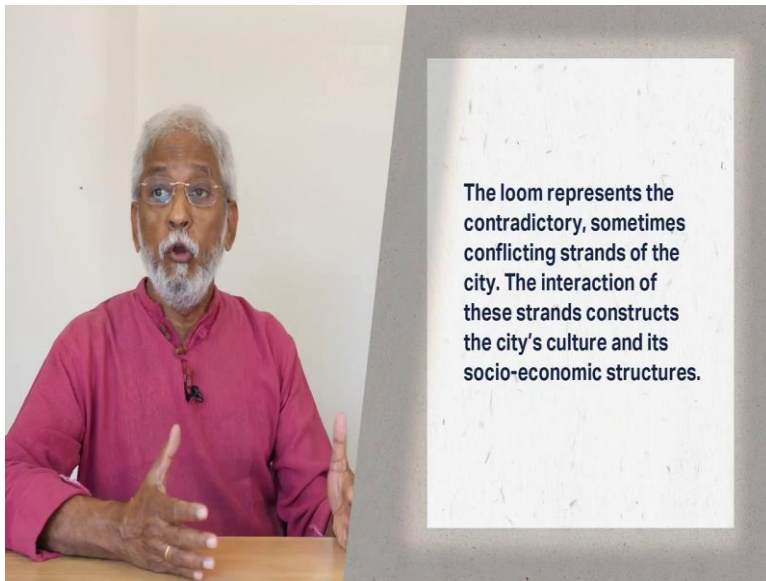


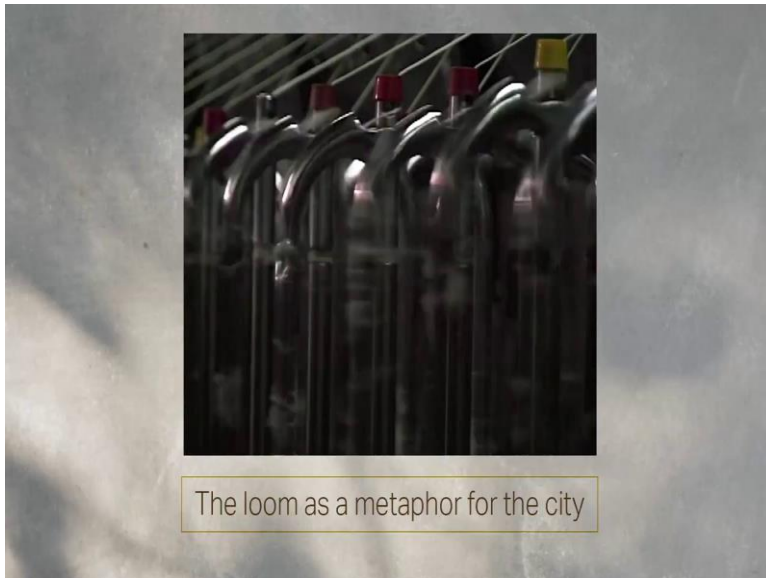
At one level we love the city but at the same time concerned about the way it was changing. And both the poet and the painter are concerned about this as well.



So how does one bring the beauty of the city and the grime of the city? So, we were wondering how do you bring all these complexities together?

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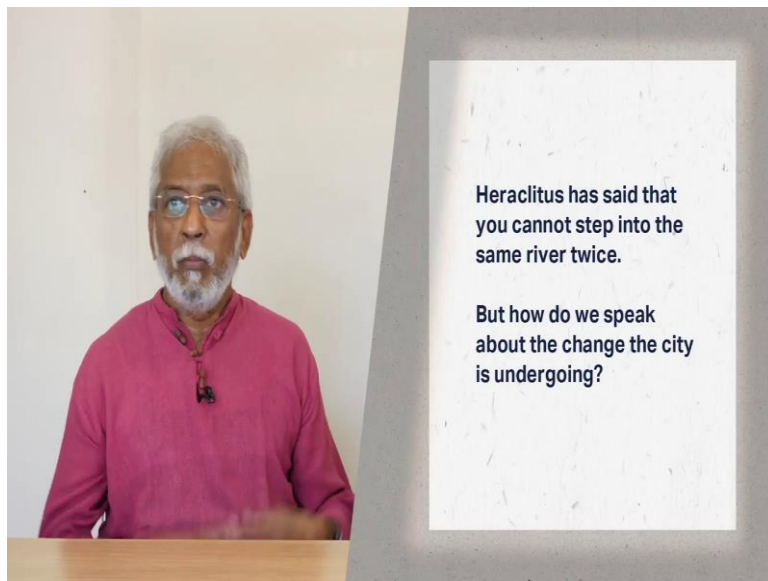


The idea for loom kind of became very handy to kind of bring together these antinomies. A loom for example, not only represents the city because much of the wealth of the city is generated by the textile industry, its architecture, its food, its street culture all that is informed by the people who worked, the proletariat who work for the textile industry.

There is a warp and the weft which make possible the larger fabric. So they look like as if they are moving in different direction, but they all bring the city together. So, is multicultural fabric so to speak. One of the most interesting collectivity in the city was a trade union movement, Mumbai is a birthplace of Indian Trade Union movement.

So it was informed by this very robust progressive a working-class culture. So with the textile strike and a subsequent closure of the mills that kind of culture kind of died down.

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The precarious lives and livelihoods of the common people

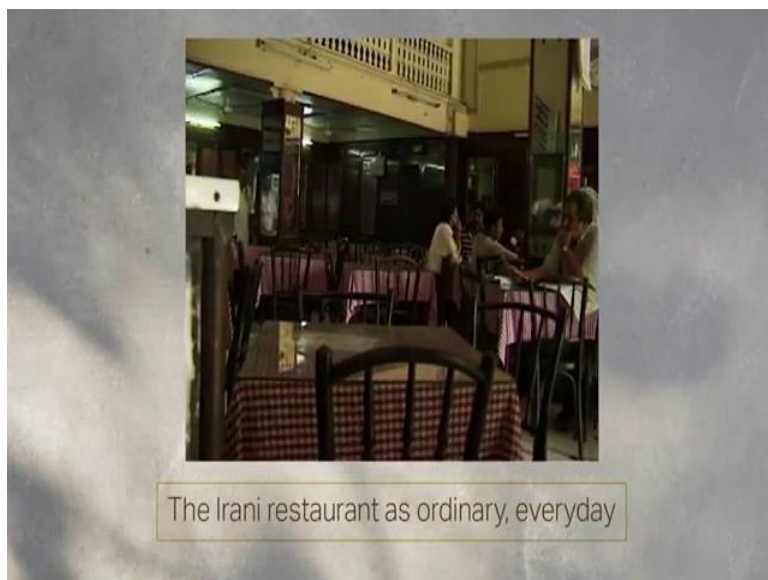


The precarious lives and livelihoods of the common people

But how does one then talk about this change at all, at a micro-level and also at the macro level which we see in the film in many different ways, one of the examples that I can entitle a woman selling tomatoes in the beginning, so it is really a matter of fact image when she will appear I mean this is a figure that you pass by, though they are builders of the edifice of this grand city as the Narayan Surve puts it.

We passed by; we do not even give a second look. But there is a yet another space at which there is an image of where there is a downpour and she is trying to kind of sell these tomatoes, and it has become a turbulent image, it kind of represents the threat to the livelihood of common people or the poor people on the street that is kind of the shining new city does not take on board.

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If you looked at the Irani restaurants sequence which we kind of had been great fun putting together in the beginning. It is a very carnivorous kind of space, this music there is you know it is a space which is very nostalgic but then recall recurse in the later in the film it is a kind of a commonplace image, the music is gone, and the lights are fled, it is a kind of a everyday image.

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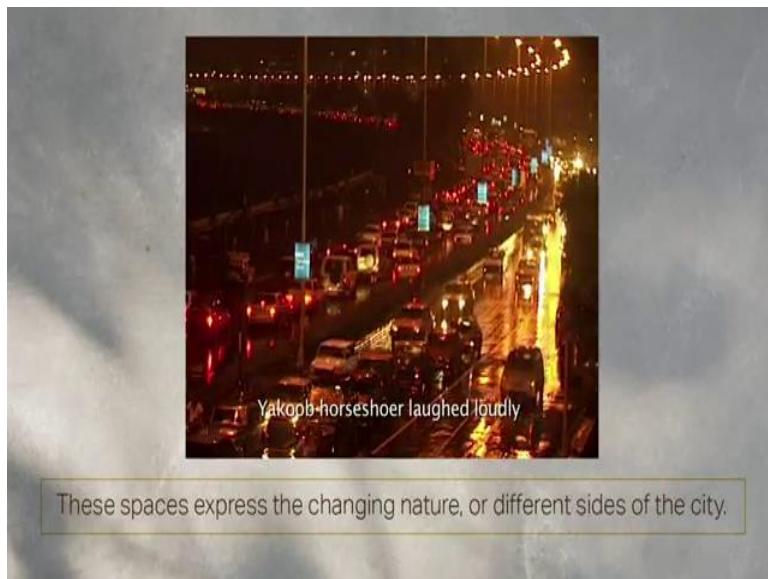
The same spaces express different moods.



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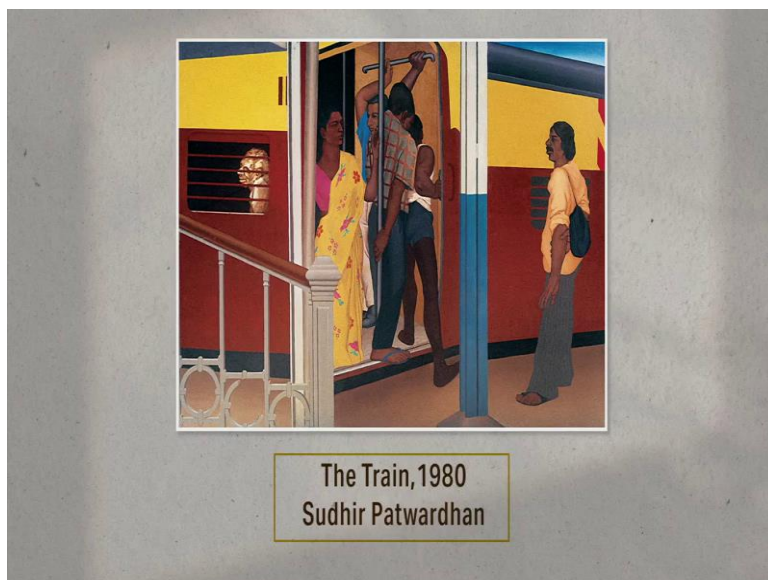
The same spaces express different moods.



Look at the Marine drive in the beginning when it appears is like a there is a "Bhel Puri Wala" who sells and that is kind of focus on the film in that entire sequence which is an everyday image and of course when it comes which is we kind of bring it back when we talk about the 90s riot, which is a very dark turbulent image, which is kind of beautiful but at the same time broody and disturbing. These are some of the ways in which we tried as an operative word here, to kind of bring this concerns that we had and kind of trying to kind of embed within the film, the kind of changes the city has gone through.

Professor Anjali Monteiro: The painters working with, you know one kind of register of the city and the poet has a very different register or several registers I would say, and then we have our images.

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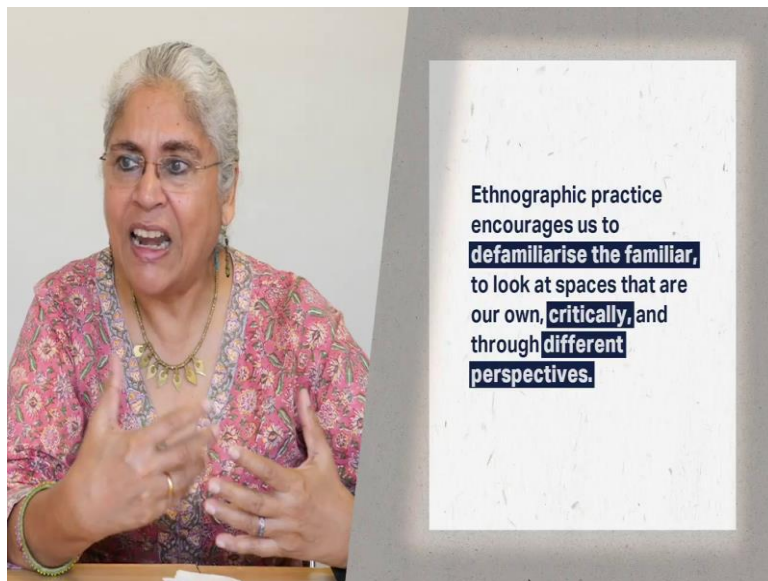




So how do we bring, you know, these disparate ways of looking at the city together? For instance, I can think of one example which is the painting call the train where there is a particular kind of grill that is there in the in on the railway on the staircase, and we actually went you know from station to station looking for where we would find that grill because we know that is the way Sudhir paints he would have definitely seen it somewhere, and we found it at Dadar station.

And the kind of move from the grill in the painting to you know the grill on the platform. I think the gaze that we bring to bear in the city, in fact, that all three sets of artist bring to bear on the city probably have something in common and that is but in a sense we are looking at our own space.

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And I think when you look at your own spaces, there is definitely a lot of affection that you have for your spaces, a lot of little things that you notice because it is your space and I think that kind of detail is there in Sudhir's work, it is there in the poetry of Surve the little metaphors.

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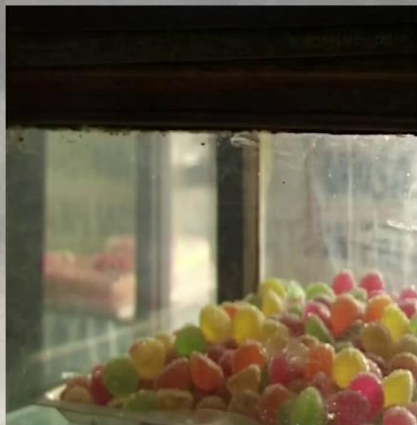




Visuals may refer to and evoke many unspoken narratives.



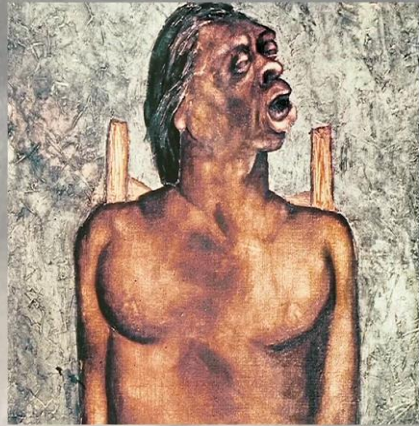
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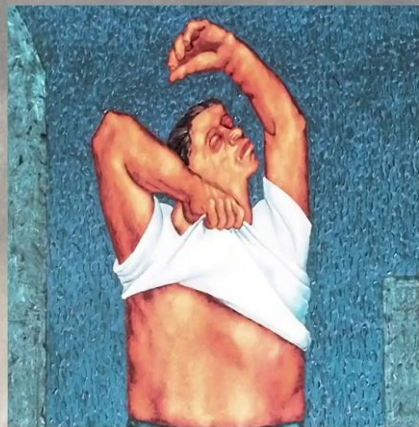
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And that was something I think we tried to bring out as Jaysankar sometimes calls it The Secret Life of Things you know, a drop of water on a table tells many stories, the reflection on a jar of jujubs as a car passes by kind of evokes memories, it evokes so many things. So, but of course, we are also looking at somebody else's life because you are looking and this is something that Sudhir is acutely aware of, the politics of representation.

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The politics inherent in representing the Other



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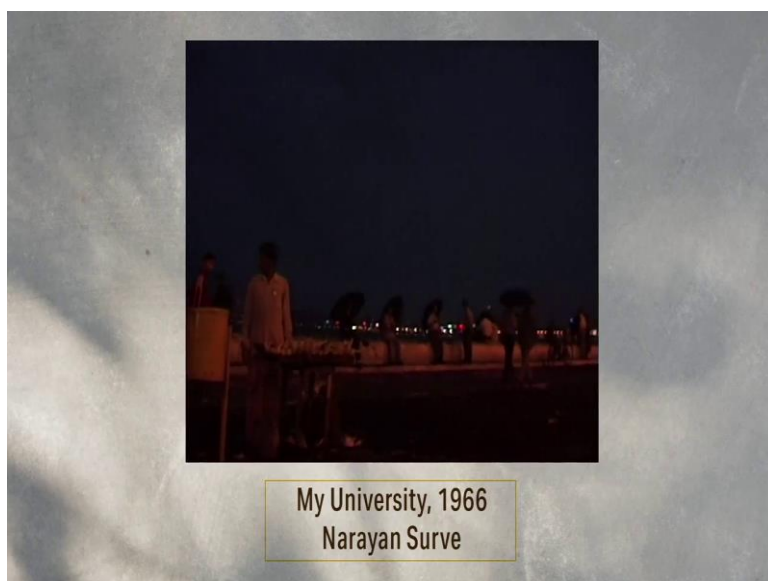
So, as a middle-class person is looking at the life of the working class and he very reflexively and critically explores how his relationship with this life changes over a period of time from initially kind of being see himself almost as a spokesperson for the class and which I think many of us who were Marxist or influenced by Marxism did at one point of time to moving more towards being a participant in one's own space.

So he gives his wonderful example of how he decided to sit in public spaces in his own locality and paint and how children would come and asking what he was doing, and he would start conversations around the space, and he felt that gave his work a different dimension.

All filmmakers doing ethnographic work are aware of, and we often think about, what is this relationship that we have with our subjects. What is the kind of relationship we have the space.

Professor K. P. Jayasankar: And both the work of Sudhir, as well as Narayan Surve, gave us to kind of take this ethnography project forward in some sense because of the reflexivity that there is embedded in it, and Sudhir work is evident from the multiple perspectives that it brings, he kind of problematises what he is seeing, problematises what is reality and also Surve kind of in its social critique of what he is writing about, also problematises the social praxis of what the reality of what he is kind of talking about.

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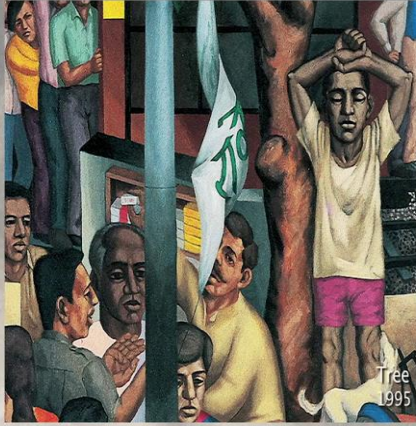
My University, 1966
Narayan Surve

So, here, in that sense ethnographic methods did help us in kind of conceptualising this film. Sudhir is a radiologist, so in fact, I have this term, his work is critical social radiology. A radiological image is the picture of the real, but it is the picture which is very different from what you see.

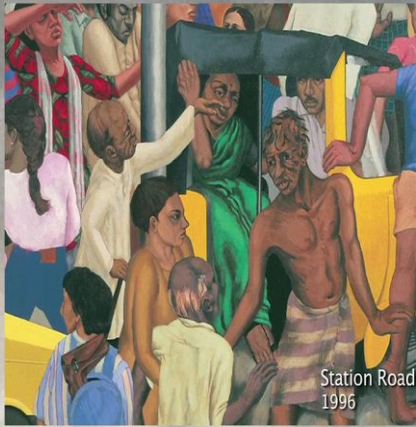
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Street Corner, 1985
Sudhir Patwardhan



The paintings show what underlies the structure of the city.



Multiple stories, multiple perspectives



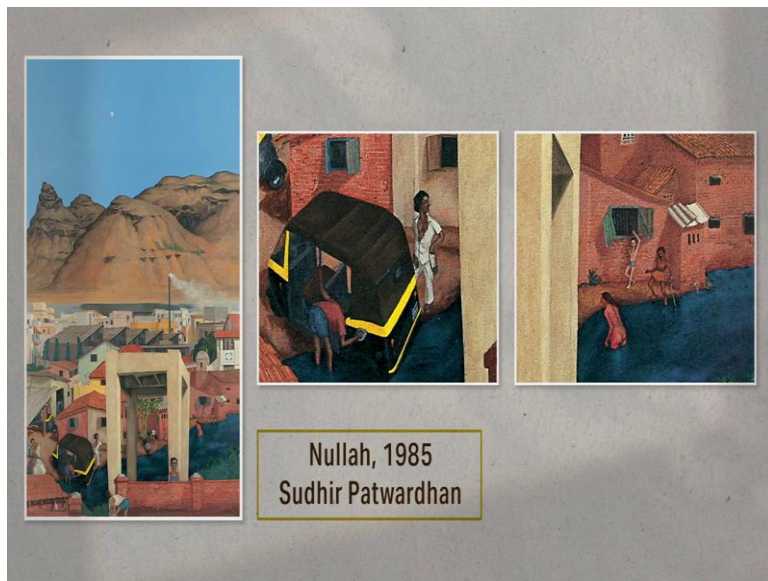
Multiple stories, multiple perspectives



So when he looks at a space, he cuts down through the tissues into the essence of the city. So thereby, he sees reality in a different way. You can see what is essential, what underlies the city, What makes the city possible, the structure, the kind of working-class vigour, the robustness of these everyday happening in the city. And also what he does is to bring into his images, so is the ideal for multiple perspectives.

So he does not privilege one perspective, I mean he brings into one frame, different aspects of that frame and what he also does interestingly is that you know his paintings carry a story, though it is just one frame, as you look at it, it unfolds and then there are many stories you realise, there are many stories that are being narrated within the frame.

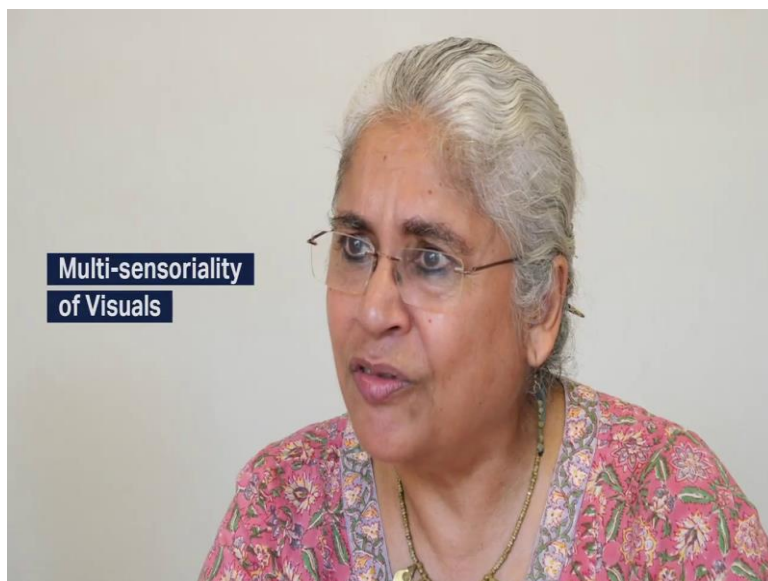
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One woman bathing and or somebody look gazing into the frames, all kinds of thing that happen in this. So that is something that we have tried doing it.

Professor Anjali Monteiro: So talking about Surve's poetry, since it is so powerfully kind of affective, it is something that sort of hits you in the gut, I think in some way we also try to use the image in that way, not in a descriptive way, not to look at the city in a descriptive way.

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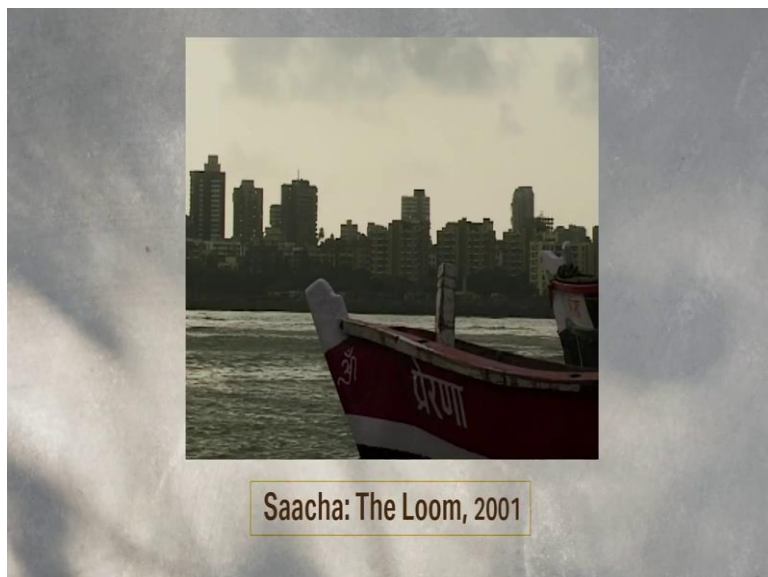


But to look at the city very up close and you know in a way that is a visceral that kind of you know affects you the way we have used you know texture and colour and reflections and also

we were shooting a lot of it during the monsoons where I think the city gets a different kind of a haunting beauty which also can be quite disturbing at the times.

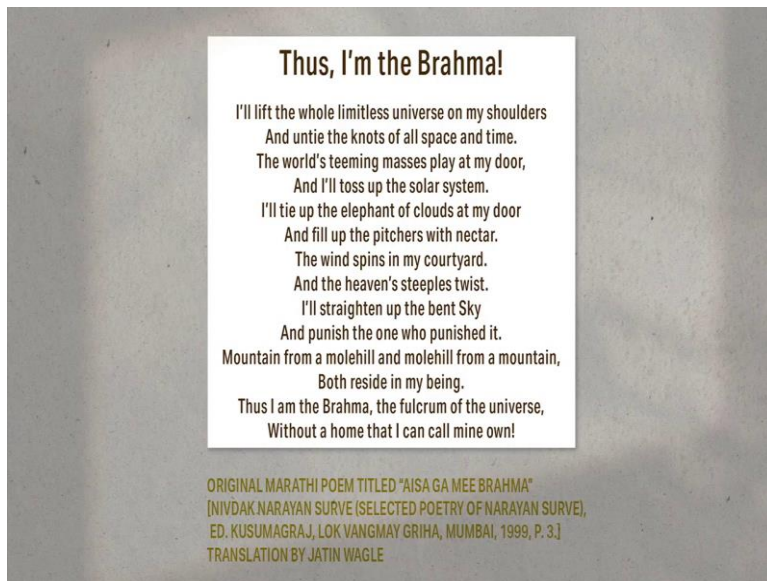
So I think Surve's poetry offered us that space to engage very poetically and lyrically with the image and to look at the city through new eyes, though it was a city that to be a very familiar with but to re-discover the city in new ways.

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We did not try to describe what he was saying but used it in very many different ways, so sometimes it is used in a kind of playful way.

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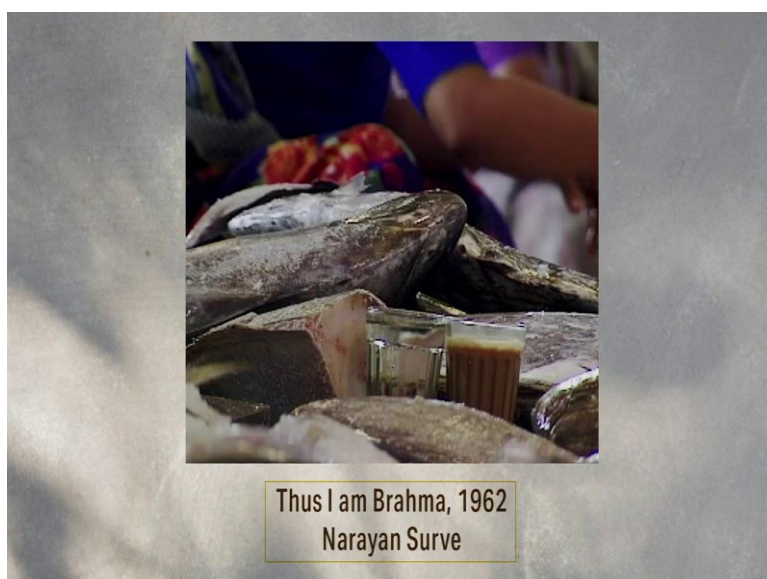


So there is this poem called "Aisa Gami Brahma". Thus I am Brahma, and you are talking about the universe and all, and we shot it in a fish market, which is a, you know, a very commonplace but we shot the market also definitely.

Professor K. P. Jayasankar: With a woman in focus.

Professor Anjali Monteiro: With a women in focus, yeah. So and it ends with on the eye of the dead fish.

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Thus I am Brahma, 1962
Narayan Surve



Without a home that I can call mine own!

Thus I am Brahma, 1962
Narayan Surve

It in some way kind of evokes the poem, questions a poem, laughs with the poem I mean it is doing a whole lot of different things because Surve is a free spirit because his poetry has so much power, I think it gave us a very interesting space to experiment with the image, to use the image in very many different kinds of ways to use it completely non-indexically.

Professor K. P. Jayasankar: Some of the images do not really indexically link to what you are talking about, there is a moment at which Sudhir is talking about the expression and a mark that he makes on the canvas, and then the image is a barber actually making a mark on somebody's face.

So, I mean for us it was a more humorous deployment of that image but is also talking about another mode of artistry in that sense, you know it kind of blurs his destruction that we have between certain kind of art and certain other kinds of craft. So it is not directly linked, but it has it kind of expands a meaning of both.

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Sudhir Patwardhan (in documentary) : In my view representation any representational work, you know there are three, I mean roughly speaking there are three elements that go into our work like this and first of course is observation, what you see around you and your need to depict what you see. Along with this, is, of course, the conventions that you would use to depict what you see.

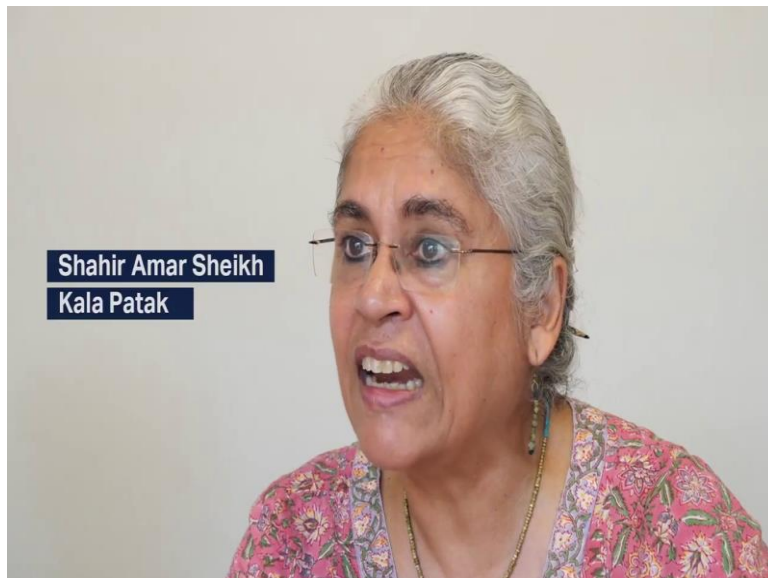
Those conventions will affect how much you can in fact see what you will see, what you edit out. The second aspect is the mark that you make on the canvas, the expression, the kind of emotional charge that you can give to your activity on the canvas.

Professor K. P. Jayasankar: So these two eminent people who are trying to climb the mountain from two different directions can of did help us in a very interesting way.

Professor Anjali Monteiro: In fact, when the film was completed we took it to Surve's house and showed it to him and then Sudhir came to our studio and saw the film, and we wanted to make sure that you know they were happy with whatever was there in the film and that was meant a lot. Because we saw it actually as a collaborative project which is not our film on the city, it is all three of us who were trying to understand all over again our relationship with this changing city.

The other thing for us was a very interesting experience while making the film is our engagement with the music of those times.

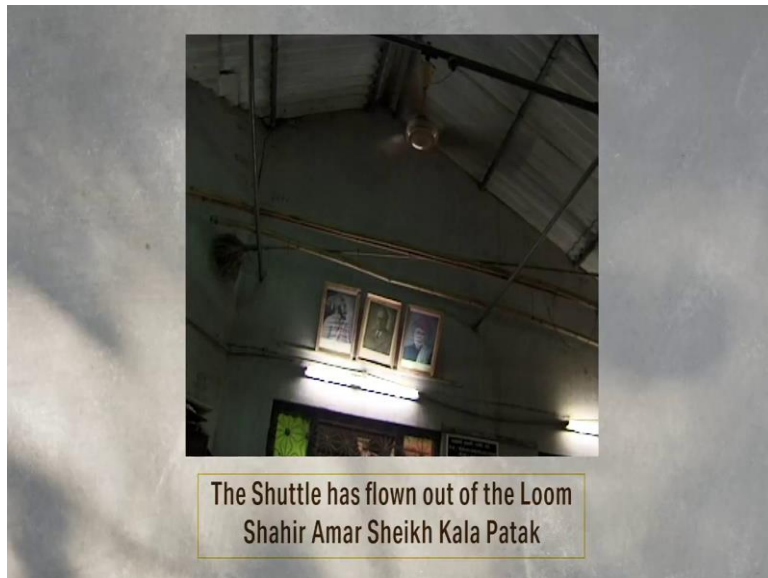
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So we managed to find this group called Shahir Amar Sheikh Kala Pathak. So Shahir Amar Sheikh is a very well-known bard of the 40s and 50s kind of left poet who has this amazing body of work and this was the troupe that sang with him and now they were all in their 60s and sort of somehow struggling to make a living because those times had passed.

So we actually sat with them and recorded a lot of the songs of the 40s and the 50s particularly there is this interesting song called "Sutla dhota sacha madhun", so it is a strike song of the 1940s the shuttle has flown out of the loom it says.

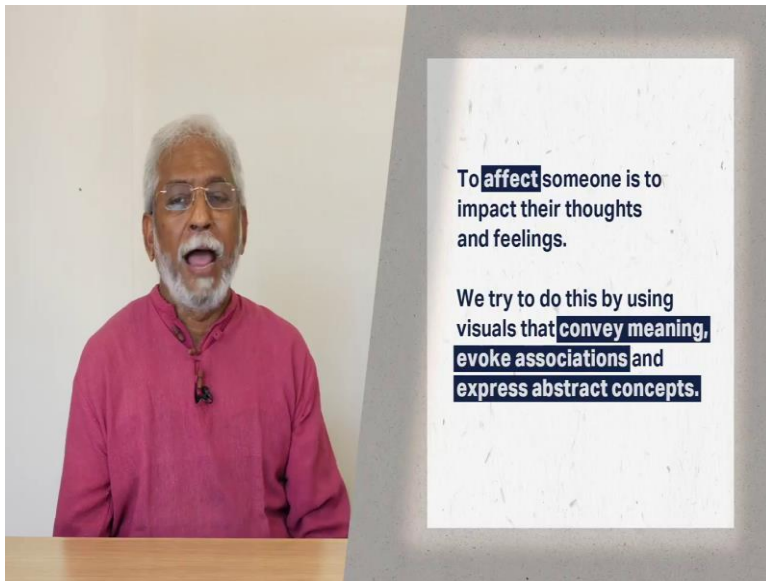
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The engagement with the visual, the engagement with the oral allows for that many-many layers of meaning and as an audience you probably pick up those things that appeal to you or you kind of build your own meaning through the text.

Professor K. P. Jayasankar: What Sudhir was saying and it expands a meaning of what you are seeing. So they kind of work together in a dance so to speak. So basically a dance or a rhythm, music which music, the image and the sound kind of worked together.

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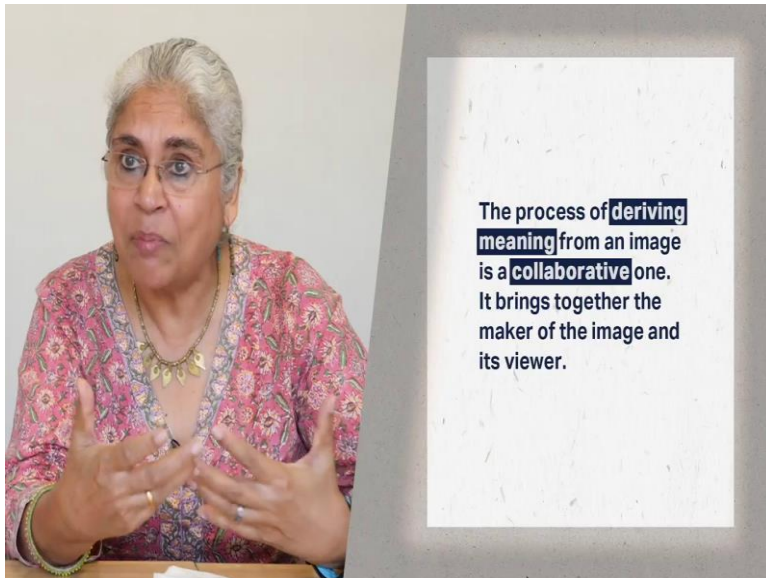
One of the ideas that we keep in mind is the idea of affect then effect, so effect is a very inferior mode in which you kind of indexically try to kind of bring about us a desired effect in that frame, but it is more affect is more embodied kind of feeling, it is kind of more pleasure-oriented, it is not very unidirectional, but it can take you in many ways and you kind of relay to it in your own way. So you those kind of connections is what we have worked with.

Professor Anjali Monteiro: You know when you are from a space and you are trying to represent it, there is probably a tendency to take for granted that space and so not to engage with it in critical terms with new eyes with somewhere I think we try to also while it was a familiar space we try to you know de-familiarise ourselves and look at it as Jayasankar said, from multiple perspectives little parts, little stories that perhaps you have to discover as the audience.

Even in Sudhir's painting or in our film, I do not think we tell all those stories, those stories are there, they are lurking in the intestacies of that space, many stories and it is for the audience to pick those stories and to tell them in your own way because you would come to the film with your experience of the city or perhaps, experience of another city or no experience at all.

For us, ethnographic film is a very open-ended text that you know you as an audience insert yourself into and you know make your own stories. It should be a text that allows you to sort of empathise with your subject.

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And spaces and you know in that process you know kind of also insert yourself into that space, so I think for us ethnographic film has always been that kind of a space, a space for you know interpretation and discovery rather than a space for description of something that is. So, what is not is or what we do not see or what we partially see or the absences are as telling and as important as the presence is.