

CHALAMAAN (Ongoing)

A documentary film journey aboard the only remaining tram system in India, the Kolkata tram system.

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INTRODUCTION

জীবনটা একটা চলমান যাত্রা , যেখানে ঘাঁটি গুলো অস্থায়ী।

Jibonta akta chalamaan jatra, jekhane ghati gulo asthai.

Life is an ongoing journey, where stops are temporary.

Chalamaan (meaning “ongoing” in Bengali) is the name of a documentary film and research project based on the last and only remaining tram (streetcar) system in the Indian subcontinent. This system operates in the city of Kolkata, India under the administration of the West Bengal state government and the Calcutta Tramways Company.

While every other major city in the Indian subcontinent discontinued trams, Kolkata has persisted with retaining its service; the oldest electric tram service in Asia, in operation since 1902. Trams were introduced by the British Raj to create a better means of transportation for the local population and to facilitate the movement of goods to and from the port and dockyards. They were also crucial in quickly mobilizing the British police force to locations of anti-colonial protests within the city in the early 1900s (Boral, 2012). With the arrival of the automobile boom in the mid-20th century, all other cities in India and in fact many places across the world shut down their tram services completely. Yet Kolkata persisted with retaining its service despite government clashes with tram workers unions and rival political parties (Weiner, 1961; Ray, 1986).

As the Kolkata tram system struggles for survival while operating on annual losses, tram systems in North America and Europe have experienced a revival as less polluting, more convenient modes of transport (Condon, 2008); with new systems being planned and existing systems well maintained. The aim of this project is to visually capture the experience of a journey aboard the tram service and present information regarding its history and challenges over the last hundred years. It is up to the viewer and reader to reflect on their experience of the tram system through the film and via this paper to get an idea of why it has survived so long and what value it holds for the people of Kolkata.

INSPIRATION

At the age of six, I had the unique opportunity of experiencing what a ride on a tram felt like when my father, on a subdued Sunday evening in Kolkata (Calcutta), decided to hop aboard one, abandoning his hunt for a taxi. We rode from one end of the city in the North to the depot on other side in the South near where our house was located. Little did I know then that I was a very fortunate kid to be riding a tram because this was one of the last functioning tram services in all of Asia, and still is today. We passed through the interiors of many colourful parts of the city from the densest localities with historical monuments rising above, to smoggy industrial districts, and onto open fields resembling the Bengal countryside. Finally as night fell and the city quieted down, we reached the end of the line, and home. At the time it was simply a dreamy ride for a young boy. The air, the smells coming in through the window, the places, the people, those feelings, now they have a real context.

The tram was originally a legacy of the colonial era but has since been completely adopted by the natives of Kolkata. It is one of those rare instances where the merit of a way of living, or in this case journeying, is more important than who thought of it or the circumstances of its introduction. It is the unique observatory experience of a journey aboard a tram that goes beyond a particular people or culture and appeals to a common human trait - to reflect and to dream.

This affinity for the tram was not shared by all. With the arrival of the automobile boom in the mid-20th century, all other cities in India and in fact many places across the world shut down their tram services completely. Yet trams still remain in Kolkata. This is due in part to the determination of some members of the local community who contend that trams are a more environmentally friendly mode of transport and in part to the nostalgia and attachment that they evoke for the history of Bengal.

BACKGROUND

I wanted to make a film based on my memory of the tram system. But my goal was for this creative work to have strong factual backup, more to convince myself that I was simply not going on a whimsical trip home but that I was working on a project that might prove meaningful. This led me towards heavily researching the merits of the tram system and the reasons it has been retained so long in this particular city in India. I decided to analyze some studies that have been done on the system. The key themes included the history and fiscal performance of the tram system in Calcutta, the political history of Calcutta Tramways, and the feasibility of retaining or creating new tram systems in general, based on the transportation needs in cities across the world.

The studies that have been done on the Kolkata tram service have mostly been about worker conflicts in the pre independence era of the Calcutta Tramways Company, and about the current infrastructure of the service. The study done by Eshita Boral (2012), *Tramways – An Eco-friendly Mode of Mass Transportation: A Case of Kolkata* provides insightful statistics that tell the story of the decline of the Kolkata tram service from the 1970s to present day. In addition there is an establishment of the historical origins of the service.

Boral's research was based on secondary data collected from the Calcutta Tramways Company (CTC), Calcutta Metropolitan Development Authority (CMDA) and primary data collected from questionnaires with CTC employees and commuters.

The study first places the historical context of the tram service in Kolkata: originally introduced as horse-drawn coaches in 1880 as a more efficient way to carry goods to and from railway stations that serviced British India. At this time it was run as a joint stock company by the British and was headquartered in London. Later, once electric trams were introduced in 1902, the service transitioned into a full-fledged mode of public transportation. In 1967 the Government of West Bengal took over management of the CTC and by 1983 it became a part of the Transport Department of the Government

of West Bengal.¹

Boral presented the various statistics of the CTC in terms of infrastructure and earnings over the last 40 years. The fleet of tramcars has decreased from 485 in 1976 to 319 in 2008. The late 1980s was the only time when new tramcars were purchased, in part due to financial assistance from the World Bank who had created the Calcutta Urban Transport Project to help improve efficiency of public transport in Kolkata.² In 1976 there used to be 284 cars on the road per day, and as late as 2008 there were only 99 on the road.

In terms of financial performance the CTC has been incurring increasing losses since 1966. In 1976 there were losses of -38.9 million rupees, and in 1985: -132.3million rupees. Total earnings in the present day are approximately 110.6 million rupees, but the total expenditure is 1.3 billion rupees, funded by the Government of West Bengal. Despite incurring losses the tramways have continued to operate and the infrastructure has largely remained the same since its inception, with 7 depots and 11 termini spread through North, South, and Central Kolkata where the population density and passenger load is the highest.

Over the years some of the termini and depots have been closed, either permanently or due to construction of other civic infrastructure resulting in service no longer going through these depots and termini. The Howrah station terminus was closed and the tram tracks on the famous cantilever Howrah Bridge were permanently removed in 1993. Following that, in 1994 the High Court terminus was closed for reconstruction of Strand Road, but rails and wires were removed permanently from there and other nearby locations. As recently as 2004 the Gariahat depot was closed for building of an overpass

¹ Eshita Boral. "Tramways – An Eco-Friendly Mode of Mass Transportation: A Case of Kolkata", *Researchers World* 3, No. 2 (2) (2012): 66.

² Projects : Urban Transport Project. "Projects & Operations." Accessed April 20, 2016. <http://www.worldbank.org/projects/P009769/urban-transport-project-calcutta?lang=en>.

on Gariahat Road.³ There were again major closures in 2011 when the Joka-Behala stretch was closed along with the Behala terminal. The decision was made due to the construction of a Metro extension that would run through the same region. The southbound line of the Lalbazar – Mirjapur route was closed but the up-line remained. Also during this time the Ballygunj depot to Kalighat depot stretch was closed for reconstruction⁴ but trams have been running on and off from those depots since 2013.⁵ Areas such as Ballygunj and Kalighat are in the heart of the city and are some of the places that can be considered areas that the CTC would be expected to make a bulk of its revenue, so the closure of or access to intermittent service at these crucial routes have not helped the cause of the tram at all.



Fig. 1. Recent map of Tram system. Reproduced from *Calcutta Tramways Company*, <http://calcuttatrampways.com> (Accessed March 15th, 2016).

³ Boral. "Tramways – An Eco-Friendly Mode of Mass Transportation: A Case of Kolkata", 67-68.

⁴ Ibid, 68.

⁵ Bibhas Lodh. "Tram Route Back on Track after 7 Years." *The Telegraph*. October 18, 2013. Accessed April 25, 2016. http://www.telegraphindia.com/1131018/jsp/calcutta/story_17445841.jsp#.V00MTvkrLIW.

The number of daily passengers has also been decreasing over the years according to Boral (2012). The trams used to serve almost 280.3 million passengers per year to now carrying 27.2 million passengers, which as Boral points out is still actually a significant number compared to other modes of transport in the city.

Using these statistics Boral (2012) discusses if the tram system should remain in Kolkata or be totally replaced by the other competing modes of transport which already function there such as the bus and subway systems. Some of the key advantages identified by Boral include the smooth, comfortable, and sturdy journey the tram provides on the otherwise busy streets of Kolkata.⁶ A tram follows a track, avoiding the chaotic traffic for a safer journey. A questionnaire conducted by Boral on local passengers actually showed that eco-friendliness was not as high a priority as the negligible accident rate, low fare structure, and less crowded tramcars.

Boral explains that near the end of the 20th century the West Bengal state government tried to follow the model of other cities and countries in doing away with the tram system. Those same countries, especially in Europe, are reviving their systems now and the state government has the opportunity to learn from the mistakes of others. Boral states that according to the results of the questionnaire conducted in the study, it's not only the government but a cross-section of individual citizens as well who wanted the tramcars withdrawn, though the overwhelming majority are in favour of retaining it.⁷

The major disadvantages of the tram service in Kolkata include the effect of trams on disrupting and increasing other vehicular traffic and the condition of the poorly maintained tramcars and tracks in Kolkata that sometimes force them to derail or for the pantographs to stop functioning. Also as mentioned before, maintaining the service with a reduced number of passengers while operating with

⁶ Boral, "Tramways – An Eco-Friendly Mode of Mass Transportation: A Case of Kolkata", 71.

⁷ Ibid, 70.

heavy losses is a tremendous burden for the Calcutta Tramways Company.⁸

Advantages of the tramcar outlined by Boral (2012) are that they are eco-friendly; running entirely on electricity, creating very little pollution and emissions on the road, also reducing the demand for fuel. As mentioned before, despite poor maintenance the trams follow tracks and are generally much more reliable than other modes of transport in reaching destinations and being accessible to board easily for senior citizens and children. Also due to the low fares it is a vital mode of transport for those in lower economic classes and if the service is allowed to run on dedicated tracks without other vehicles intruding then the speed of service can also be improved.

Boral (2012) also decided to directly compare the tram service with the other popular option for public transport, the various Bus services provided by private operators and the state government. Trams have much higher capacity for carrying passengers – they can carry up to 200, where as a city bus can only carry 78. She also mentions that speed is actually not a factor and that recent studies have shown that buses run at 9.8km/h and trams at 8 km/h. If trams were given protected right-of-way and dedicated routes then they would be able to make up even that small speed gap. Boral also compared the lower cost of maintaining tramcars and tracks as opposed to roads and buses. She also argues that replacing the tram system would mean increasing the amount of buses on the road but that the city of Kolkata already has a shortage of buses therefore removing the tram system would be dangerous.

In terms of the infrastructure available to actually resuscitate and modernize the tram system, Boral (2012) looks favourably on the Calcutta Tramways Company. She points out that the main Nonapukur workshop already has enough personnel with experience and sufficient equipment to revamp the ageing tramcars, and in fact in September 2008 a handful of new air-conditioned modern cars were rolled out with plans to introduce more in the future. Boral (2012) recommends further studies in perhaps introducing a Light Rail Transit system at certain corridors of the city as part of the

⁸ Boral. “Tramways – An Eco-Friendly Mode of Mass Transportation: A Case of Kolkata”, 70.

tram network, especially near expressways and bridges. The most important point to note is an observation by Boral that there have been signs of increase in passenger numbers in recent years but a tremendous amount of work would need to be done to regain the amount of daily passengers that the network serviced in the late 1970s.⁹ Even then it is not fully possible to regain the ridership that the tram previously carried due to the introduction of the Kolkata Metro subway service from 1984 onwards which is now the primary mode of public transport within the city. As of 2016, construction is underway to connect the outlying suburbs of Kolkata to the already established metro system within the city with five new lines, one of them being the one that runs through Behala and which led to the closure of the Behala and Joka tram terminals as mentioned previously.¹⁰

Condon, Gruenberger, and Klaptocz's (2008) study, *The Case for the Tram: Learning from Portland*, adds to Boral's observation of tram systems being cheaper and more eco-friendly alternatives to subway and bus systems. Their study is based on the decision by the Province of British Columbia to announce a Provincial Transit Plan for the Greater Vancouver region worth \$2.8 billion in constructing an underground extension for the city's Sky Train system. This study is particularly relevant to what is happening in Kolkata, where just as Vancouver there is a bias towards expanding subway operations as a solution to improving public transportation.

Condon, Gruenberger, and Klaptocz (2008) question whether there were more affordable alternatives and studied the recent development of the Portland tram system as a possible model to provide the best possible transit system while being fiscally responsible in the Greater Vancouver region, which previously had a streetcar system until 1955. In Vancouver just like in Kolkata, with the automobile boom the tram/streetcar ridership began to see a decrease; streetcars were replaced by buses and trolley buses, with the tram tracks being ripped out completely.

⁹ Boral. "Tramways – An Eco-Friendly Mode of Mass Transportation: A Case of Kolkata", 72.

¹⁰ Metro Railway Kolkata / Indian Railways Portal. "Metro Railway Kolkata / Indian Railways Portal." Accessed March 27, 2016. http://www.mtp.indianrailways.gov.in/view_section.jsp?lang=0&id=0,1,397.

The city of Portland, Oregon, on the other hand, had to build the Portland tram system with a focus on cost efficiency due to the defeat of an initiative to expand the light rail system (MAX), which would actually have cost more money. The eventual cost of the tram system ended up being one third of the cost of installing a Light Rail Transit system and one tenth of many modern subway systems: approximately \$25.8 million per two way mile.¹¹ In Portland, this was despite the fact that they had previously torn out the tram tracks and the city had to rebuild the entire line. Furthermore the effect of trams on real estate was favourable. Property development in high density areas adjacent to the streetcar line increased exponentially and in turn the city was able to make back some of the money through increased tax revenues.¹²

The study also revealed that cost and speed are not related and higher costs don't necessarily translate into a faster transit system. Cost and speed figures of 13 North American, 4 European, and 1 Australian city were used as data. If low-cost systems such as trams have dedicated routes and protected right of way then they can match the commute time of light rail or subway systems. Once again this coincides with what Boral (2012) wrote about improving the Kolkata's tram service's speed by introducing dedicated routes and protective road rules.

Condon, Gruenberger, and Klaptocz (2008) also noted that in developed cities in Europe such as Berlin, Vienna, Paris, and Dublin there is a balance in expanding or funding modes of transport and that the tram systems actually serve more complete urban districts with the other modes spreading outwards in harmony. There does not have to be a choice of one or the other.

Concluding their study on the Portland tram system they note that if the same model were applied to Vancouver then the \$2.8 billion which is planned to be used to only extend the Sky Train by 12km towards UBC would result in 175km worth of area linking the entire city being covered if a

11Patrick M. Condon, Sigrid Gruenberger, and Marta Klaptocz. "The Case for the Tram: Learning From Portland." Sustainability by Design: A Design Vision for a Sustainable Region of 4 Million. May 2008, 3.

12 Condon, Gruenberger, and Klaptocz. "The Case for the Tram: Learning From Portland", 3.

modern tram system were built instead. It may not be as fast as a subway or Sky Train but would increase quality of life in many neighbourhoods with enhanced access and an increased investment climate in high-density areas. They hammer home the point by mentioning that the region's goal to reduce greenhouse gas production by 80 percent and spend taxpayer dollars sensibly are even more an incentive to go for a tram/streetcar system rather than a subway or a Sky Train expansion.¹³

Siddhartha Guha Ray's study *Tramworkers of Calcutta: Some Reflections on Their Unionisation and Political Experience 1920 to 1930* recounts the oppressive conditions that early staff of the tram service in Kolkata had to go through working for the then British owned Calcutta Tramways Company: leading to their own non-cooperation movements, some successful, and some failures and the resulting formation of the worker's union.

The key takeaway from this study is when Ray (1986) points out that the importance of these strikes was the foreshadowing they gave towards Indians striking against the British owned companies they worked in and that since the tram service was a public utility it was an even bigger focus and concern for the public.¹⁴ This made the people of Kolkata fond of the tram workers and quite supportive of them as well. This historical angle gives a real example of the citizens of Kolkata adopting the tram, though a colonial invention at first, as its own due to the stands taken by the tram workers. These historic socio-political events add to the story of the tram as a symbol of the city of Kolkata.

Myron Weiner (1961) in his study *Violence and Politics in Calcutta* describes the events surrounding a strike organized by various left leaning Communist and Socialist parties in the 1950s. The strike against a hike in Tram ticket fares spiralled totally out of control, leading to the arrest of more than 500 people and mobs taking control of the southern part of the city, all in the name of

13 Condon, Gruenberger, and Klaptocz. "The Case for the Tram: Learning From Portland", 8.

14 Siddhartha Guha Ray. "Tramworkers of Calcutta: Some Reflections on Their Unionisation and Political Experience 1920 to 1930." *Social Scientist* 14, no. 5. (1986): 28.

resisting an increase in price of one fourth of a cent. It was clearly a chance for political parties to use the trams to spread their own agenda and to strong-arm the government, which conceded and rescinded the price increase, in turn leading these parties to claim this as a victory of the people and allowing tram service to resume back to normal.¹⁵

The studies by Weiner (1961) and Ray (1986) seem to give a clue to the importance the tram service plays in the society and culture of the people of Kolkata. These studies are crucial in providing the context for the cultural aspect of retaining the tram service in Kolkata: its embodiment of the city's socio-political and cultural heritage and its historical role as part of the struggles of the community.

Two clear strands of research emerge from these varied texts in answering the question of why the tram service has been retained in this city for over a hundred years. The well-formed strand is that of the tram service being the best possible option as a cost efficient, environmentally friendly, and ideal mode of transport for a city like Kolkata (Condon, Gruenberger, and Klaptocz, 2008; Boral, 2012). The second strand is that of the tram system's importance as a historical and local cultural entity despite the financial strains of maintaining it.

On 17th August 2015 at the Indian Institute of Chemical Research, I was pleased to meet with the major authority and foremost tram activist in Kolkata, Dr. Debasish Bhattacharya. The interview that I did with him not only confirmed the research I had done prior to shooting the project but Mr. Bhattacharya also spoke to me candidly about some of the vested interests and their activities in hampering the survival of the tram system within the city.

He pointed out that the three crucial departments within the government that are actually hampering the operation of the system are the Transportation Department, Traffic police, and the Municipality Corporation. In concert these three departments have been steadily chipping away at the foundations of the century-old tram system by giving priority to private entities that operate private bus

15 Myron Weiner. "Violence and Politics in Calcutta." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 20, no. 3 (1961): 276.

services and deciding the policies of road right-of-ways and street construction, which have hampered the service quality of the tram.

Some of the examples are how entire routes are shut down due to construction of a flyover highway but when time comes to re-open the route the authorities drag their feet and a route dies a slow and silent death. Trams are also denied access to the major transport hubs of Kolkata such as the railways and the Ferry Ghats where passengers from neighbouring areas arrive and have no option for a tram and are forced to take the bus. Most of the tram routes do not have any protected right of way so it is literally a life and death situation for certain passengers to even board the trams as cars and buses ply all around and the tram tracks are placed on the middle of the road without any reservation. I myself had to go through this situation to access a tram stop near Sealdah station.

Debasish Bhattacharya felt that those in the corridors of power within the West Bengal government are people who never use public transport and so they don't have the sensitivity to care about the plight of the tram system.¹⁶

Mr. Bhattacharya has been fighting for the Kolkata tram system now for nearly two decades and expressed to me that the future of the tram really depends on the mood of the public. He said that attempts have been continuously made to get rid of the tram service but it's a testament to the will of the people that the system is still operational. His hope is that the people of Kolkata will be more vocal and leverage their voting power to force the politicians to act on retaining and improving the tram system.

Over the course of my research and through speaking with Mr. Bhattacharya and others I think there is a mindset that Kolkata would not remain Kolkata without the tram. The tram is part of the city's DNA. The frustration is that it is being treated as a token when there is so much factual evidence that it can be more than just a heritage for old memories. It can be a truly effective mode of transport

¹⁶ Debasish Bhattacharya. Interview by Shounak Ganguly. Personal Interview. Indian Institute of Chemical Technology, August 17th 2015.

for the conditions of the city and it can definitely be modernized to adapt with the times. That would be the best way to preserve its legacy.

METHODOLOGY

Throughout the process of creating this film, I have constantly referred back to my early memory of the journey on the tram. This memory has been the center point for all visual decisions regarding the project.

Reading back what I wrote in the inspiration chapter, there is a theme that arises from the memory. That the tram is the most permanent piece of it – the city and all the activity is passing by it. Finding out about the financial plight of the Calcutta Tramways Company added to the nostalgia of my memory and I began to look for as many pictures, either archival or present day that people had taken in relation to tram travel in Kolkata.

On the internet, I was able to gather a sizable archive of photographs that allowed me to storyboard my film mentally, which contributed to a sketch video that I put together with archival footage and photographs to give a sense of the structure that I wanted for my project. For the sketch, I did not include a soundtrack but rather the sounds of tramcars plying and the crowds of Kolkata, which is an idea I would continue with for the final sound design as well.

The sketch I had made eluded my goal of a film which was to be a mixture of the city symphony, sensory ethnography and informational styles of documentary, but less of the latter. Since the inception of the project, I had been worried about providing just enough information so that there is some sort of back story that allows the viewer to be fully immersed during the lengthy periods of only visuals and sound. As I would realize later during the editing process, this was not as straightforward as I had envisioned it to be. Nevertheless, this entire process was immensely helpful because now I had a very clear idea of exactly the types of footage that I needed.

The production schedule I drew up in July 2015 consisted of a four-week period during the entire month of August. The original plan was to do four interviews. The originally intended subjects were Dr. Debasish Bhattacharya who is the Chief Scientist at the Indian Institute of Chemical Biology

and also one of the few consistent tram activists in the city. Second was to be Ms. Nabaneeta Dev Sen who is a celebrated author of Bengali literature and a very important part of the culture of West Bengal and Kolkata. She had written a short article on her childhood memories about the tram system which inspired me to interview her. Third was Mr. Nilanjan Sandilya who is the Managing Director of Calcutta Tramways Company (CTC) and the person that I also had to attain permission from to be able to shoot this project. Lastly, I left a spot open to be able to interview someone at the Nonapukur Workshop where tramcars are renovated, which ended up being Mr. SS Ghosh, the Works Manager who had been with the company for twenty years.

Since I was going to be shooting aboard trams on the weekends, I had drawn up a general plan of which routes to take in consultation with some of my family members who knew Kolkata well, particularly my father who was a constant presence during my shooting in the city to help me with logistics and breaking the ice with some of the officials at the Calcutta Tramways Company.

I left Toronto hopeful that I would be able to manage all this within the four week period and in the back of my mind there was always December 2015 as an absolute last resort when the weather would be much more favorable as would people's tempers in the city.

This is where the real adventure began because, as I had been warned before going and as I saw all too clearly when I arrived, the monsoon in Kolkata was absolutely unforgiving. Some of the news channels were reporting that the rain was five times the usual average in the city and transportation was a major issue (on the worst days even trams did not ply). In terms of my production schedule, it was nearly cut in half because the first week and a half I was relegated to staying in my locality. Once the weather was slightly better I was able to go out and connect with the Calcutta Tramways Company and show them a reel of my previous work which convinced them to give me permission to shoot the project. In return, we made a deal that they would be able to use my footage for this project later for their own purposes.

Once I had the permission my first stop was the Nonapukur Workshop where I gathered footage of the entire operation except for wheel placement and foundry work. During this time I was also able to interview the Works Manager, Mr. Sitansu Sekhar Ghosh. Initially, the interview was going in a very formal fashion as Mr. Ghosh covered the history and the present state of the system but I was able to gain some anecdotes about his childhood riding trams and not being able to imagine that he would be the one in charge of maintaining the tramcars.

I had devised a set of interview questions that would be standard amongst all the interviews with the themes of asking the guests about memories of their own tram rides and what they felt was the reason for the decline of the tram system. The questions were then improvised depending on the particular guest.

At this point, there were some days where the weather would clear and I was able to start gathering footage aboard a couple of the main routes that ran through the Esplanade and Maidan areas of Kolkata which were some of the oldest and most iconic routes in the city. During these first few trips, I was shooting from morning to afternoon. Subsequently, I was able to contact Dr. Debasish Bhattacharya and conduct a very informative interview with him about the politics behind the decline of the tram system and his own efforts over the past fifteen years to help revive the tram system in Kolkata.

I had planned to interview Ms. Nabaneeta Dev Sen next but was unable to get access to her at the time so I moved on to complete getting footage aboard the trams during evening and night times to get some sort of progression in the shots which would help during editing. Being in Kolkata during the monsoon season actually had one advantage as I was able to capture different weather conditions with overcast, sunny, and rainy conditions that are representative of the weather in the city year round and would add to the visual story of my film.

Nearing the end of my stay in Kolkata I was thinking to myself that at least I have something to

work with when I get back to Toronto and I made sure that I rounded off my shooting schedule by interviewing the Managing Director of Calcutta Tramways, Mr. Nilanjan Sandilya. It was a short interview but he gave soundbites that were very eloquent.

During the process of shooting, I believe my first most conscious decision was to make sure that the shots looked "stable" or that if there had to be any movement it would be within the frame and not an actual movement of the camera. The scenes in the Nonapukur workshop are mostly all shot on a tripod and there is only one shot that utilizes a tilt motion. I feel that keeping the frame still gives a sense of organization and balance, something permanent that has been there for a long time. It also helps in seeing the beauty of the actual work being done by the workers.

When I was aboard the trams I had to sacrifice the tripod to be able to easily move around the tramcars capturing different shots. Most of those shots were hand-held but once again I tried to hold the framing as long as possible on things of interest to continue that theme of permanence – that the tram is constant while everything else is moving and passing; while all the activity is happening around and inside its frames. There are also literally window frames outlining many of the shots inside the tram. Lastly, I also made sure I did not film too many shots where the focus is shifting because once again it was paramount that there should be a theme of permanence and ease with how the film is viewed.

I think my biggest regret during shooting was that I ran out of time to gather more footage. The weather cut short my shooting time and I was only able to cover three of the major routes that run through the city. If I had more time my wish would have been to travel through and stay in certain locations for a lengthier period of time – maybe visit different depots and termini than the ones I had already covered and shown more of the city – but again, how would that have impacted the way the film moves on its journey? I am not sure; perhaps it would have given me more of a headache in the editing phase to create continuity and a tight story.

The editing phase itself has been the most challenging and difficult aspect of putting this thesis

project together and there was a large amount of time where I felt like I had lost my way a little bit in trying to achieve the balance between information and visual storytelling. In the beginning, I was putting together short sequences edited mostly based on the content of the interviews. This was partially because I had to present some of my work early on to my peers and I also believe I was not detached enough from the footage just yet. The content from the interviews was still fresh in my head and this led to a reliance on a lot of talking head footage in search of creating some sort of narrative.

This process would continue through the fall of 2015, until I began to feel as if I had lost the essence of what was earlier done in the sketch to capture the feelings of memory through a journey: the visual and sensory type of storytelling. The documentary was veering towards a more informational piece at this time and I began to feel very unhappy and decided to restart editing from scratch.

This is when I tried to forego all the supposed requirements for the film and cleared my head by solely focusing on the footage of the Nonapukur tram workshop which I knew had to be its own sequence wherever it ended up in the timeline of the film later on. I therefore spent the early weeks of November on editing a fresh sequence that featured none of the interview footage but just a visual exposition of the workshop; my main goal was to create the atmosphere and tone that the tramcars had been here for a very long time and were somehow like these ancient creatures that held history in every piece of them.

That is how I came up with the first five minutes of the film, which is a sequence of scenes that even at this point has remained relatively unchanged and is the foundational edit that the rest of the film builds upon. Once I was able to put this initial sequence together it was the single biggest breakthrough during the editing process because it brought a sense of logic to my edit that I could pick up on for the rest of the film and it helped establish the entire vibe of the project. Even more importantly than that, this sequence reminded me exactly what the idea had been at the very beginning – that this was supposed to be a visual, sensory piece – that information was secondary. I would go through a few

more hiccups in the process before completely realizing this.

You would think that it would be smooth sailing from that point onwards but the fact that I had to establish the basics of Who, What, When, Where, Why loomed over me and I still did not have a grasp of exactly how much and which specific pieces of information I would add to the film. This added confusion to what would have been an otherwise stable editing timeline. Over December and well into February 2016 I would always have difficulty getting past the first eight or nine minutes of the film. I was able to put the Nonapukur workshop sequence together and then show the visual progression of the story from dawn to afternoon – with some minimal voice-overs from the interviews. I had big problems right after this because for a long time I was trying to add the bulk of information in the afternoon scenes when we see more renovation work at the workshop and the depots. At one point I even began using archival footage but that was met with fierce resistance from my peers and advisors because it was killing the whole sense of journey. This jolted me into trying to find a much more efficient solution. This was by far the single toughest part of completing the edit: how to retain a sense of the journey as the clips progress, but also add just enough information and voiceovers as exposition without feeling like one is being force fed.

At the end, I knew I had to once again start clean and dump the sequence I had previously visualized as the proverbial "second act" of the film, and reduce the interview voiceovers substantially and go back to just letting the visuals and the sound talk for me. I edited the afternoon sequence without any voiceovers until I added only the bare minimum, which was a dialogue of Mr. SS Ghosh talking about how the Calcutta Tramways Company is self-sufficient and maintains the system without any outside help. This was the bare-bones approach that I continued to follow. As I went into the final phase of the film I cut out a lot of informational dialogue which is important but which I feel is too detailed about a specific issue and would only slow down the pacing of the film.

This approach led me to go through the transcripts of the three interviews I did many more

times to find just the right lines of dialogue to somehow allude to the bigger picture regarding the state of tram service in Kolkata, and I picked out pieces from Mr. Debasish Bhattacharya and Mr. Nilanjan Sandilya's interviews. One touched a little on the vested interests and corruption in Kolkata, while the other was a reflection on the loyalty of the tram workers and their hopes for a better future. These smaller pieces of dialogue would be edited into the late afternoon and evening portions of the film to setup the final act. I felt that when I introduced the last act of the film with the rain sequence it would be absolutely vital to not have any dialogue at all until a small line at the very end because of the natural element that is so evident in the scenes with the sound of the rain and the hazy visuals. So my goal was to push that as much as I could through the edit and to make sure that once the audience leaves the film it's not necessarily the words or the issues that they remember, but rather the experience they had aboard the tram. If the viewer goes out with an experience and a curiosity rather than just new information then I think I would have accomplished what I set out to do.

For a very long time I had been debating adding music or some type of background score but every time I added a piece of music or some kind of sound to my timeline it just seemed very out of place and changed the atmosphere too drastically. For now, I have avoided adding a score but in case I ever come back to re-editing this project or using the footage for a more expanded piece then maybe there might be an appropriate setting for music.

DOCUMENTARY RELEVANCE

For a long time I had not thought critically about where my project would be placed in terms of a particular style or form of documentary. Another conflict that I dealt with was how to balance my desire to make a visual film that communicates all the information that is available without sticking to the usual trial and deposition documentary format. While I was often conflicted on how to embed information and dialogue into the film, I think the final cut has just enough of it while also remaining true to my inspiration of the visual memory of riding on the tram system.

In terms of the visual and aural tone of the film the key influences and closest references are the entire genre of 'City Symphony' documentaries, ranging from Joris Ivens' *Rain* to a more recent discovery and a film that I find is probably the most similar to my project visually: Stan Brakhage's *The Wonder Ring*. What does 'City Symphony' mean? In his article *NY, NY: A Century of City Symphony Films*, Jon Gartenberg described some of the attributes of the films that he had seen: "In cinematic terms, such works represent the articulation of both a defined time frame (most often from morning until evening) as well as a carefully articulated geographic space (e.g., a loft apartment, a city block, the length of the island of Manhattan)."¹⁷ In my case, the film begins its journey from early morning and transitions into the night – with the defined space being the Nonapukur workshop that repairs trams and the space within the trams themselves.

Gartenberg also speaks about the evolution of city-symphony films after World War II and uses Stan Brakhage's *The Wonder Ring* as a prime example where filmmakers, "used cinema as a means of expressing their inner states of consciousness. A vast repertoire of techniques was employed to represent subjective awareness, including the use of distorting lenses, multiple exposures, and a movement from representational images toward abstraction."¹⁸ I believe the final cut of my film crosses in and out of the borders of abstraction and "reality", which actually serves to function as my

17 Jon Gartenberg. "NY, NY: A Century of City Symphony Films." *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 55, no. 2 (2014): 248.

18 Ibid, 258.

main narrative device: obviously no one person sits on a tram for the entire day, nor does one tram run for the whole day. The style of my editing is deliberately playing with the footage to attempt to bring some sort of movement in the viewer's consciousness within a feeling of reality: the goal being to create the sense of journey.

Another form I believe my film falls into is that of “sensory ethnography”. I think that City Symphony films of the early 20th century were actually the first real sensory ethnographic films before this became a style or a genre. “Sensory Ethnography” is the term given to films that have descended from the line of Robert Gardner's *Forest of Bliss* to a more recent catalogue of content being produced by the Sensory Ethnography Lab (SEL) at Harvard University with films such as *Manakamana* and *Leviathan*. Karen Nakamura describes sensory ethnographic films as a form of visual anthropology that serves to depict the field experience:

the heat, the smell, the press of people, the subtlety of a gesture, the bleakness of the landscape, the quiet in the garden, or the hallucinatory overload of a festival? Even clumsy films impart a sense of being there, and a person skilled in both film making and ethnography can completely immerse the viewer in another cultural space.¹⁹

Nakamura goes on to describe the effects on the viewer, “Our brain’s natural synesthesia will do it automatically when we are totally immersed in the filmic world, our mirror neurons firing in sympathy with what we see and hear.”²⁰ In these kinds of films, and going by my instincts, it is not about presenting an issue in an academic format, but instead placing the viewer into the situation itself and attempting to re-create that experience. That way, perhaps if they are truly moved then they can take action and discover further information that they feel is crucial on their own.

Having completed the film and reflecting on my initial desires I want to mention that in terms of visual composition and the overall look that I wanted to achieve with this film, a very key influence was the work of photographer, Roy DeCarava. I was and still am drawn to his impeccable composition

19 Karen Nakamura. “Making Sense of Sensory Ethnography: The Sensual and the Multisensory.” *American Anthropologist* 115 (1) (2013): 132.

20 Ibid, 135.

and the gritty, yet very intricate look that his photographs have, especially his work depicting the African-American experience in Harlem. His reflections on his work and thought process also connected with me due to his desire to photograph his own people with dignity, and not in an exotic or cartoonish manner. Some of his reflections on the thought process behind his work spoke deeply to my own ideas and intentions:

I want to photograph Harlem through the Negro people. Morning, noon, night, at work, going to work, coming home from work, at play, in the streets, talking, kidding, laughing, in the home, in the playgrounds, in the schools, bars, stores, libraries, beauty parlours, churches, etc.

I want to show the strength, the wisdom, the dignity of the Negro people. Not the famous and the well-known, but the unknown and the unnamed, thus revealing the roots from which spring the greatness of all human beings...I do not want a documentary or sociological statement, I want a creative expression, the kind of penetrating insight and understanding of the Negroes which I believe only a negro photographer can interpret. I want to heighten the awareness of my people and bring to our consciousness a greater knowledge of our heritage.²¹

Even though I did not spend an extended amount of time in Kolkata I feel that I have grown up with the cultural background of the people of that city and even being able to recall the memory of the tram journey stems from my own desire to communicate in a way that identifies and displays that culture. Another quote that I feel communicates my wishes and my philosophy is once again by Roy DeCarava: “My photographs are subjective and personal - they’re intended to be accessible, to relate to people’s lives...People - their wellbeing and survival - are the crux of what’s important to me.”²²

21 Peter Galassi. “Introduction”, *Roy DeCarava: A Retrospective*, directed by Peter Galassi, chief curator, Department of Photography, MOMA: 20.

22 Ibid, 36.

REFLECTION

What started from a childhood memory and curiosity has translated into this documentary film that is now complete. While no idea is absolutely and completely replicated into the finished product, I do believe that in this case a majority of my initial ideas for this project have come to fruition. I began with a memory of a tram ride and a curiosity to learn about the situation of the Kolkata tram system. Now through the influences from learning about City Symphony and Sensory Ethnographical filmmaking styles along with the photography of Roy DeCarava I have been able to shoot and edit this piece called Chalamaan.

It has been a pleasure to also gain crucial information during the filming process from Dr. Debasish Bhattacharya, Mr. Sitansu Sekhar Ghosh, and Nilanjan Sandilya. Some of the content of their interviews, especially the aspects of encroachment by private bus owners and the status of the Nonapukur workshop is information that was not widely covered in the discourse over the Kolkata tram system and that is something that is truly valuable for me as a takeaway from this project. I also believe (though I may be wrong) that this is the first documentary on the Kolkata tram system that shows the tram/streetcar journey in detail. I do know for sure that this is the first documentary which shows the Nonapukur tram workshop in action.

It is my sincere hope that this thesis film and the accompanying paper add to the discussion around retaining the Kolkata tram system and hopefully improving it towards its full potential. Streetcar systems generate economic growth around their network area while also being cheaper than subway systems and more convenient than bus systems as well as being one of the most environmentally friendly modes of public transport.

In the case of Kolkata, the tram system has been around for more than a hundred years and every piece of metal, every scratch, every part of the trams have traveled through the changing history of the city. They are part of the soul of the city, and part of the memories of anyone who has travelled

on them. I hope I have been able to communicate a fraction of that sentiment through this project.

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