Comment

Pairon Talle

I had been living and struggling in Mumbai for over nine years as an independent filmmaker. My feature film *Amavas* starring Konkona Sensharma, Victor Bannerjee, Mahesh Manjrekar and others – despite completion – was languishing in a can somewhere and the producers were refusing to release it. I was depressed. And I was stone broke. A chance documentary project for UNESCO, on the endangered world heritage site of Hampi, enabled me to return to Delhi, my hometown.

The landscape of the city in the interim, had transformed beyond my wildest imagination. Gone was the city of the fat Punjabi wedding, of loud, but innocent, Santa and Banta, of India Gate and Dilli 6. This was an altogether new Dilli.

I was witness to the murkier side of this radical transformation courtesy my involvement on a documentation project for Greha, an NGO specializing in urban planning and sustainable development, that was doing grassroots work in an urbanizing village by the name of Aya Nagar, the last stop on the Mehrauli-Gurgaon Road before entry into the state of Haryana.

Aya Nagar is a Gujjar village which today serves as home to a population of over one lakh people from across the length and breadth of India, Nepal, and Bangladesh. The Gujjars were nomadic herdsmen, who were deemed a criminal tribe by the British, a tag which still sticks to them. Not unlike the Jats, they too are wedded to their livestock, to community, and to their ancestral land. In fact, much of plush South Delhi originally belonged to these very communities.

But Aya Nagar epitomizes how these ‘owners’ of the city have changed – becoming mercenary by turning their backs on generations of history, ancestry and selling their ancestral lands, and, in the process, also indelibly transformed the capital.

Aya Nagar is also an unauthorized colony in the eyes of the state – the denizens of the colony ‘forced’ to live in contempt of the law with no access to sanitation and other basic amenities. This is not an anomaly. This is a fixture of Delhi – spontaneous settlements like Aya Nagar mushrooming all over the capital and its surrounding environs – colonies that serve as mass vote banks for politicians who have no intention of ‘regularizing’ their constituencies.

It suits the authorities to turn a blind eye to the predicament of these people. As we speak, new settlements and illegal colonies are emerging, quite literally out of thin air, for as long as these colonies remain unauthorized the people in power keep making money, and getting votes. This is only possible in collusion with a vast army of foot soldiers, the bhoo mafia (land mafia), which illegally possesses/grabs land, sells and resells it to the poor and gives kickbacks to the politicians, who in turn give lip service to the teeming masses and win votes on the pipe dream of a better tomorrow.

As a storyteller, it was the brute realization that Delhi had been ‘reclaimed’ by the broker, the dealer, and the middleman – the bhadwa/dalaal – that was to become the seed for my next feature film, *Pairon Talle*. To my mind, the city had become a mall and multiplex infested medieval conflict zone where aggression and aspiration were at epic loggerheads with one another. And it all boiled down to land. Property. This landscape of Delhi – the bewitching beauty of the Aravallis in particular – unfolded before my very eyes in all their stark violence and poetry, scarred as they were by greed and patriarchy, and I felt an overwhelming urge to capture a moment in time. This was also the landscape where the Indian epic, the Mahabharata unfolded.

Something was rotten in the state of Delhi and I was but mad south-southwest.
Possessed by the conceit of making a radical film that would serve as an ode to the city of my birth, I took to travelling in and around the national capital region (NCR), primarily the neighbouring townships of Gurgaon and Faridabad, which were witnessing rampant, unchecked development and urbanization. The story of Pairon Talle organically developed from this protracted encounter with the NCR.

It was also around this moment in time – 2008 – that the NCR became infamous for a slew of sensational crimes: the Aarushi and Hemraj murder, the Nithari carnage, or illegal mining in the Aravalli’s became headline news courtesy the Supreme Court’s ban and countless honour killings fronted the headlines. In fact, the instances of runaway lovers seeking shelter from their own bloodthirsty fathers, brothers and uncles became so common that the Haryana police even considered setting up safe houses to provide hapless couples shelter. Of course, this never happened.

This violence and exploitation, on the basis of caste and gender, was inherently tied to the struggle over control of land – for women were an extension of property and necessary to maintain the status quo when it came to inheritance (therefore honour killing and runaway love). Similarly, it was essential to ensure the acquiescence of the lower castes to both retain control and exert dominance.

Pairon Talle was shot in the fall of 2008. It is the story of a lower caste watchman who stands solitary guard outside his feudal lord and master’s abandoned silica mine. One night a runaway couple comes to the mine desperately seeking shelter. Apparently, a contract killer is after them. Initially reluctant – he cannot grant entry without his master’s approval – the watchman finally relents and lets the boy and girl stay the night at the mine. What he does not know is that the girl is none other than his master’s daughter, and the boy is her lower-caste college lover. The watchman’s goodness sets into motion a brutal chain reaction, and by the time he realizes the ramifications of his actions it appears to have been too late.

**Sidharth Srinivasan**

**The selfie and the world**

THE Self became a public project around the mid-1990s when individuals captured and disseminated their personal lives and moments online. Webcams, moblogging, Vlogging and Flickr eventually arrived so that technology could finally catch up with the aspirations for self-representation that all of us carry within us. Ordinary everyday life became the subject of extensive visual documentaries in what has been termed the ‘museumization of the quotidian’. It is in this line of cultural practices of starring in one’s own biopic that we need to see the newest fad: the ‘selfie’.

The usual response to the selfie is to accuse the individual of being narcissistic, but this does not adequately acknowledge the cultural benefits accruing from the selfie-project. Barack Obama, Narendra Modi, Ellen DeGeneres, the Pope, and astronaut Rich Mastracchio are celebrities who have done their selfies, as have a million others, all of whom can be accused by the critics of Instagram and Snapchat of violating norms of cybercivility when they post their selfies. Indeed it must be said that selfies might be connected to the fascination with self-portraiture by artists and photographers through history.

The selfie, this essay argues, is a means of social interaction. It is a mediated presentation of the self that then interfaces, digitally but no less materially, with the world. The selfie is an act of agency that allows the individual to interrupt or punctuate the flow of information and conversation around and about her/himself even as s/he participates in this flow. I shall return to this interruption-participation role of the selfie toward the conclusion of this essay, leading up to which is a series of propositions.

First, the selfie is a practice that enables one to be the subject of a story or narrative and not just its object. The selfie enables us to script our own story, complete with facial expressions, exclamations and tags. Yet, and this is interesting, as we shoot the selfie (did we ever think we would use a selfie-phrase like ‘self-shooting’?), we see ourselves seeing ourselves. We are at once the subject and object of the selfie, unlike a photograph. The selfie reflects us back to us, even as it becomes the object for circulation and ‘forwarding’. Here the selfie participates actively in the series of narratives made possible by digital and personal communications technology: I insert my story alongside others’ on social media sites.

Second, in an age dominated by the online, electronic and text-based social interaction and fragmented identities, the selfie brings the body back into the picture.

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ture, literally. Embodiment, that foundation of subjectivity, is firmly reasserted with the selfie’s focus on bodily expressions and posturings (even erotic and sexualised ones). But the cultural shift we need to take cognizance of is this: embodiment is technologized and technology itself is materially embodied. It is not uncommon to see selfies with the face plastered to or lips smashed against the camera lens, thus bringing the corporeal self into immediate (and even violent) contact with the medium. Even the sick body is now the subject of a selfie and, as recently reported, one can post a ‘sick selfie’ to prove to your boss you cannot go to work, or continuously update the world on the progress of your cancer (as was done by Lisa Adams, tweeting updates about her Stage IV breast cancer).

Amelia Jones writing about the self-representations using contemporary technology says: ‘the screen is embodied and the flesh takes its texture and materiality from the monitor.’ 3 There is a haptic and tactile immediacy to the selfie as a result that tells us the body is never obsolete, even when it is mediated because the medium can only be accessed via a body. But what is crucial is, unlike text-based communication, the selfie reveals the singularity of the body: my face, my body.

Third, in the process of documenting one’s self and the body, we reassert that ‘I am worth it’, to borrow L’Oréal’s famous slogan. For cultural critics this has been a major development as a means of self-therapy because it offers a ‘body-positive’ image of one’s self. 4 By putting one’s ‘natural’, that is unscripted, self out there for the world to see, one has willingly subjected oneself to the surveillance of the world. In an important argument about Jennicam (Jennifer Ringley was the first ‘webcam girl’, who recorded her life for the world to see), Rachel Dubrofsky makes the point that this publicizing of the self, or the willing subjection to the global eye, suggests ‘the idea of being content with the self – not changing the self’. 5 This affirmation of the self—the ‘body-positive’ of Tiidenberg—‘works in a therapeutic capacity’ because the subjects ‘can be content with who they are’ 6 and therefore to stop any impetus for change. The ‘this is me’

6. Ibid.

nature of the selfie suggests that one asserts (critics would say ‘flaunts’) one’s corporeal identity, even when it does not subscribe to the current mainstream norms of sexy or appealing or even interesting. People whose bodies do not fit these norms and who have otherwise found it difficult to gain social acceptance (except in negative ways) have particularly benefitted from the ‘body-positive’ advantage of the selfie, studies show. 7 In such interpretations, the selfie is seen as a significant instrument of self-assertion, confidence—and morale-building exercises and psychological well-being (shall we call it selfie-esteem?).

The remaining points here extend the third into new directions in order to think through the selfie.

Fourth, and extending the above, the selfie is treated as an instance of ‘empowering exhibitionism’. 8 It is empowering because one controls the representations of the self, of the body, out there by transmitting one’s pictures. It suggests a certain measure of control over one’s life and story when we actively pursue a visual narrative of one’s day or week or work through uploads/updates, scraps and posts. The selfie therefore is an important mode of telling one’s story in the way one chooses to, and should be seen as a mode of interacting with the world, of ‘putting on a face’ one wants the world to see. It is ultimately an act of agency: to determine the nature of one’s profile in the world, and to determine who sees it (‘close friends’ or ‘all’ on social networking sites). The selfie is a mode of inserting oneself into the social circuit driving communications, but it is one that allows the individual the freedom to choose how s/he might be perceived in the online social spaces.

Fifth, the selfie represents a parallel surveillance culture to the organized surveillance by the state corporate entities because it subjects itself to the public gaze. If the CCTV can generate a story about me, then I would rather generate the story I want the world to see. It is also important that the very act of self-shooting implies the presence of a community of watchers/viewers with whom the selfie is to be shared. What the selfie represents then is an on-camera performance of the self for the world we know will see it. The individual inserts himself or herself into the larger social project of surveillance voluntarily with the selfie, and this is no different from the non-official (that is, non-state) forms of surveillance we see in the form

of loyalty and membership cards or frequent flier coupons we collect and for which we share personal information to a manufacturer or supplier in exchange for benefits and deals.

Sixth, the empowered exhibitionism also gathers around itself a community of ‘likes’ as the clip-culture of the Whatsapp age forwards the selfies around the users. A parallel community narrative of people who do not fit the corporeal or ‘attractiveness’ norms begins to emerge. It is possible to see the selfie as providing the cornerstone of a mode of social memory-making. This social memory is non-official, unscripted (usually), user-generated and random. Birthday parties, local hang-outs and other events that constitute the routine of everyday lives become the moments of selfies and groupies, and their circulation the foundation for social memory. New norms of looks, fashion, recreational activities might emerge from such selfie-circulation in a community. As a means of social relations, the selfie presents the self to the community, seeks approval and endorsement through sharing – and this is no different from the various modes of impression-management that we regularly and routinely practise for social relations. The selfie serves as the digital business-card, the personal information bulletin, even the personal souvenir (what Erving Goffman called ‘expressive equipment’).10

Seventh, the selfie represents the continuity of lived experience with spectacle. The spectacle is not ‘out there’, but here, with me, in my cellphone, in my everyday moments. Capturing the day as it proceeds ensures a documentation – museumization? – of the ordinary, and translating it into a spectacle. The selfie, previously associated with the spectacular, is now that of the ordinary. The monitor is where I (too)


11. This mutability and distributability has also raised, not without reason, the spectre of the ‘pornographing’ of selfies, especially of women. Digital technology allows easy editing, morphing and Photoshopping of pictures that then might find their way into the thriving pornosphere.