

Becoming Through Film (making)**Politics of Contingency and Re-presentation****Arpit Gaiind**

What does it mean to hand over the camera to an adivasi 'community' and its methodological impact on what gets represented and how one represents it. This paper tries to mark the moments that emerged with the Ho adivasi in Jharkhand in which film became an act of thinking, creating, and 'becoming'. The paper argues that the politics of representation and social transformation are closely linked to the transition from 'conventional' to 'action' research'. In this logic, the paper argues for the film as a question of creation and aesthetics - a question of politics.

One fundamental consequence of the twin projects of *capitalism* and *modernity* have been of *transition*. The transition from thought being temporalized as one kind of practice to practice being de-temporalized as the lesser 'other' of thought. Practice thus becomes an 'inferior' one in the schemata of knowledge production. The significance of this can be seen in how the nation-state is imagined as a historical yet singular entity that is always already present in time. In this logic of the nation-state and its *telos*, the 'backward' forest-dwelling *adivasi*'s purpose is defined to be that of becoming 'modern' and catching up to the 'present'. The linear temporality I am referring to here plays an important role in neutralizing every kind of collective politics possible because it only bases itself on binaries of modern and pre-modern, developed and under-developed.¹ In such a modern conception of the world that we live in, the adivasi subject always already exists in excess of the collective life of a nation-state where coexistence becomes impossible and progress (becomes

¹ See, AnjanChakrabarti, AnupDhar and Stephen Cullenberg, *World of the Third and Global Capitalism* (Delhi: Worldview Press, 2012), 116. Also see, Nikita Khanna, "Revisiting Methodology: Scripting, Stage, and Transformation" *Journal of Practical Philosophy*, 2020.

presentism). This philosophy of progress always tries to defer the future to another date of incremental improvement.

The problem with this modern developmental project is the teleological approach that it envisages for the world by reducing the *unknown* adivasi to non-contemporary beings. It dismisses any sort of imagining of the future or practice that sees *time as multiplicity* and disrupting any face to face encounter of the past and present, primitive and progressive, and the urban and the adivasi. It only sees time in silos and temporality leading to the subordination of creative practice to the mere biography of the author i.e. *the adivasi archive*². It is at this point that the question of action research becomes relevant and forms the basis of this paper around which the sub-text of representation revolves. I argue here how the politics of representation and social transformation are closely linked to the *transition* from 'conventional' to 'action' research.

Locating Methodology

The significance of an *action research* work fundamentally lies in the schemata of the methodological processes undertaken and *how* they lend themselves to the 'political' relevance of the project at hand. I say 'political' because in order to mark a difference between conventional research problematic and an action research one, 'transformative axis' as a methodological concern is a necessary starting point around which this paper is located. Two points are critical to the conceptualization of action research as a paradigm – first is the question of Immersion and second is the philosophical problem of Empiricism. Both these questions I argue, are tied to the problem of practice without which doing research of a transformative nature would lack the desired imagination of a symbiotic relationship between the two. Immersion as a methodological exercise and the *making of the film* as a process I argue is the empirical form that deals with the question of what constitutes the *common* of Turibasa³?

²Nikita Khanna, "Revisiting Methodology: Scripting, Stage, and Transformation" *Journal of Practical Philosophy*, 2020.

³Turibasa (Chuada panchayat) is a village in the West Singhbhum district of Southern Jharkhand state of India. This paper is derived from the one-year village immersion that this author did as part of his MPhil action research program and the film that got made in the process by the community

The question of authorship becomes important when the performative practice of making the film by the community doesn't fit into the criteria of both the rules of craft and aesthetics of what a *film* is assumed to be. In the popular imagination, the film-maker and the actor are two different categories where the sole access to the craft resided with the maker and the actor is just a performer. However, what happens when the two roles are not so distinct anymore and the authority over theory as well as the process of filmmaking lies in the hands of the adivasi⁴ – the subject of the film becomes the *maker*? Deleuze calls this a need for radical empiricism, that "...begins from the moment it defines the subject, a habitus, a habit, nothing more than a habit, nothing more than a field of a habit of immanence, the habit of saying I".⁵ This is the moment where the common in Turibasa foregrounds itself as they decide what gets *shown* in the film. Making of *Jayar*⁶, hence becomes a practice of an ethically informed action of *creating* with the community. The question of self-representation in this logic is a question of transformation - of the adivasi subject.

To theorize action research as a methodological question of subject *reorientation* is to understand empiricism where a symbiotic relationship evolves between the researcher and the researched– one that is not trapped between a simple binary of the self and the other. Sensations of living in Turibasa or making the film are questions of creativity, of human nature and not just of knowledge transfer. *Jayar* might not be consistent with the story of every Ho's life and maybe is a *fictional* imagination *but* of the community - where they decide to *become* something in their act of making it. In this logic of *becoming* this paper tries to mark the shift towards moments in which writing becomes a question of practice; film - a question of creation and aesthetics - a question of politics. So when Gunaram⁷ says that *aisi aur film banayenge, is meinkaafikuchnahinaaya* ("will make more films like these as a

⁴In Hindi adivasi means "Original Inhabitants" where Adi means beginning or first and vasi means dweller. It is also a term used in collective reference to indigenous people in some parts Indian subcontinent – mostly the central and eastern belt of India.

⁵Giles Deleuze, and Boyman Anne. *Pure Immanence: Essays on a Life*. Trans. Anne Boyman.(New York: Zone Books, 2001).

⁶Jayar is the name of the film that was co-created as part of the action-research project during my MPhil. The name Jayar was given to the Ho community after the first screening of the film in the village and was mutually decided. In Ho language Jayar means the burial stone around which the death ritual happens. The name was given by the people in Turibasa itself during the discussion after the first screening of the film.

⁷Gunaram is the person with whom this project was initiated. This is part of an informal conversation with him during the immersion in January 2016

lot got missed in this one”) one needs to be aware that there are no lives in particular but there is living, one that is getting represented as well as constructed through the making itself.

Jayar explores the multiplicities – not as an abstract concept but rather as a coming together of people who made it, the makers who decided to capture or are captured in the process. The technique of that capturing - its conditions and its schemata, needs to be laid out. When Turibasa comes 'together' for creating the film, it ends up unfolding logic of impersonal individuation –of singularities rather than particularities – of many unspecified curators of the project. Jayar takes away the particularity of *the life* in Turibasa and creates 'a life' – a life of (a) community, an organism that will run with the logic of $n-1$ ⁸ - where $n-1$ does not signify lack but foregrounds the *insubordination* of singularities to the Whole or the 'together. It follows this logic because the process demands the subtraction first (of individual subject positions) for 'amoeba-like' multiplication (of singular life-worlds). This is precisely why this cannot be called a film – it cannot be reduced to a particular image (of an adivasi village, of Turibasa) only, as it needs to transcend that – which is particular to the 'common', the 'singular'. This decentering of the process of filmmaking is rhizomatic in its “becoming”. Jayar as a medium or as a technique to *record* and *see* was grounded in its ability to create (something that will always be theirs transcending time and space), borrowing both from the *past* (therefore historical) as well as *future* (thus an exercise in 'becoming' someone new). I would mark this as the point where the members of the community and their relationship with the common⁹ that gets conceptualized through the film is overdetermined by the contemporary politics of indigeneity¹⁰ itself.

Re(presentation) through film-making

The 'common' that gets forged in the process of imagining an action research project and the form it eventually takes by coming together is not a linear process where the origin and the end are not easily determined. The process gets evolved through a

⁸ Giles Deleuze. and Boyman Anne. *Pure Immanence: Essays on a Life*. Trans. Anne Boyman.(New York: Zone Books, 2001).

⁹ also see, Genevieve Lloyd, ed. *Spinoza: The Ethics*. Vol. 2. (US: Taylor & Francis, 2001).

¹⁰. For the question of modernity and its impact on how the question indigenous subject is structures, see, Prathama Banerjee, *Politics of Time: "primitives" and History-writing in a Colonial Society*. (Oxford University Press, USA, 2006).

cohabitation of space as well as coming together in struggles of the community leading to the collective project. Immersion (as a method) then is not just a detached form of *participant observation* [emphasis mine] but something beyond that; where the action researcher attempts to constitute herself with the community to evolve an ethical relationship – informing its politics and the praxis. Methodologically speaking, the everyday practices of *be-ing* in the village (over the course of one year) to become something in the process will always remain contingent yet persistent through diverse ways of living of both the ‘action researcher’ and the ‘community’ they attempt to ‘live’ with. For instance, capturing death or making of *hadiya* (local drink) can only be properly understood in actual concrete forms where the meaning of these practices is assumed by the one who performs it in what Marx calls ‘concrete-real’ ways. To be able to read or interpret through symbols, figures, images, rituals and sounds - in which the community’s meaning is circulated is what one needs to work towards where the meaning is not straightforward or transparent and does not remain uniform in the passage through the representations.

Here, the transfer of the register from research to action research, from empirical (data) to philosophical praxis is also a shift from objectivity to the “pre-objective” and the “pre-theoretical”. I say this because if I raise the larger question of *representation* through the underlying point of this project, I would be pushed to argue - what Foucault marks in *This is not a pipe*¹¹ - that, all of our understanding of the world and language is represented but the politics of that representation should make us question who represents whom and how to shift the discourse of this representation. What Foucault cautions us from are two kinds of subordination that happen in any work of representation – either the text is governed by the image - for instance, words and sentences are used below an image as if to just lend themselves as a mere description (and the actual meaning is established by the image itself) of the *image* and words just describe – or – the image is governed by the text where the image is just an add on, a short cut to what the words have to say - an allegory, for instance, in school textbooks.

¹¹Foucault, Michel. "This is Not a Pipe, trans." *James Harkness* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983) 9 (1983).

Immersion as a methodological aspect of action research is relevant precisely at the point where this representation is questioned and one becomes 'responsible'¹² for the transformation that happens during the course of our engagements with the community¹³. The question of 'who' – *who* represents the adivasi and who represents the community and 'how' does this representation come to take place thus, is of critical importance. The reorientation of the subject can be reached only when a shift is marked from a 'positivist' understanding of the community to a more constitutive and subject-focused one – to inaugurate the point of *praxis*. To reach this point of praxis, the conventional process of filmmaking needs to be flipped, whereby the visuals that get captured decides the film that gets made and where the art defines its craft - not the other way around. I mark this 'creative becoming' as the point of ontological departure from conventional research to action research and from moral writing to ethical righting¹⁴.

Performative Practices of the kind Jayar is will always demand a politics of synthesis, of the non-categorical sort, one that is built on the multiplicity of associations. This transition of register – from 'self' to *a life* (one that is always already immersed in a cultural code of living), an a-priori is also a transition from a personal individuation to a multiplicity, a decentred community – since it transcends both tribes as an 'identity' and adivasi as 'just' an experience. I argue that the *Deleuzean* transcendental empiricism that, is this common living – of sensation and network of associations, one that is transformational and transmutation and not 'developmental' or 'teleological'. The film here is not just experience because it is irreducible to any pre-existing 'we'. Cinema then is this other act of thinking, of creating, of becoming. The problem of subjectivity is not just the problem of what one sees and how one lives with the community but is also a question of what one becomes in the process. This needs to be understood from this vantage point wherein thought (as an act) is

¹² For understanding the question of moral writing to ethical righting, see, AnupDhar, "Action Research: Writing on Righting Wrongs", presented at Symposium on Research and education for rural development and food security to build resilient rural environments: Australian and Indian perspectives, 2015. Retrieved from https://www.csu.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0009/1450188/Action-Research-writing-onrighting-Wrongs-Anup-Dhar.pdf.

¹³ By community here, I mean both the group of people who handled the project and made the film over the course of the year and who contributed in their feedback and editing comments while also watching and discussing the film after the first screening in Turibasa.

¹⁴ AnupDhar, "Action Research: Writing on Righting Wrongs", presented at Symposium on Research and education for rural development and food security to build resilient rural environments: Australian and Indian perspectives, 2015. Retrieved from https://www.csu.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0009/1450188/Action-Research-writing-onrighting-Wrongs-Anup-Dhar.pdf.

intrinsically tied up to practice (of living) and immersion leading to the making of this film; this is one way to reach that exegesis of political praxis - a Borromean Knot perhaps¹⁵.

The binary of Urban and Rural (immersion) and the arguments for and against it becomes redundant (and rather problematic), the moment it becomes clear that the spatial displacement from Delhi to Turibasa is a displacement of materiality – an empirical displacement of a certain form of living and not a dis-association of living together as Deleuze marks¹⁶. In this sense, what I am arguing is, that in order to reach anywhere close to the question of praxis and understanding of human subjectivity, the problem needs to be seen from the point of practice and not intellectual cognition – which can help us understand the adivasi experience of 'struggle' from with(in) and *not* with(out). The struggle from within will always remain in a state of flux and it is in this flux that a concept like immersion allows us to make sense of living together in a common not just as a need, but as a condition of existence; in that sense, action research is a methodology of this existential becoming.

Action research in this way is an act of imagination and thinking connected with the everyday, repetitive materiality of life – a life that wants to become – a Ho life that can become. Experience of immersion and writing from the vantage point of Jayar at all points needs to invoke a dialogue – where the represented image of the community or the film and the writing doesn't end up hegemonizing each other. This dialogue is critical to move towards a consistent and evolving, decentred reflective practice, in order to reach a conceptual space of comprehension of the human condition and adivasi life world. In this process, Jayar is a philosophical exegesis of transcending the obvious conventional modes of thinking and doing by attempting to engage with praxis in a nuanced process of reflective engagement to reorient the subject position of an action researcher. At this point, I argue for a shift towards claiming Jayar as *not just a film*. In short, the film and the writing stops affirming and start exploring – thus making an epistemological shift. The methodological relevance here is to question the inherent belief in the meaning bereft of its linguistic

¹⁵ See, AnjanChakrabarti, AnupDhar, and Stephen Cullenberg, *World of the Third and Global Capitalism* (Delhi: Worldview Press, 2012), 103.

¹⁶ Gilles Deleuze, *Empiricism and subjectivity: an essay on Hume's theory of human nature*, (Columbia University Press, 1991).

nature of it. As Wittgenstein¹⁷ argued, words and language aren't inherently meaningful but are always contingent on its use. Immersion, action research, and questions around life worlds make us complicate our understanding of the adivasi reality.

‘Development’ as a question of creativity

Life can only be understood backward; but it must be lived forwards.

- Søren Kierkegaard *Journals IV A*
164 (1843)

At a time of radical and continuous developmental change, concepts of coping and recognition will itself require new forms. This is where Jonathan Lear¹⁸ argues for the call for concepts—to dream a future of ‘becoming’ (a) new, imaginatively; Jayar, is an exercise in that imagination. When Bablubhai inaugurates the conversation in the gram sabha meeting around the dominance of Hindi speaking subjects and symbols like a swastika (“Hindi meinbaatkartekarteHobhashabhooljaayenge” - If we keep on talking in Hindi we will forget Ho language) and how it has taken away the ‘essence’ of being a Ho and fear of forgetting by the new generation; it is something that everyone resonates with. Ho adivasi’s dream tracked reality at two levels in Jayar - first, it picked up the anxiety of the community¹⁹ and responded to it. Second, insofar as the community’s anxiety was justified — that it was a response to an uncertain future — the film addresses this reel-life challenge by documenting what matters to the Ho and not necessarily the omnipresent and abstract category of adivasi.

Concepts of coping and recognition of the changes that are happening around demand a “facing up to reality”²⁰ and to a situation in which the old ways of living are not working anymore, as Lalbahadur²¹ says, “humare time pe ye sab nahintha, hum

¹⁷ P.M.S. Hacker, *Insight, and illusion: Wittgenstein on philosophy and the metaphysics of experience*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972).

¹⁸ Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the face of cultural devastation*, (Harvard University Press, 2006).

¹⁹ *ibid*

²⁰ Jonathan Lear., *Radical Hope: Ethics in the face of cultural devastation*, (Harvard University Press, 2006), 111

²¹ Conversations during immersion in the formal of an informal interview.

kabhiTuribasa se bahargaye hi nahin...” (all this wasn't there in our times, I didn't even leave the village ever when I was young). So if there were to be such a thing as recognizing these radically altered times of movement, market, and migration, it would seem to require a transformation of the psychological structure with which we cope with the reality of the 'present' and hope for a certain future. Hence Babloo hopes *bacchepuranibaateinbhulneinnahin bas* (“kids don't forget the old rituals”) - thus *recognition and coping* have their vicissitudes.

We are all too familiar with the image of that ‘old person’ (Lal Bahadur chacha, lying down on a cot and narrating his experiences: a person whose ideals and outlook would have been appropriate in the past, but which are not able to change with ‘the changing times’. However unfairly, such people are stuck in their memories of the past. One might think that Babloo or Lalbahdur, would be least able to make the psychological changes that require them to cope with contemporary development trajectories. It is important to abstract out these thick conceptions of being courageous - to protect what they think they might lose – so that in a particular historical time a culture may ask in the most general terms what it is about this courage that makes it a human condition. The answer to this I argue is that courage is the capacity for living well and devising a coping mechanism for each community with the risks that inevitably attend human existence.

For a vibrant culture, it is traditionally the task of the older generation to adapt the culture's ideals to current challenges and to pass those ideals on to the next generation. But in the period post-independence and the global developmental project of modernity, the Hoadivasi like many other indigenous communities across India and the world went through such a collective disruption that there was no way to pass on those ideals in an unproblematic way. This is a critical aspect of acquiring or inheriting a culture's set of concepts through which we can understand ourselves as desiring, wishing, and hoping for certain things. We are now in a position to see how a Ho's response to make a film might count as courage and hope at the same time. As Lear in *Radical Hope* says, “at a time of cultural devastation” such as

adivasis' have to face in the present, "the risks include not only malnutrition, starvation, disease, defeat, and confinement; they include loss of concepts"²².

Politics of film and film-making

The point to mark here is that, in contemporary politics, instead of thought being temporalized as one kind of practice, the practice was de-temporalized as the lesser other of thought. The accuracy of thought was arbitrarily verified to having no lineages with everyday reality or practical life. If some elements of thought failed to make sense of the practical life thought still wasn't discredited and held its importance. Abstraction and Universality of theory in that regard superseded the 'contingency' and 'particularity' in order to pull out the thought from the 'shackles' of practice. Thus, the nation was made to be historical and singular which was always already present in time - either an already made modern subject or the one in the process of modernizing (the backward forest dwelling adivasi). Where the imagined community's identity²³ had to be prevented from being disrupted. The post-colonial state within the logic of telos and nation ends up reducing the question of community to a homogenous whole. As Chatterjee²⁴ points out: "it is not our inability to think about new forms of the modern community but our surrender to old forms of modern state" that plagues us in our conception of development.

Jayar tries to reclaim the freedom of practice and practical imagination through creativity - free from the imperative to abstract and discipline time into the structure of chronology and representational knowledge. History and anthropology thus become two very important sites of perpetuating this quest for the singular subject because the non-chronological time was marred by the essentialist attempt to historicize time itself and to prove the very history of the author that I talked about earlier. This eventually led to the subordination of creative practice to the biography of the author i.e. the cumulative time of history and knowledge. It is for this reason, Jayar becomes a project of creating that memory from an imagined un-historicized past to a possibility of future becoming, attempting to resist the aspiration of developmental time.

²²Jonathan Lear. *Radical hope: Ethics in the face of cultural devastation*, (Harvard University Press, 2006), 123.

²³Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. (Verso books, 2006).

²⁴Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the colonial world: A derivative discourse?* (Zed Books, 1993), 11.

A fundamental problem with the modern developmental project is the teleological analysis of the world that ends up reducing the unknown primitive and adivasi (or Indigenous) to non-contemporary beings. This emphasis on knowledge (and politics) ends up with such a limited sense of the world by representing the 'non-modern' and 'unknown other' in terms of the present - but always through its past. It dismisses any sort of creative imagining of the future or practice and appropriates 'time' as a singular yet repetitive activity and only sees it in silos and temporality. This kind of representation ceases every face to face encounter of the past and present as well as the primitive and the progressive where *collective* politics focuses only on dualisms of identity. The indigenous subject of the *present*, 'always-already' exists in excess of the collective life of a nation - when the nation takes another step towards progress and abdicated being responsible²⁵ and what it left behind. This defers the subaltern future to another date of incremental improvement reminding how the *indigenous*, is just a 'contingent emergent'²⁶ the outcome of the time.

Development in this logic, by reducing the adivasi to the category of non-modern and past-less (yet historical) subject, also reduces the theoria and practice as disjunct projects of knowledge production making the Adivasi life an absent entity. On the other hand, Immersion is that point around which the film – both as an outcome and as a process of making the common - the transformative practice revolves. Jayar by Turibasa was a moment where coming together was both - a means as well as an end of the immersion.

Can the Adivasi create?

What I have intended to do through this work is to establish how the constructed and self-evident narratives structured around the self and the other, the modern and the pre-modern and especially the adivasi and the non-adivasi served a specific political project both from both a Euro-centric point of view as well as an Orientalist one. However, in attempting to negate these hegemonic constructions and to counter them, one needs to be careful to not end up in a trap of *mere* theorizing of difference whilst still preserving the binary categories. Instead one needs to strive to

²⁵Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "CSDS, Golden Jubilee Lecture", *YouTube* (August 5, 2013).

²⁶Anup Dhar and AnjanChakrabarti, "The Althusser–Lacan Correspondence as Ground for Psycho-social Studies." *Psychotherapy and Politics International*, 12, No. 3 (2014), 220-233.

fundamentally reimagine and re-present and rethink *difference* in order to arrive at any genuine point of critical reflective practice that creates new possibilities. When Basmati didi says that “hum sab toh ST bangayehain, sab ST hain, Hotoh bacha hi nahin, Hobachanahai” (we are ST, everyone is ST. There is no *Holeft*, we need to save the *Ho*) one could see the tension that emerges out of, at times distinct and at times intersecting subject positions of ‘adivasi’ and ‘Ho’.

The attempt is to get a much broader and a critical re-evaluation of the conceptual categories of culture and representation and understand the broader political significance of the two. It is to give a sense of Ho adivasi’s hope, loss, tradition, and the fabric of everyday understandings through a living memory of the film that got made. Here I attempt to theorize culture as a dialogue between aspirations and sedimented traditions. “By bringing the future back in...”, as Appadurai says “by looking at aspirations as cultural capacities, we are surely in a better position to understand how people navigate their social spaces”.

Immersion and the question of representation is that point around which the film as well as the point of *transformative practice* revolves. Jayar by Turibasa was one such moment where coming together was both, a means as well as an end (of) ‘the’ action research. To conclude I argue, that development by

(i) reducing the adivasi to the category of the ‘pre-modern’ and the past-less (yet historical) subject renders the adivasi a ‘discursive lack or problem’, a ‘lack or a problem’ that either needs to be corrected or annihilated altogether

(ii) rendering ‘theoria’ and ‘practice’ as disjunct-hyperseparated projects, also reduces adivasi practices to a certain banality or devaluation.

Jayar was a response to both.

Action-research as a methodology is intrinsically tied to the pursuit of a practical philosophy of the pre-modern times²⁷ where the problem of practice was something that needed to be both, articulated and expressed. Jayar is that ‘ethical good’ that

²⁷ Wilfred Carr, “Philosophy, methodology and action research”. *Journey of Philosophy of Education*, (2006), 40(4), 421-435.

needs to be expressed as a question of social transformation - a phronesis²⁸ that Aristotle talks about in *Nicomachean Ethics*.²⁹

²⁸AnupDhar and AnjanChakrabarti. "Marxism as Asketic, Spirituality as Phronetic: Rethinking Praxis." *Rethinking Marxism* 28, no. 3-4 (2016)

²⁹ Harold H. Joachim and David Arthur Rees, *Aristotle: The Nicomachean Ethics: A commentary*. (Greenwood Press, 1985).