



HDK-VALAND – HÖGSKOLAN FÖR KONST OCH DESIGN

Cuts and Continuities

Caste-subaltern imaginations of the Bengal famine of 1943

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Akademisk avhandling för konstnärlig doktorsexamen i konstnärlig gestaltning vid
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Abstract

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The Bengal famine of 1943, in which nearly three million people died, was man-made. A multitude of factors led to the famine, including British colonial policies, war, hoarding and profiteering by local elites and businesses, and existing faultlines of caste, class and gender. In recent years, scholars have focused on scrutinising the famine from an anti-colonial perspective. Still, a gap exists in exploring the intersectionality of caste-related subalternities and the famine. However, the immediate concern with filling this gap is ethical-methodological: even from the lens of caste-subaltern consciousness, how does one arrive at and share stories of the famine, and can they ever be 'recovered' and 'represented'? This dilemma and tension animate this PhD in Artistic Practice. The main starting research question is – how can film practice, both as methodology and outcome of the inquiry, be mobilised to explore negotiated imaginations of the Bengal famine from a caste-subaltern perspective?

Taking the Gramscian notion of subalterns as people/groups on the margins of history, subaltern studies, especially in India, have consistently focused on the need to write history from below. On the one hand, scholars and historians have looked at archival materials for erasures of subaltern history and foregrounded them. On the other hand, they have mobilised methods such as oral history to recuperate the subaltern histories. In a limited sense, this research adheres to this tradition. It looks at existing films on the Bengal famine and makes critical interventions in them to foreground the caste question, and it also aims to create 'new' material through collaborative fieldwork-filming and workshops. However, this PhD also departs from the tradition as it is not a recuperative historical project. It focuses on the creative, collaborative, and negotiated processes of imagining and engaging with that history.

Through an iterative, collaborative and reflective film practice, this research suggests that filmmaking can foreground subaltern epistemologies and ontologies when it is not merely seen as product-oriented but also as a knowledge activity. Moreover, it can foreground an ethos of active and continuous negotiation and enable the emergence of multiple, contested and layered narratives. Lastly, this research proposes a shift away from 'recovery' and 'representation' of the 'authentic' caste-subaltern experiences of the famine and toward negotiated imagination.