



The camera that went out of focus

Calcutta was the birthplace of India's only analog but like many of the city's glorious could have beens, National 35 passed into oblivion no sooner than it was born, writes Madhuban Mitra & Manas Bhattacharya

On a humid afternoon in June 2009, as we entered the precincts for the first time, a gigantic replica of the National 35 camera stared back from the lobby of the administrative building. In another time, a light concealed inside would illuminate the now-darkened lens. An hour into our bemused rambling through the vast, deep spaces of the factory, a huge door was unlocked and we were left to gaze in utter bewilderment at a shirt hanging in the Machine Shop. It seemed that the shirt's owner had left it to dry and could come back any moment to reclaim it. But, never did. These moments, still vivid, are perhaps definitive of what eventually became a six-month sojourn in the National Instruments Ltd. factory.

Our entry into the factory wasn't happenstance. Invited by the Media Lab, Department of Film Studies, Jadavpur University, to whom we are immensely grateful, we spent each day rummaging through the sprawling ruins of the factory where time seemed frozen and nothing changed except the quality of the light, the thickness of the cobwebs and the rise and fall of the wind. Yet, National Instruments, as many of us know, was the once prosperous factory that produced the National 35, the only 35 mm still camera ever manufactured in India. Launched in 1979, the National 35 was immensely popular through the early 80s, and was meant to be the iconic Indian camera which, as history would have it, it never quite became.

Originating in 1830 as the Mathematical Instruments Office to service the Land Survey Department of the colonial government, the factory moved to its current premises in 1957

and was rechristened National Instruments Ltd. with the aim of servicing and manufacturing high-precision instruments for the land survey, meteorology and defence departments of the Govt. of India. Though the factory produced various optical, mechanical and electronic instruments, it was known to the public for the National 35 camera. However, like many public sector enterprises in post-Independence India, National Instruments Ltd went into decline from the late 80s, stopped production in the early 90s, and was eventually declared a sick industry. The company dissolved its workforce and most of its employees went out on voluntary retirement schemes. Ironically, at the time it was shut down, the factory had been developing the National Reflex 2000, which would have been India's first SLR camera. In January 2009, the precinct was handed over to the Jadavpur University for establishing a new campus.

The Camera Assembly, the place where the camera was born, is today a silent, eerie and dusty repository of broken camera shells, spare parts and debris. The factory bristles with human traces and objects of personal significance scattered in the rooms, on work tables and in worker's cupboards. What makes it intriguing is that they were either forgotten or deliberately left behind by the workers who were laid off and knew that they were not coming back. Habits lingered in the angle of a mirror, a dog-eared book of stories, and a quotation from Henrik Ibsen scribbled on the wall. Somebody even left a love letter behind. A book of stories by the Russian writer Ivan Turgenev tucked in a cupboard bore testimony not only to the specific cultural predilections of a

Bengali working class, but also to an era when lavish, state-subsidized Russian publications were available dirt cheap in the city. The little traces of whimsy and ghosts of habit created pockets of the private within the grey, indeterminate industrial space, allowing us to conjure up the people from the objects they left behind. In the absence of the workers, the photographs were made as a series of portraits – portraits without faces.

Sometimes, we worked separately and on our own, at other times, we operated a camera together. Collaboration meant something much deeper than the actual making of the images. It was a process of thinking and looking together. As we picked our way around the various abandoned units of the factory, a pattern emerged, of things recurring with unflinching precision – old, defunct clocks presiding over various rooms and work spaces; switchboards in sad disrepair; and rotting files that spoke of voluntary retirement schemes, unpaid pensions, leave applications and arrears.

This play of repetition and variation within the factory space triggered the idea of photographic typologies, each focusing on a specific aspect or theme within the larger project. For instance, in *Temp Mort* we explored the notion of time in a factory through a series of defunct clocks. These clocks were instruments of surveillance and control as is evident from card punching systems installed near them to monitor the comings and goings of workers. Therefore, the clocks were mechanisms for regulating the body of the worker in

relation to industrial production. Similarly, we looked closely at the yellowed, decaying paper trail in *Post Datum*. Through the device of the photographic typology objects and traces acquired an accumulative, accretive quality. In retrospect, it was also a kind of homage to that great tradition of photographing industrial structures – Bernd and Hilla Becher's highly formalistic, geometric typologies. For us, each typology became a catalogue of things dead, found, or forgotten.

As we began to inhabit the space, small movements, mutations and flickers held us in thrall. The inspiration for the photo animations came from the necessity to capture the alluring dramaturgy of light and the discreet and subtle variations through photographic means. These aspects of the space were not possible to record through the single, classical still photograph, at least not in the way we wanted to.

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Composed of photographs shot in sequence, the animations, therefore, explore a liminal space between the still and the moving image. Through their somewhat staccato, stylized motion,

we wanted to invoke both the early silent cinema and the photographic slideshow. On the other hand, we also wanted to capture in some way the eerie and the uncanny, and hit upon the idea of making the National 35 camera mounted on a tripod walk through the spaces of the factory, as if the ghost-camera comes back to haunt the very factory that produced it. The Phantom Camera series that resulted from this experiment refers to both Dziga Vertov's

Man With A Movie Camera and Wladislaw Starewicz' earlier animation masterpiece, *The Cameraman's Revenge* with its cast of insect-people.

The advent of the National 35 camera marked an important moment in the history of photography in India. Therefore, our work is also about photography reflecting on a forgotten aspect of its own history. However, the first "Indian" still camera was, in fact, not an indigenous technological marvel. It was an almost exact replica of an obsolete German camera from the 1950s, the Regula Sprinty BC. National Instruments Ltd. acquired the design and license for replicating the Regula camera from the German company King KG in the 1970s, and the Regula Sprinty BC was reborn as the National 35 Sprinty BC in 1979. As a caveat, our work does not intend to stoke any nationalistic sentiments about the 'great Indian camera'. Neither does it seek to valorize a supposed 'golden technological past' and the "national" camera as a product of that past. Rather, it is an ironic look at the past, at the absence of a truly "national" camera – the Indian camera that never was. The recurrent master image we use to allude to this absence, is the broken, empty carcass of the camera with a black hole in the middle. Photographed in the digital format, the images are also about the digital ruminating on the death of the analogue. Rather than invoke a nostalgia for that which is disappearing as we speak, *Through A Lens, Darkly* attempts to excavate a certain history of labour and of technology, and their slow but inevitable passage. Our photographs are, in a way, the last images of a shipwreck.

The authors have collaborated on the project *Through A Lens, Darkly* which is on view at Photoink Gallery New Delhi, till February 12th