

The Journey

*'I went for an ancient democracy and world's best hashish
but what silently pulled me towards Malana was my destiny.'*

Hidden in the mountains of the Himalayas, Malana was like a lost world. A reticent community fostering a primitive existence in harmony with nature and harbouring their own unique model of democracy of consensus. Outsiders were thoroughly prohibited from entering the village. When I first tried to go to Malana, I was warned by many local people around, 'Don't go, people disappear there...' An aura of fear and mystery floated around Malana. Yet, I went!

A filmmaker in search of virgin images with two imaging devices - one modern video camera and one century old view camera. Little did I know that what would follow will transform my life forever.

I do not vote. I do not believe in the present model of democracy that divides society with political polarity, makes enemies out of neighbours; prompting brothers to fight. I question the *Right to Vote* when common people remain misinformed, manipulated and misguided by political leaders pursuing their vested interests. In my opinion, in a diverse country like India instead of a more inclusive political system we have created an oppressive rule of the so-called 'majority' where the actual majority is still deprived and underprivileged. But I believe in democracy, the Democracy of a Consensus. And one of the last living specimens of this is Malana, which I witnessed getting destroyed by the modern democracy.

Just like this modern phenomenon of digital imaging has detached ourselves from some finer sensations and aesthetics of chemical imaging - intuition, evaluation, patience & most importantly trust; I have felt that the ethics of our present day democracy under direct influence of the market economy also reflects a very similar paradigm shift. I started my film as an intellectual discourse on imaging and democracy. The secret which binds the ancient system of Malana has been trust. The century old view camera stood for me as an allegory of the *Democracy of Trust* and the modern day digital camera represented the eye of modern democracy; which was invading upon this hidden treasure of the ancient civilization.

A four-year journey compelled an obsessive cinematographer like me to realize that life is much wider than what I perceive with my eyes and much bigger than what my imaging devices can ever record. I have been toying with imaging since childhood. Having been a practicing cinematographer for the past fifteen years, camera to me is like a living being, a part of me. But for the first time in my life I felt myself being needed, my camera was recording some truth, which otherwise would have vanished into oblivion; unheard. It taught me how to remain a humble recipient, to wait for that moment of truth.

The magic of imaging and the moment of truth: so real yet so out-of-the-world.

It was the magic of imaging that opened the doors of trust for me. A wedding in the village and I shot my first wedding video. It was the first wedding video shot in the village. The mother of the bride took me to her heart as a godson, brother of the bride Hemaraj became my god brother. I became a part of a family of five brothers and four sisters with a room for myself in their house. Hemu, my god brother and Shanta, the groom became the protagonists of my film. Slowly I became a part of their village; my camera became an unobtrusive witness to their destiny and mine too.

Within a year of my first visit the village got burnt due to an electrical short circuit. The fire started from our house. Our family lost three houses, everything. My godmother who had given me my second birth in Malana could not bear the shock. She chose to die. I could see destiny unfold and chose not to film it. I remembered the dichotomy of Wim Wenders in 'Lightning over Water' filming a dying Nick Ray. I didn't want to kill my second mother frame by frame.

Fate somehow had more in store for my main protagonist, Hemraj who had already lost his home and his mother. His wife, Ketkti was implicated and later convicted for trafficking hashish. Kekt's story itself exposes how the drug mafia works hand in glove with the police and how inefficient the judiciary is. Hemraj being mentally ill and in Kekt's absence, there was nobody to take care of their children Rajesh and Rajkumari. Kekt remained a character in absentia. Her spine chilling telephonic conversation that revealed the truth of her arrest stands as a testimony of her plight. In the court of law she was not allowed to speak. Now this film shall tell her story to

the nation. And it has to win hearts so that in this democracy she can at least expect to get a fair re-trial.

Everything in this film is real; no staging, no enactment, no re-creation. No external music either, only carefully structured diegetic sound. Reality itself forms the grand narrative. Not a direct cause and effect or an action-reaction synthesis of the western drama. But an oriental epic structure where often the sub-plots, sub-characters take the story forward. Underneath the surface of on-screen drama the film reflects a silent story of change including that of myself.

When I first pitched the project in Docedge in 2008 the title of the film was 'Image: Democracy', by the time I was pitching in IDFA Forum the title changed to 'One day ahead of Democracy' and two years later the title has come back to my Indian roots with 'Bom'.

In Indian philosophy the universe is made up of five basic elements; *Kshiti* - earth, *Aap* - water, *Tej* - energy, *Marut* - air and *Bom*. 'Bom' stands for celestial void where it all ends and also the universal unity from where creation begins. *Bom* is also the *nad* (sound) to address Lord Shiva, whom we see as the creator and the destroyer of the universe.

This film has been like my *sadhana* – meditation, unveiling the universe in a microcosm. Camera had been my medium of worship. I was an atheist when I went to Malana but today I understand what God is and why we need Him. The way reality unfolded in front of my camera made me a believer. When I wished, He had sent the clouds to cover the mountains. When I needed He beamed his divine light to uncover the truth. The old priest Vudeiram, who didn't touch anybody including the villagers, holding my hand he asked me to keep in touch. I realized a larger order had destined this Amlan to Malana, to tell their tale, to save them from extinction.

Their primitive way of life helped me see some fundamental truth about the progress of human civilization. Their simple understanding, so basic and so natural that it often questioned my logic, my rationality. My political discourse ran out of words, got translated into images of their lives, their wisdom. Old priest Vudeiram once told me, 'One who loves will be loved in Malana'. He enlightened me with one

fundamental truth of life. Taught me how to trust and be trusted. I shared their emotions, their pain became mine, my voice theirs, now my film is their story.

But how would the story end? How can an epic end with a feeling of injustice and deprivation. Ryota Kotani, the commissioning editor of NHK told me, ‘...you’re here to make peace not war.’ I understood the film has to win the hearts of my audience on behalf of the people of Malana. It also has to resolve somewhere and spread good conscience in people to take our democracy one day ahead.

They journey had many rough edges, securing finance and finding a universal acceptance being toughest of them. Even though I pitched in IDFA Forum I failed to evoke interest of the European and American Broadcasters. My inverted perspective like the inverted image of the view camera did not find an acceptance. The moment I say I do not vote and do not believe in democracy the western intellect shut me out. When I speak the truth on the issue of legalizing cannabis it becomes hard for any authority to accept. The moment I say I have been smoking cannabis for the last 23 years and nothing wrong has happened they feel it is blasphemous. Even the Indian security agencies have continued to keep me under surveillance. But in reality consumption of cannabis has been a age old practice in this land. As an attribute to Lord Shiva, it has always been part of our religion and culture. Report of Indian Hemp Drug Commission, 1894 clearly stated that it is so deep rooted prohibition is unworkable. People of India consumed cannabis as appeasement after hard labor. For *Sadhus* and wise men it was like a carrier; keeping them above the material self. It was never a party drug as it is recognized and practiced in the western world. In my promotional clip the western broadcasters saw a little girl Rajkumari, Hemraj’s five-year-old daughter, sitting on my lap rubbing hashish and I am asking her, ‘Whom are you making it for? For me!’ How would an outsider understand that hashish was the only gift of love that she could offer me. How anyone, including me could ever imagine that the little girl would finally become my daughter and the film would end with her singing, ‘Have you seen the butterfly flowers!’ It is she who finally wins the hearts for all of us.

Ryota Kotani, my Japanese commissioning editor with his oriental wisdom could see much more in my inverted perspective. ‘What you see in Malana no one else can see.’ He provided me the support and helped me make my film. My post-production

days in Japan during spring last year had been a remarkable experience. I edited with an editor Nezu, who didn't understand or speak English. But we worked together, ate together and waited for the cherries to blossom. Soon Tokyo was all white with flowers. I learnt to feel my own images without the text. I realized that the natural emotions inherent in the footage are more powerful than my logically constructed ones. In the edit, flow of feelings took over the logic of rationality and verbosity. It took one more year for my film to evolve after I completed the version for NHK. My experience at NHK made my story more abstract but at the same time helped it become more universal.

The film grew like a living being. I did as much as I could with my own hand; camera, edit, sound, production... almost everything. Today it is being completed and ready to make its appearance into the real world. My next responsibility is to help it reach out to people. I don't want to assign a price for my film, I leave it to the audience to decide its value and contribute on their own. I believe in philanthropy. If I fail to sustain I will have to question film making as a profession itself!

Life is much larger than a film. And being a good human is more important for me than being an 'established filmmaker'. Four years back I first went up to Malana with that heavy view camera on my back and today I have come down with a heavier responsibility on my shoulder. I feel myself destined to save this ancient community from extinction, to preserve their language and culture, to help them integrate into modernity. I dream of seeing Malana as a model of self-sufficient village both economically and in energy. I have been running my 'Bom-Bom Charitable Trust' for more than a year now setting up projects for sustainable development and alternative education in and around Malana. One year back I took custody of distressed children Rajesh and Rajkumari, giving them love, parental care and proper education. In democracy they say people get the government they deserve. And we can't expect God to come down and change the world for us. Even if my film fails to bring any change, the fact that in this journey I being the filmmaker could change myself to a better human being is something I can carry on with.

The ominous words of the locals I first met were indeed true. Yes people do disappear in Malana! Once you learn to trust like them you are never the same person again. Though it's going to be a long battle I know God's on my side. For, He has

already sent two of His beautiful angels to be by my side. The little ones have already showed me '...the butterfly flowers!' I hope you see them too.