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Super-8 in Calcutta: Analysis of a "Failed" Movement

Abstract

The Super-8 films that flourished in the city of Calcutta during the 1980s had been central to a very conscious film movement that wanted to propagate the culture of non-commercial filmmaking by organizing film festivals and workshops on the format. The movement played a pivotal role in Calcutta's film culture because it initiated film enthusiasts to a new horizon of filmmaking where anybody, on a shoestring budget, could narrate a story or document an event that the mainstream media would not cover.

However, the discourse around the movement was one of failure that witnessed the production of poor-quality films. There has also been a conspicuous critical as well as archival lacuna in chronicling Calcutta's Super-8 movement. Thus, to learn about the movement, I had to meet film society activists of the era and listen to anecdotes until I was integrated into cultural networks that helped me access the archives of personal collectors. An examination of the personal archives renders prominence to the transnational collaboration that the movement had witnessed, besides the horizon of expectations that the format had stimulated in the realms of film production and circulation. This paper shifts the emphasis on Super-8 from the "quality" of the films produced and the associated notion of "failure" of the movement to the filmic possibilities that the technological format had enabled. It thereby analyses the movement's critical role in stimulating aspiration towards a participatory practice of alternative filmmaking in Calcutta. It reads such practices as a form of politico-cultural activism.

Keywords

activism, alternative, network, film movement, Calcutta

Introduction

> "But the movement was eventually a failure. The Super-8 films weren't of high quality. Most of them had problems with syncing the sound. We had many expectations from the movement, though."[1)]
> "To be honest, the movement was really a failure. We wanted to experiment, and we were enthusiastic about the movement. But the films produced were of really poor quality."[2)]

This paper displaces the analytical lens from the "quality" of films produced to the question of possibilities that were engendered by the Super-8 movement in Calcutta, and by extension, in Bengal during the 1980s.[3)] Such a critical arc enables an enquiry into the discourse of failure that congealed around the movement subsequently. The rationale behind such an analysis is to grasp a better understanding of the format and the film practices that developed around it. In this exercise, I read the Super-8 film movement not as a failed enterprise but as a form of politico-cultural activism that was interested in the creation of alternative media texts.

I understand failure as "a product of judgments that reflect various arrangements of power, competence, and equity in different places and times," borrowing from the theorisations of Arjun Appadurai and Neta Alexander.[4)] Analysing how templates of judgement produce regimes of failure, the authors ask:

> what events produce these judgments (history), who is authorized to make them (power), what form they must take in order to appear legitimate and plausible (culture), and what tools and infrastructures mediate these failures or make them ubiquitous (technology).[5)]

The intersection of history, power, culture, and technology in the determination of failure forms the crux of critical examination of the authors and provides me a vantage point to understand the discursive registers that constructed the movement as a failure. This paper argues that the critical notion of activism aids in understanding the horizon of expectations that the movement fostered, thereby shifting emphasis from the question of failure to the notion of potentialities promised by the movement. I frame the movement as a form of activism, borrowing from the works of Michael Buser, Carlo Bonura, Maria Fannin & Kate Boyer. The authors emphasize the "relation of collective practices to space, both in how practices become tactically situated in space… and in the way that certain

1) Former member of Chitra Chetana, interview by the author, September 2016. The conversation was in Bengali. The translation has been done by the author. The source has not been named for the lack of permission for the same.
2) Former Super-8 activist associated with Jadavpur University Film Society, interview by the author, 2018. Source anonymised on purpose because of lack of permission.
3) Ibid.
4) Arjun Appadurai and Neta Alexander, *Failure* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020), 1.
5) Ibid., 2.

spaces can become referents for collective visions."[6] The authors' focus on the situatedness of cultural activism is relevant to my analysis of the movement's specificity in the city of Calcutta. Addressing the expanding literature on cultural activism in the discipline of Urban Studies over the last few years, they define the notion as a "type of organizing 'where art, activism… and politics meet, mingle and interact.'"[7] Furthermore, in conceptualizing the movement as an instance of politico-cultural activism, I take cues from the arguments of Anna Bernard. She identifies the impulse to "fortify existing participants and galvanize new ones" as the central tenet of activist practices.[8] Although Bernard's work focuses on the resource-value of cultural activism by focussing on documentary films and literary texts, her work is significant to this paper. With an active investment into workshops and training sessions, the Super-8 movement actively sought to converge multiple resources to gain visibility and an increased participation.

Sources and Methodology

My quest for tracing the history of the Super-8 movement in Calcutta began in 2016 when I was working on my M.Phil. research thesis. I read that Saumen Guha had been the pioneer of the movement, but my efforts in tracing him for an interview were rendered futile.[9] Disappointed, I continued speaking to fellow researchers to learn as much as possible about the movement. Eventually, I noticed on my Facebook feed a photograph of a booklet that had been published during the first Super-8 film festival in Calcutta. I got in touch with a fellow researcher and Facebook friend to find out how he had accessed that document. He informed me about a personal collector, Amit Bandopadhyay, who had carefully preserved documents pertaining to the Super-8 movement. I acquired the collector's contact, and during the course of numerous conversations, he recounted to me his memories associated with the movement. The archival materials I have used for this historical analysis were thus not found in institutional archives. Curiously, both the library at Nandan, West Bengal Film Centre, Kolkata, and the National Film Archive of India, Pune, could not provide me with research materials related to Super-8 in 2016. Therefore, I had to depend on personal collections for writing this history. It makes sense to explicate here that this research would not have been possible without the mobilisation of the professional and cultural networks that I had been anchored in as a doctoral researcher. The motive of this research, however, is not to salvage Super-8 from an inconspicuous corner of oblivion and attribute currency to it. Rather, the interest is to displace the analytical loci from the quality of films produced to the political and cultural aspirations that the format had fostered, in order to critique the notion of failure.

6) Michael Buser, Carlo Bonura, Maria Fannin, and Kate Boyer, "Cultural activism and the politics of placemaking," *City: Analysis of Urban Trends, Culture, Theory, Policy, Action* 17, no. 5 (2013), 606–627.

7) Ibid.

8) Anna Bernard, "Cultural Activism as Resource: Pedagogies of Resistance and Solidarity," *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 53, no. 3 (2017), 367–379.

9) "Super-8 mm movement in West Bengal," *Activist Canvas*, 2010, accessed January 27, 2022, https://canvaspix.wordpress.com/2010/02/10/super-8-movement/.

While I gained access to the personal collections crucial for this historiographical exercise, I failed to acquire an interview of Saumen Guha until April 2021. I knew a few fellow researchers who had the contact details of Guha. Nevertheless, both of them hesitated to share the details, stating that Guha had turned into a cynic over the years and therefore refused to meet new people. Navigating through such blockages, I eventually obtained Guha's phone number through a colleague who also shared my research interest in Super-8. Initially, I hesitated to dial up, but when I did, I was surprised to find a willing collaborator who listened patiently to all my questions. For the first time-bound interview, I had prepared a structured list of questions for Guha. However, over time, the frequency of our interaction grew, leading to conversations developing organically, which offered Guha the opportunity to articulate, in detail, his memories surrounding the Super-8 movement.[10] Besides speaking to me about his work, Guha also lent me his publications on Super-8 that he had preserved at his home. This brings me to the methodology of this research analysis. I write this history by juxtaposing archival evidence with anecdotal evidence.[11] The contextualisation of archival documents with anecdotes helps me locate the film movement within the socio-political and cultural co-ordinates of Calcutta (now named Kolkata).[12] It is within the urban context of Calcutta that the film movement gained momentum due to the organisation of film festivals and workshops on the format.

The Urban Context: Strategies of Popularising the Format

What influenced Saumen Guha to work with Super-8, though? During the first interview session, Guha emphasised that he had always borne the curiosity of gaining an insider's view into people's lives. During his early college days, he roamed around villages and observed the quotidian life of different strata of society. This interest propelled the subject of his apparent first film on Super-8, *Silent Calcutta* (Saumen Guha, 1980). The film focused on the lives of the pavement dwellers in Calcutta, offering a glimpse of the struggle and joy that marked their daily life.[13] Initially, it was a silent film. Later, he acquired a negative film and a reversal film with a magnetic soundtrack from Bombay. To this, he added a soundtrack that resonated with the film's theme. He recorded the helpless and anguished cry of a two-month-old toddler (Guha's elder sister's son) and incorporated it into the film's soundtrack. Although *Silent Calcutta* is believed to be his first film, Guha clarified that his Super-8 debut was about his sister, Archana Guha.[14] It captured her recovery and

10) Alfred L. Martin Jr., "Why All the Hate? Four Black Women's Anti-Fandom and Tyler Perry," in *Anti-Fandom: Dislike and Hate in the Digital Age*, ed. Melissa A. Click (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 166–183.

11) Sean Cubitt, "Anecdotal Evidence," *NECSUS: European Journal of Media Studies* 2, no. 1 (2013), 5–18.

12) To know more about the change in nomenclature of the city, see https://www.theguardian.com/world/1999/jul/22/suzannegoldenberg.

13) In an interview, Guha mentioned that the life of pavement dwellers had always intrigued him. He shot extensively on the subject and gave a huge quantity of stock-shots, titled *Unwanted Calcuttans*, to DocFilm of Denmark in 1985 to collaboratively work with them. He was however oblivious of the final use of the stock shots by DocFilm.

14) "Super-8 mm movement in West Bengal."

eventual walk towards the airport in Copenhagen, Denmark, after the successful treatment of her paralysis with the help of Amnesty International.[15] Guha's induction into the format was thus anchored into a personal context. This correlation between his personal life and the development of the Super-8 movement had further dimensions to it. Guha was emotionally attached to his mother, and during his Naxalite days, he had developed a fondness for the mothers of his fellow comrades.[16] He wanted to adapt Gorky's *Mother* into a film as a tribute to his own mother, and had applied for grants to the state's cultural department. Being denied the grants, Guha decided to employ the Super-8 format as an alternative medium that could bypass the demands of the state-corporate nexus. At its core, Guha's motive in developing the format had been iconoclastic in charge.

It was in Denmark, during the treatment of his sister, that Guha procured his personal Super-8 equipment, a second-hand Fuji camera. He had already read extensively about it and was aware of how the medium was being utilised in different countries for making alternative films. The aforementioned film on Archana Guha, titled *From Copenhagen with Love* (Saumen Guha, 1980), was shot on a single cartridge and was screened at Guha's home for his family and friends. *Silent Calcutta,* however, had been screened at multiple venues. In this vein, I analyse a questionnaire that was circulated in the Electrical Engineering Lecture Hall of Jadavpur University on May 9, 1981, to comprehend the critical questions that Guha had sought to address while familiarising film enthusiasts with the format. *Silent Calcutta* had been screened at the seminar on "Alternative Technique of Low-Cost Filmmaking: a Test Case." By listing the questions that might have possibly intrigued the viewer on watching the film, the questionnaire offers clues to comprehend the pivotal axes that structured Guha's talks surrounding the format:

- Is this technique applicable in all cases of (a) Photography (b) Editing (c) Sound in film-making?
- Through this technique, we can achieve how much (a) cost (b) time (c) man power reduction or benefit?
- To what extent this technique is used throughout the world?
- What is the scope of renovations in this technique?
- What is unique in this technique for extensive use?
- If this technique is viable or feasible, why it is not popular in India, or in West Bengal?
- Who or what are the obstacles, we have to fight against to implement this technique?
- What are the facilities available and how those can be explored in India or in West Bengal? (sic)[17]

15) Archana Guha endured brutal police torture while being interrogated about the Naxalite connections of her brother. After being released from jail in 1977, Saumen Guha devoted himself to ensuring justice for his sister.

16) To know more about the Naxalite movement, see Rajeshwari Dasgupta, "Towards the 'New Man': Revolutionary Youth and Rural Agency in the Naxalite Movement," *Economic and Political Weekly* 41, no. 19 (2006), 1920–27.

17) Saumen Guha, "Alternative Technique of Low-Cost Film-making: a Test Case" (Seminar Lecture, Electrical Engineering Lecture Hall, Jadavpur University, Calcutta, May 9, 1981).

Examining the questionnaire, we can argue that the session emphasised the efficiency of the format that propelled its global usage and currency.[18] It also underscored the novelty of the technology and the challenges that had to be confronted to popularise the usage of the media format. The motivation was to discuss the questions "in a free and fair manner, based on factual informations, evidence, data in kind."[19] After addressing the technological possibilities, Guha stressed other significant questions that demanded equal attention while deliberating on Super-8. For instance, what narrative experiments could be conducted by utilizing the technology? What were the global film movements that Super-8 had triggered? Did the format enable a configuration of new ideological templates or new models for film movements? The questionnaire makes it explicit that Guha's lecture posited the Super-8 technology as a harbinger of creative, political, and aesthetic possibilities. It also underscored the global film movements that the technology had engendered to provide a frame of reference and a possible direction that the movement in Calcutta could aspire for.

Besides such seminars, Guha conducted workshops in Calcutta to train film enthusiasts on Super-8 and to broaden the horizons for engagement with the format. This is evidenced by a newspaper report titled "Calcuttay Super-8." 37A, Mahendra Sarkar Street buzzed with curiosity surrounding Super-8 as young film enthusiasts gathered there to learn the technique of making a film on a shoestring budget. The workshop, titled Workshop on Little Film Making (WOLF), convened in the evening with almost ten students carefully reading cyclostyled notes that mentioned recent developments around Super-8. Equipped with a Nizo- 4056 camera, Guha mentored the students by explaining what different functions they could achieve with the camera. The rationale behind the workshop was to make a film and simultaneously learn about the filmmaking techniques. The workshop format had been envisaged by Rana Sengupta, who was later joined in his efforts by Meenakshi Pal and Adindam Basu. The organisers had approached various people for participation in the workshop. Eventually, Guha became a willing collaborator since he was also looking for a platform that would enable him to mobilise Super-8 not only as a weapon of protest but also as a medium of communication. The report highlighted the ambience of the room to offer a glimpse into the epistemic impetus that undergirded the workshop. The room boasted of books in every nook and corner: some pertained to works of American cinematographers, others were editions of *Sight and Sound*. Guha was mostly referring to *Lipton on Film Making* while tutoring the batch of students.

During the screening of his film *Silent Calcutta* at a film festival in Portugal, Guha realised the obscured and marginalised status of the format in "third world countries" since his film was the only participating entry from Asia.[20] The workshop makes sense within Guha's dynamics of experience. It was strategically conceived to induct active participants into the transnational cultural exchange, which had developed around the technology, as well as to familiarise them with the format's potential. The strength of Super-8 lay in its

18) For an understanding of the different ways in which the format was used, see Stefan Szczelkun, "The Value of Home Movies," *Oral History* 28, no. 2 (2000), 94–98.

19) Ibid.

20) Aniruddha Dhar, "Calcuttay Super 8," *Aajkal*, June 6, 1983 (n.p.). It is difficult to cite the page number of this newspaper report since I obtained only a paper cut-out of this report from the personal collector.

small size and light weight, offering the independence and dynamic flexibility to be used in any situation. Furthermore, the films could also be blown up to 16 mm or 35 mm. To analyze WOLF and the form of participation it envisaged, I refer to the theoretical work of Ryan Shand. Focusing on the vitality of the amateur cine movement from the early 1930s to the late 1970s, Ryan Shand proposes the "community mode" as a viable terminology for addressing cine-club filmmaking that occupies an "ambivalent exhibition space" between the "home and mass modes."[21] Shand argues that filmmakers have made movies on many issues that cannot be circumscribed by ideas of the home movie or the oppositional avant-garde. Although Shand notes that the community mode is not exclusively defined by notions of film gauge, I find his critical template useful for thinking about the Super-8 movement in Calcutta. For Shand, filmmakers working within the community mode included those

> who belonged to film societies and entered their group-made films into the annual film festivals that were held all around the world, as well as travel filmmakers who toured with their films, and also more locally based civic filmmakers who rented town halls and other available exhibition spaces.[22]

Even though Shand focuses on a different geographical (primarily the Global North) and temporal context than my work, I find his argument productive to think about the community mode of film production and discourse generation that Super-8 movement in Calcutta galvanised through spaces such as WOLF.

The aforementioned newspaper report on WOLF argued that despite the creative and technological possibilities, there was a prevalent ignorance surrounding Super-8. However, Guha attributed a specificity to the ignorance and noted that the technology had led to a surge of blue films in Calcutta. To Guha, the ignorance lay in not mobilising the format appropriately. Guha's perspective makes it evident that the discourse surrounding Super-8, at that particular point in time, was that the format had to be utilised and developed in a culturally legitimate direction. The emphasis, therefore, was on how Super-8 was not being optimally utilised. This undeniably calls for speculation about what was considered a legitimate and culturally appropriate usage of the format. Guha further sarcastically claimed that while Calcutta boasted of radical filmmakers, none of them had envisioned working with Super-8, whereas on the global front, most radical filmmakers were already experimenting with narrow-gauge formats. Guha's statements in the newspaper report on WOLF rendered visible the seeds of optimism that formed the substrate within which Super-8 movement was expected to germinate. The format heralded a plethora of new possibilities, comprising not only aesthetic experimentation and transnational exchange but also a potent form of social and politico-cultural activism that could underscore people's interests.

21) Ryan Shand, "Theorizing Amateur Cinema: Limitations and Possibilities," *The Moving Image: The Journal of the Association of Moving Image Archivists* 8, no. 2 (2008), 36–60.

22) Ibid.

Towards Building a Network for Super-8

What the workshop engendered, received a further impetus with the publication of the bulletin, *Super-8 in India,* which offered a detailed account of the endeavours and discussions that had congealed around the format:

> The necessity was being felt for sometime. The World of Super-8 film in India, though small as yet, is changing. The change is a rapid one towards using Super-8 for independence and as a format for serious mode of expression. Amidst these changes an urge to build a platform for people interested in Super-8 was strongly felt and this bulletin is a step towards constructing at least a network of communication between such people.[23)]

The bulletin provided details about the Super-8 films that had already been shot, along with a very short note about the subject and duration of the films. Since this is the only issue that I could access from the personal collections of Bandopadhyay, it is difficult to state how many editions this specific bulletin had. However, the first issue mentioned most of the films that had been screened at the Indian Super-8 film festival 1983, organised at Jadavpur University from December 17 to December 21, 1983. The list included *Jala Nahi Mile* (Saumen Guha, n. d.), a 10-minute film by Guha on the drought in the Kangsabati project area of Bankura district in West Bengal. Focusing on the city, *Calcutta -Oh* (Charles Solomon, n. d.) depicted "fragments of pedestrian hazards in Calcutta" in a 6-minute-long sound on tape film.[24)] In a similar vein of reflecting on the urban milieu, *Faces* (Subhasis Mitra, n. d.), an 8-minute-long sound film, captured the different facial expressions of the people living in Calcutta through an experimental visual collage. Engaging with the crisis of the times, *Unemployment and Automation*, a 25-minute-long film by Atanu Majumder tackled the question of automation in the banking industry. While detailing the long list of films runs the risk of evoking a monotonous reading experience, I nonetheless mention them to provide a sense of the diverse narrative content as well as aesthetic experimentation of the Super-8 films of the decade.

I now shift from the content of the films to the infrastructures for producing them. What was the point of access for the camera that was necessary to make the films? Was there a network for informing film enthusiasts about possible avenues for procuring the equipment? I glean the sub-section "Super Market" to understand these specificities that were indispensable to the movement. Advertised for sale on the bulletin was an Elmo Super-8 XL Sound 3000 AF (Macro) Camera. The features of the camera included "autofocus, low light zoom lens (F-1.2, 3X Zoom), One touch Macro filming, predrive and Electromagnetic release mechanism, 18fps and single frame shooting."[25)] Advertised alongside was an Eumig S936 (Automatic duoplay) Super-8 sound movie projector constituting features such as "18 & 24 fps projection, microphone & auxiliary sound recording, auto-

23) Saumen Guha and Partha Chatterjee, "At First Sight," *Super-8 in India* 1, no. 1 (1984), 1.
24) Saumen Guha and Partha Chatterjee, "For Your Eyes and Ears," *Super-8 in India* 1, no. 1 (1984), 2.
25) Saumen Guha and Partha Chatterjee, "Super Market," *Super-8 in India* 1, no. 1 (1984), 4.

matic/Manual level control."[26] The camera and the projector were offered at a cumulative price of 12000 INR by Gautam De, a resident of Bejoygarh, Calcutta. Within the aforementioned price, the offer also included accessories for both the equipment. The camera was meant to be sold with "wrist strap, earphone, earphone adopter, action mike EC-204 (may be connected with or without chord), 1.5 V G 13 Silver oxide cells, Mike chord, chord spool, Mike stand, eye cap, hard carry case."[27] Accessories with the projector included "microphone with stand, recording earphone, connecting chord, film spool, film cutter, one Phillips projection lamp, Microphone connecting lead."[28]

These elaborate details definitely offer a glimpse into the technological paraphernalia that sustained the movement. It also helps us to comprehend how socially inclusive the movement had actually been. Considering that the camera and the projector cost 12000 INR back in the 1980s, it would not be misplaced to argue that only a specific class of people could afford to buy the equipment. However, this does not mean that the equipment could only be utilized by the class with sufficient purchasing power who could afford to own the equipment. The fact that there were workshops or seminars where people trained with the format on a hands-on basis presents a clue that people might have had the possibility to use the format without necessarily owning the equipment. Guha corroborated this in his interview when he recounted that fellow film activists often made Super-8 films with the equipment he personally owned. There is also archival evidence to support this axis of enquiry. For instance, the section "To Shoot Or…" in *Super-8 in India* recorded the names and addresses of people or organisations that could provide professional consultancy or equipment rentals for filmmaking. Enlisted under the section were Saumen Guha (with his ensemble of Nizo sound camera, a GOKO editor and a Eumigo projector with a sound recording facility) and Mridanga Cultural Organisation with the latter renting projectors and facilitating screenings of Super-8 films.

The bulletin also highlighted the need for education and training in the format, attempting to dislodge the commonly held perception that Super-8 was meant for amateurs that did not require sufficient skill or technological understanding. It makes sense here to address the fact that amateurism has been a dominant template for analysing small-gauge film production. Stefan Szczelkun offers a history of amateur film, noting that amateurism emerged between 1880 and 1920 to culturally invert the notion of economic professionalism, representing "spontaneous, anarchic, whimsical, personal, subjective" impulses, besides freedom and innovation.[29] With the gradual pervasiveness of the notion of leisure, the meaning reversed, associating amateurism with "poverty of technique, lack of sophisticated aesthetic judgement and intellectual incoherence."[30] Szczelkun provides an insightful account of the development of different film formats such as 16 mm and 8 mm and argues that the introduction of Super-8 in 1965 made filmmaking accessible to those who had low incomes. While Guha also elaborated upon the cost-effectiveness of the format, his rationale was to counter the notion that Super-8 was solely an amateur enterprise.

26) Ibid.
27) Ibid.
28) Ibid.
29) Szczelkun, "The Value of Home Movies," 94–98.
30) Ibid.

This explains his intensive investment into different models for training filmmakers. Therefore, I find the notion of activism more pertinent to discussing the movement in Calcutta than the analytical trope of "amateurism" that has been broadly used in scholarship on narrow-gauge formats. Patricia Zimmermann does complicate the issue, moving beyond binaries "of the accomplished professional versus the deficient, privatized amateur" and underscoring "localized microhistories rather than nationalized, phantasmatic representations."[31] Highlighting how the lens of failure is frequently employed in discourses pertaining to amateur films, the author notes that amateur films "are often viewed as cinematic failures infused by an innocent naivety and innocence, a primitive cinema without semiotic density."[32]

Mapping the discourses pertaining to Super-8 in Calcutta by speaking to filmmakers who had been associated with the movement, I realised that "failure" was a pervasive notion. The movement was deemed a failure because of its swift waning away with the advent of VHS, besides the supposed lack of technical quality of its films. However, Guha was articulate about the intentionality of the movement and the plethora of possibilities that the movement promised. It was perceived as a gateway for providing an alternative iconoclastic vision of the world that was structurally obliterated by the mainstream media. This resonates with Zimmermann's theoretical premise in which she underlines how cultural production, facilitated by capitalist transactions, occupies a privileged position. This effectively side-lines other cultural productions that develop within "families, political collectivities or marginalized identities."[33] She argues that amateur film poses a threat to "dominant visualities," thereby engendering "a significant site of cultural struggle over who has power to create media and to enter into representation."[34] While the author's arguments align with the rationale of the film movement's participants, a crucial point of departure lies in the preference of the term "people's gauge" over "amateur" to signify the impetus behind the movement in Calcutta.

Undeniably, at the core of the movement lay the motivation to familiarise people with the appropriate method of employing the technology by training them on the format. In this vein, the aforementioned bulletin *Super-8 in India* quoted Leny Lipton, who argued that there was more value to Super-8 than just being a technology that could be regarded as an inferior training format for aspiring filmmakers. Lipton further noted:

> There is a fantastic degree of prejudice on the part of professional filmmakers and film instructors, maybe because they cut their teeth on 16 or 35 mm. In their heart of hearts, they have scant respect for this preposterously tiny format… Super-8 actually requires more skill to turn out a decent film than the larger formats because the Super-8 frame is so tiny. If the last drop of quality is not present in the original photography and sound and if all the post-production operations aren't carried out me-

31) Patricia R. Zimmermann, "Morphing History into Histories: From Amateur Film to the Archive of the Future," in *Mining the Home Movie: Excavations in Histories and Memories*, eds. Karen L. Ishizuka and Patricia R. Zimmermann (California: University of California Press, 2008), 275–288.
32) Ibid.
33) Ibid.
34) Ibid.

> ticulously, the finished film will suffer greatly. Super-8 filmmakers have to be consumate craftspeople (sic).[35]

This quote was followed by an extensive reading recommendation list, which mentioned not only the book titles but also the public libraries in Calcutta where they could be accessed. The list was divided into two parts with a total of fourteen book suggestions. While the first part pertained to a general overview, the second part focused on literature that was indispensable for learning the technical aspects of filmmaking. The quote from Lipton, and the subsequent reading recommendations, point to an attempt towards legitimizing and ascribing value to Super-8 by highlighting the possibilities engendered by the format. Citing Lipton to critique the techno-elitist dismissal of Super-8 by professional filmmakers, the editors articulated the persistent need for training in the format. They also recognised the problematic technological discourses of hierarchy that had congealed around the format. The recommended literature in the "Book Shelf" section included *Independent Film Making* and *Lipton on Film Making* by Leny Lipton in Part 1 and *The Technique of Documentary Film Production* by W. H. Baddeley (among others). The second part incorporated *Technique of Film Editing* by Karel Reisz and Gavin Miller and *Oxford Companion to Films* by Lizanne Bawdwen, besides other relevant suggestions.

Following up on the reading suggestions was an announcement of upcoming festivals where filmmakers could send their films. In this context, "The Local Event" in Cologne invited amateur filmmakers to submit Super-8 films that were shot in their immediate geographical setting. The competition had been planned for the Photokina in Cologne (then West Germany) from October 10 to October 16, 1984. The winners would be awarded with cash or other prizes and would also be offered a visit to Photokina in Cologne. The maximum length of the films submitted for the competition could not exceed 3 minutes. This announcement was followed by the notification of "Movies on Shoestring" festival, which solicited films for the 26th amateur film competition, scheduled for the first weekend of May 1984 in New York. Award winners would be able to participate in a travelling show so that the films could be screened in hospitals, clubs, and schools as well as for other potential audiences within the Rochester area. The deadline for the entries was the last week of March. The delineation of such details indicates an interest to be in the information loop about global initiatives pertaining to Super-8. This global imaginary congealing around Super-8 can also be gleaned from the previously mentioned newspaper report that argued that third-world countries were lagging behind in global filmmaking exercises with the format. Consistent with efforts to legitimise the movement in Calcutta, and attribute cultural currency to it, was the critical strategy of locating the global context against which the local filmmaking experiments could be positioned. There was a curious consensus among the film enthusiasts and the media reports of the time that the movement in Calcutta had to catch up to the experimental and alternative vigour of Super-8 that was visible in the global regime.[36] This global imaginary surrounding Super-8 lay at

35) Saumen Guha and Partha Chatterjee, "On Records," *Super-8 in India* 1, no. 1 (1984), 4–5.

36) To learn more about the global exercises on Super-8, see Amrita Biswas, "Tracing Kolkata's cinephilic encounters: An analysis of alternative cinema in the city," *Studies in South Asian Film & Media* 10, no. 2 (2019), 113–128. The following page can also provide useful details: "Super-8 mm movement in West Bengal."

the core of the discourse of aesthetic, political, and creative possibilities that the format enabled.

What is this global imaginary, though? I understand this imaginary as a manifestation of interest to integrate into the global cultural networks that actively participated in ventures surrounding the format. Being situated within the network would enable the accruement of knowledge about the technological and aesthetic or narrative experiments that were being globally conducted on Super-8. The motivation behind the organisation of lectures, seminars, or workshops in Calcutta was to familiarise aspiring filmmakers with the global engagements with the format. The goal was to encourage a vigorous critical investment into Super-8 that would align the local along the global trajectories. Such an opportunity would inevitably extend the horizon for the distribution and screening possibilities for the films. This aspiration of being incorporated into the network resonated in the "Festivals in Review" section of the bulletin under discussion, *Super-8 in India*. The section offered a brief summary of the 1983 Super-8 film festival in Calcutta, that I discuss in the next segment of this paper. Recognising the festival to be a success, the review noted that thirty-three films from six different states had been screened during the festival that was attended by almost six hundred viewers on a daily average. The award winners were decided by the audience who voted *Sam Vedana* by Mukunt Sawant, *Bubai* by Burnpur film society, and *Havenots* by M C Anand as the respective first, second and third winners. On December 21, a meeting between the different filmmakers was scheduled, followed up by prize distribution and a screening of the winning entries as well as four non-competitive entries. The festival was significant because it established contact between the filmmakers and offered a glimpse into the status of Super-8 filmmaking in India. The festival's success ignited an optimism that the network of Super-8 would soon be a reality, facilitating efficient distribution and screening opportunities for the films. During the festival, it was also announced that a non-competitive festival would take place in Calcutta in March 1984 to further enable and contribute to an expanding Super-8 network.

Positioning of a People's Gauge

To decipher the spirit behind the 1983 festival, I turn to the bulletin *Filmilieu* that was published for the eve of the first Indian Super-8 film festival. It began with a word from the editors that posited the motive of the publication:

> It is time for us to believe that Super-8 film and social surrounding can no longer be considered to be separated from each other. We believe more that Super-8 can come up as weapon against the malignant society. So has come Filmilieu to speak for films, festival and society.[37)]

37) Saumen Guha, Rana Sengupta, Saswata Bhadra, and Suddhasatwa Basu, *Filmilieu*, no. 1 (1983), 1.


ON THE EVE OF THE FIRST IND AN SUPER–8 FILM FESTIVAL

FILMILIEU

Bulletin No. 1 17th December–1983 Price : 75 Paise

It is time for us to believe that Super-8 film and Social Surrounding can no longer be considered to be separated from each other. We believe more that Super-8 can come up as weapon against the malignant socie'y. So has come FILMILIEU to speak for films, festival and society.

SOUMEN GUHA, RANA SENGUPTA, SASWATA BHADRA SUDDHASATWA BASU

PEOPLE'S GAUZE : SUPER - 8

Super-8 is a new comer in India. But it had already captured hearts of conscious cine-lovers. It has come for a permanent place for an alternative medium—a place for constructive

The History Fingerpoint

Super-8

Soumen Guha

World had always witnessed two kinds of movements everyw One was social and other arose from Art. But whatever were

Figure 1: The front page of *Filmilieu* bulletin. Photograph by the author from the personal collections of Amit Bandopadhyay, April 2021

The section "People's Gauze: Super-8" included a brief interview with Dilip Banerjee and Asit Dasgupta of Chitra Chetana, which organised the 1983 festival along with the Jadavpur University Film Society.[38] The interview began with a short epigraph that condensed the spirit behind the movement: of heralding an "alternative medium" and a "constructive movement."[39] The main objective for organizing the festival was the popularisation of the "people's gauze."[40] Being a finance-intensive medium, cinema entailed issues concerning who could afford and utilise the technology that configured it. As the mainstream industry was detached from the masses, the organisers deemed it necessary to develop an alternative medium of communication that could engage with the quotidian struggles of people's lives directly. Positing the technological and financial gains that the format facilitated, the organisers claimed that they were not against 16 or 35 mm, but they were more conscious of the possibilities facilitated by the specific Super-8 gauge.[41] The advantages included "the minimum expenditure in mounting and screening of the films," which could offer the scope to any individual to become a filmmaker and attribute visibility to the in-

38) The article "Super-8 mm movement in West Bengal" offers an understanding of these different organizations: "There were other independent groups who discussed and analysed films more thoroughly and were very quick in taking up film making once an affordable and feasible opening came. People's Film Workshop (PFW), Jadavpur University Film Society (JUFS), *Chitra Chetana…* were among such groups."

39) Debashis Das, Atanu Sen, and Saswata Bhadra, "People's Gauze: Super-8," *Filmilieu*, no. 1 (1983), 1, 4.

40) Ibid, 1.

41) Alexandra Schneider's work on small-gauge private film collections as an important source for film historiography is a seminal work that unearths the potentialities of small-gauge films and argues how such collections constitute viable archives that can address gaps in the knowledge of film history. Focusing on European collectors of the 1930s, Schneider argues that the films can be read as efficient templates for filmmaking. In its interest in mapping the possibilities harboured by small-gauge films, the author offers a cue for understanding the impetus behind the movement in Calcutta.

terests of the people.[42] The dynamic mobility of the camera also created the opportunity for any individual to render on celluloid whatever she saw and experienced on a daily basis in her immediate social surroundings. Hailing the festival as the first of its kind in India, the organisers argued that there had been sporadic attempts at screening Super-8 films, even by the Poone Film Institute (now FTII, Pune). However, there were no institutional attempts at organizing a nationwide festival that could create a space for popularizing the gauge for filmmaking. The response received for the festival was also overwhelming. While initially there were apprehensions about the number of entries that would be received, eventually, the organisers had sufficient entries, almost forty to forty-five, that prompted a three-day long festival. The publicity also aided in garnering support as many organisers extended their help. Specifically, Cine Super-8, the processor of Super-8 films and the maker of the projectors, declared to present the first and second awards to the winning entries.

How was the network that enabled all the filmmakers to gather at the festival forged, though? The organisers admitted that they were clueless about the developments taking place in Super-8 beyond West Bengal. Thus, they got in touch with numerous organisers who were interested in the format to know the names of films that were being made in different provinces. Later, they inserted an advertisement in the *Screen* magazine, which was enthusiastically responded to. Film director Girish Cassaravalli extended his support by issuing a press statement and contacting filmmakers and informing them about the festival. The motive was to mobilise this opportunity provided by the festival to build an infrastructure surrounding the format with an active involvement of the various organisers and filmmakers who participated in the festival.

The festival commenced with the screening of a non-competitive inaugural film. It was strategically divided between two sections: one competitive, the other non-competitive. For the latter, most of the films were sent by Birla Technological Museum. The non-competitive section also screened films that were acquired through the personal networks of the organizing committee. For the competitive section, the festival incorporated a novel methodology in adjudging the winning entries, much in alignment with its emphasis on delineating Super-8 as a people's format. While the prevalent mode of judgement in film festivals depended on a jury headed by a chairman, the Calcutta festival introduced the Audience Voting System. This was to highlight the opinions of the viewing audience and not posit established film personalities or urban intellectuals as the undisputed owners of cultural capital. Such a technique offered primacy to the people's judgement and considered the fact that their perspective might be different from that of the juries. Underlining the right to vote that every audience possessed, the organisers were eager to attribute value to the audience's sense of judgement. The method comprised arranging two shows of the same film within a day to a maximum viewing capacity of three hundred people. The audience had to mark the film on a range of zero to ten. In this way, every film generated six hundred marking sheets. The sheets were then handed over for tabulation, and the winners were declared based on their average score. This alternative method of judgement was supported by the personnel of WOLF, who undertook the responsibility of distribut-

42) Ibid.

ing and collecting the score sheets as well as tabulating the final scores for each individual film.

Addressing anticipations about the initiatives that would follow up after the festival to publicise the format, the organisers narrated their proposal to the Federation of Film Societies for arranging screenings of Super-8 films in all clubs of West Bengal. The activists working extensively on the format also decided that a publication called "Network" would be issued to explicate the technical specificities surrounding Super-8. Despite being optimistic about the festival before its inauguration, the organisers rued the lack of recognition and respect that the format was subjected to in India. They also stressed the necessity of eradicating the "ignorance, sheer neglect and conservations about the medium" that, they believed, had hampered the format's development.[43] The only strategy for circumventing such stasis lay in the active organisation of platforms and institutions that would enable a concerted publicity around the media format.

Configuration of a Film Movement

In the bulletin's section "The History Fingerpoints Super-8," Saumen Guha drew an elaborate genealogy of film movements around the world to ruminate upon whether India had a concerted film movement. He opined that even though the Western waves of experimentation with celluloid had reached India, they had hardly created any significant ripples. He blamed this shortcoming on the orientation of the films towards being cultural exports that would guarantee financial affluence as well as international fame. Critiquing the spate of state-sponsored films, Guha argued that being sponsored by the government, these films would please and satisfy the producer, besides keeping intact the "Indian archetype" to incur profits from overseas markets.[44] Expressing his anguish over the state of filmmaking that prevailed in the country, Guha claimed that Super-8 could be a powerful weapon in a situation where the state-corporate nexus controlled cultural production. Voicing his optimism about the format, he argued that Super-8 could bridge the gap in mass communication. To get a glimpse of the life led by common people, Super-8 needed filmmakers who possessed creativity, insight, and empathy to realise the "social scourge" that had victimised "common people."[45] Thinking of the format in conjunction with the depiction of reality, Guha suggested that the format harboured the potential for offering an undistorted vision of reality that was never the priority for mainstream filmmaking.

It is intriguing that Guha questioned the efficacy of concerted film movements in India while the film society movement had already gained a strong foothold in diverse regions within the country. The question is a strategic one, aimed at locating the urgency and currency of Super-8 movement within the context of the film society movement. The question, while arguing for the need of a new movement, undeniably triggers curiosities about why the film society movement was not considered a significant movement within

43) Ibid, 4.
44) Saumen Guha, "The History Fingerpoints Super-8," *Filmilieu*, no. 1 (1983), 3.
45) Ibid.

the country. In this vein, the bulletin's section "Film Movement: The Indian Perspective" calls for attention since it offers a glimpse into the anxieties and disappointments that prevailed around the film society movement. In an interview with Suvendu Das Gupta, a veteran film society activist, the editors deliberated over the causes behind the failure of the movement and strove to locate the possibilities stimulated by the Super-8 movement over and above the film society movement. Such a comparative analytical lens offers significant strands to think through the notion of failure.

Acknowledging the film society movement as a failure, Das Gupta explained that the failure could be attributed to the fact that it was an established movement that undeniably entailed official restrictions. The central organisation, the F.F.S.I. (Federation of Film Societies of India), was bound to operate in tandem with the rules and regulations of the local police authorities as well as the corporation and foreign embassies. The restrictive nature of such regulations undeniably adversely affected the trajectory of development of what was considered to be a film movement. The movement was limited to screening some foreign films and publishing articles on them in film society magazines without having a definite purpose. The activists who published the magazines deemed themselves to be cultural elites, powered by a form of education or cultural training and taste that made them believe in their superiority over other members of the cinema clubs. The other members were therefore subjected to contempt for lacking cultural training and a sense of judgement. The screenings were restricted only to members of the film societies, thereby reducing the reach of the movement because it was premised on the idea of exclusion of non-members. This resulted in a specific cluster of people affiliating themselves to the movement: the "intelligent, educated and well-off ones."[46] It can be argued that the class dynamics of the movement were pertinent. The only interest of the members pertained to watching foreign films. The film societies presented programmes with foreign films to the members because when programmes with a definite purpose were scheduled, the turnout would be miserable. Providing a statistical figure, Das Gupta noted that among two thousand members, only twenty-five to thirty would turn up whenever there was an experimentation in the programme schedule. Similarly, publishing articles with a specific purpose would sell only one hundred to one hundred fifty copies. Thus, there was a crucial disparity between the preferences of the organisers and those of the other members. Das Gupta concluded that the members would not respond favourably since their interests were often very different from those of the organisers.

Citing the reasons for the movement's failure to "develop into a real film movement," he suggested that a movement could never be sustained by only a handful of members.[47] While the masses were acquainted "with the trash" of mainstream cinema, they were not familiar with film as a full-fledged medium. Das Gupta further opined that people were oblivious of the strength of media and the far-reaching positive effects that it could achieve. The complex technology and the congruent issue of its affordability further restricted the use of the technology to a specific cluster of filmmakers with the cultural and financial

46) Rana Sengupta, Debjyoti Santanu, and Debasish Das, "Film Movement: The Indian Perspective; A couple of hours with Suvendu Das Gupta," *Filmilieu*, no. 1 (1983), 2.

47) Ibid.

currency to make films. The disinterest of the political parties also plagued Das Gupta since it was a significant factor that impeded the hopes and ambitions of film society activists who wanted the movement to be a "weapon of proletariat class struggle."[48] Das Gupta argued that the movement, therefore, remained elitist and estranged from the masses.

Das Gupta's interview throws light upon the aspirations and disappointments that had congealed around the film society movement. It also helps us to comprehend the culturally elitist understanding of media that had been harboured by film society activists who ironically critiqued the same notion. Das Gupta's reconnaissance of mainstream media as trash makes one speculate about the conception of media that was deemed legitimate by cultural activists. There is a curious consistency between the perspectives of Saumen Guha and Das Gupta on the issue of what constitutes real media or real movement. While Guha was dismissive of the spill-over of the Super-8 format into pornographic exercises, Das Gupta was critical of the media that pervaded the masses and was anxious about the aspirations surrounding the film society movement.

Nonetheless, the Super-8 movement embedded seeds of hope. A "real film movement," Das Gupta argued, was possible only when it was anchored into a specific political perspective.[49] Since all movements germinated from social problems, Das Gupta believed that such movements would be effective, when conducted under the aegis of the revolutionary communist party. He explained that the contemporary communist leaders of Bengal had failed to engage with the film society movement's potential. Their participation was limited to distributing film grants to a selective cluster of filmmakers. However, the need of the hour was infrastructural development for expanding the film exhibition circuit. Such lack of infrastructure prevented the handful of "good films," that had already been made, from reaching the people and the areas where such films would carry a significant message. Prioritising the need for film exhibition over that for production, Das Gupta claimed that instead of the former, the latter's potential would never optimally flourish. Still, the technology- and finance-intensive media industry could be infiltrated by employing the Super-8 as a "powerful weapon in the hands of an artist committed to the cause of class struggle."[50] Super-8 thus contained the possibility of creating media by circumventing the established hierarchies and structures of film production. Critiquing the existing power structures, Das Gupta lamented that dependence on the state-corporate nexus for financing a film often deprived the artist of creative aspirations about the film. Being "trapped in the system," the artist would undeniably have to act "according to the terms and conditions of the contract."[51] It is significant to underline here the contempt that the festival organisers manifested towards the reception of grants for filmmaking from private producers or the state. This was evidenced in their question:

48) Ibid.
49) Ibid.
50) Ibid.
51) Ibid, 3.

> "What role do the revolutionary film makers who are making revolutionary films with money from the state and private entrepreneurs, play in exhibiting their films to the public?"[52)]

The sarcasm in the question underscores the organisers' belief that any revolutionary film was impossible under the aegis of the state-corporate conglomerate. This thread of argument was, nevertheless, important to herald the urgent need for Super-8. It emphasised the potential of Super-8 for providing relief from such financial and aesthetic traps by offering independence from institutional structures that dictated forms of filmmaking. The iconoclastic impetus associated with the movement became more pronounced when the interviewers asked whether any progressive film movement could develop by being dependent on the establishment. The spirit of the activists associated with the Super-8 movement was defined by an anti-establishment vigour, in conjunction with the motivation to reach a wide audience and incorporate them within the film movement. The anti-establishment impetus behind Super-8 had a historical and cultural specificity to it. Tracing a genealogy of the efforts invested into developing an alternative media, Guha argued that it is significant to understand that Super-8 did not emerge within a vacuum. It germinated within a politico-cultural substrate that could be defined by the little magazine culture of Calcutta or the different movements that moulded the political contours of the city. [53)]

Conclusion

This paper shifts the emphasis from the "quality" of films produced to the horizon of possibilities stimulated by the Super-8 movement in Calcutta.[54)] This analytical arc dislodges the notion of failure that the movement's activists have associated with it. Circling back to the theorization of Appadurai and Alexander, I read failure as the reflection of a specific interpretive stance that is anchored into constellations of power as well as technological and cultural capital. Mobilizing the critical notion of failure allows me to analyse the promises and potentials ushered in by the movement, moving beyond questions of technical or aesthetic "quality" of the Super-8 films.[55)] Thus, I underscore the initiatives and practices related to the format, such as lectures, workshops, and festivals that the activists organised for rendering visibility to the movement. The rationale behind this analysis is to read the motivation behind such activities and the aspirations they were geared towards. I understand such practices as forms of politico-cultural activism that sought to create an

52) Ibid.

53) Guha mentioned the food movement of 1966 as an incident that triggered massive grievance against the state. The resistance to the state was often expressed in wall magazines, table magazines, or even little magazines which could be published at a minimal cost. He argued that the politico-cultural impetus that gained momentum with these movements significantly shaped the development of the Super-8 movement.

54) I use the name "Calcutta" instead of the contemporary name "Kolkata" since the paper focuses on the Super-8 movement during the 1980s, a decade when the city was recognised as "Calcutta."

55) I use the word quality within quotations to posit my understanding that it is a dynamic notion that cannot have standardized models of reference or templates of judgement.

alternative media that engaged with quotidian aspects of the lives of common people. As the activists associated with the movement argued, the aim was to popularise the potential harboured by Super-8 to focus on people's interests through the people's gauge. The movement also had a political impetus with a strong iconoclastic charge that was determined to free media from the control of the state-corporate nexus. The anti-establishment fervour, as evidenced in the bulletins, publications, and questionnaires that were issued in congruence with the movement, was fostered by the belief that media could not be independent if they relied on support from the state or from private producers. The imperative behind the activism was to establish a cultural network that would facilitate the creation of alternative media, independent of the structural hierarchies manifested by the mainstream film industry. The film movement's ambitions were not limited to experimenting with cinematic language. They were also channelised towards the production of media that could critique the social and economic conditions of life, to which the mainstream media was oblivious. In this vein, I position the practices that developed around the format as politico-cultural forms of activism that aspired towards the materialisation of an alternative media culture, free from the aegis of the state-corporate conglomerate.

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Filmography

Calcutta-Oh (Charles Solomon, n. d.)
Faces (Subhasis Mitra, n. d.)
From Copenhagen with Love (Saumen Guha, 1980)
Jala Nahi Mile (Saumen Guha, n. d.)
Silent Calcutta (Saumen Guha, 1980)
Unemployment and Automation (Atanu Majumder, n. d.)

Biography

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