

Excerpts from book reviews

dates.sites Bombay Mumbai

Text: Madhusree Dutta, Graphics: Shilpa Gupta and Madhusree Dutta; Tulika Books / Columbia University Press

Time and space are the chief stuff of conventional history-writing. The book *dates.sites* by Madhusree Dutta takes such a framework, and with admirable brevity, as the titles suggest. This book, then, is a book of history but not quite as we know it. Chronology is at the centre of the conventional historical enterprise – one that the book takes as an organizing principle, organizing the chapters by consecutive decades. Timelines have been the most trusted instruments of professional historians; in recent years, documentation has also gained popularity. Both these are also devices that this book uses. But there the similarity ends. Timelines and geographical charts in the hands of professional historians are the building blocks of master-narratives of the world, regional or national histories. Documentation means taking files from an archive, editing and printing them in sequence to accord fixity and construct authoritative accounts. The author of this book has subverted both these instruments: the timeline and documentation. She has made the timeline a flexible and dynamic instrument – a line that is anything but a straight line. It is jagged and ragged; it zigzags and segues into arrows and circles. She has also unravelled the narrative into discrete facts to hold them in multiple simultaneous inter-relationships, to present the possibilities of plural and dialogic narratives – to make, unmake and remake, in a seemingly unending process that goes beyond what we see and read. We get a book that its covers cannot contain: its bits and pieces spill into other dates and sites that are suggested, provoked and, at times, vaguely signalled to.

Prof. Samita Sen,
in Social Scientist, 2013

... With a narrative as unconventional as this, there are as many ways to 'read' it as there are people. Some might want to dip into it at random, or pick a decade they're interested in. Someone else might choose to be guided by the cornucopia of images. The visuals in the book are of two kinds. There are found images, often in fragmented form – old photographs, postcards, advertisements, logos, letters and telegrams, magazine images, paintings – and also a series of 100-odd 'calendars' created by several artists as a contemporary homage to the long popular history of calendar art in India. Both kinds act as triggers to the imagination, sending the brain off in all sorts of associative directions. Most are anything but illustrative, working instead as a tangential narrative that can open up the text in new ways. On p.19, for instance, there is a series of images of sea and ships – what looks like a picture postcard, a stamped envelope dated 5-9-1972, a technical drawing of a ship. These bear no actual relationship to the early 1900s timeline on that page, but they do somehow alter one's appreciation of the fact that the foundation of Alexandra Dock was laid in 1905 "to meet rising traffic of goods and traders". Other images are more strictly historical. For instance, Abeer Gupta's calendar for 1949, 'Liberty', is a faux-advertisement for Liberty Cinema: 'Showplace of the Nation', with the Indian flag flying above it and the theatre-front displaying a poster of Mehboob's *Andaz*, which was indeed the first film shown at Liberty when it opened in 1949 as the first airconditioned theatre in Bombay that was devoted to Hindi films.

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dates.sites is a Benjaminian archive of the materiality of cinema in Bombay/Mumbai. Accessible, joyful and packed with possibility, this is a book every film-lover should have on her shelf.

Trisha Gupta in Biblio, Nov.-Dec. 2012

A useful compendium of facts, dates and significant moments compiled and designed by Madhusree Dutta and Shilpa Gupta, the book emerges out of Cinema City, a collaborative arts and archival project involving artists, architects, filmmakers, commentators, cityphiles and cinephiles... What emerges out of this seemingly playful but substantive timeline is not only a history of Bombay cinema but innumerable micro-narratives — factoids, anecdotes, observations and comments — that shape and texture the larger story.

Shohini Ghosh,

in Economic and Political Weekly, 2013
