

Interview with Indian filmmaker Rahul Roy, director of *The Factory*

Lee Parsons

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On November 25 the WSWWS posted a detailed comment on Rahul Roy's 132-minute documentary, *The Factory*.

This important film chronicles the struggle of autoworkers at the assembly plant operated by Maruti Suzuki India (MSI), a subsidiary of the Japanese automaker Suzuki, in Manesar, Haryana in northern India, 30 miles from New Delhi.

The documentary treats the extended struggle by the Manesar MSI workers against India's largest automaker and against a company union. As a result of their determined efforts, the workers inevitably came into conflict with the police, the courts and the Haryana state government ruled by the Congress Party. *The Factory* exposes the collusion of the company and political establishment in a brutal and ongoing frame-up of the leaders of the new, independent union, along with dozens of militant workers.

In July 2012 company goons instigated an altercation on the factory floor that ended with the plant on fire and one manager dead—the only manager, in fact, whom the workers considered sympathetic to them.

As the result of this incident, nearly 150 workers face bogus charges of murder, arson and other major crimes. Most of them were detained until recently, when 112 finally obtained bail. Thirty-six leaders of the Maruti Suzuki Workers Union remain in jail.

Rahul Roy graduated from the Mass Communication Research Centre at Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi in 1987 with a post-graduate degree in filmmaking. Since then he has worked as an independent documentary filmmaker.

Roy is the Director of Aakar, a Delhi-based trust that works in the area of media, culture and research. He is currently coordinating *The Justice Project*, a South Asian regional research and film project that will produce 15 research papers and five films on the theme of justice and conflict.

On December 1, I spoke with Roy in Toronto.

Lee Parsons: How did you first learn about the situation with the workers at this factory?

Rahul Roy: The Maruti struggle has been a quite iconic working class struggle in India and a unique one. People have been aware of the situation since 2011 when the fight to form a union started at the Manesar factory, the second one which Maruti Suzuki set up in India.

Then in July 2012 this incident happened, after the union had given management a list of demands in March, in which a manager died and 149 workers were arrested and charged with murder.

It's fairly clear that this is part of a larger design. The fact that 149 workers are charged with murder and 2,500 workers get dismissed—it is very big.

At this time there was a series of discussion programs on mainstream television. What I found peculiar was that there seemed to be all kinds of representations from corporate management, and from family members of the manager who unfortunately died, but there was hardly any voice of the workers in any of these discussions.

It was not surprising to me, given the fact that no one in the media wants

to hear the voice of the workers. But it also pointed to the fact that here was one of most articulate groups of workers, and most politicized, and they've been completely silenced by the media. So that's where the idea started.

LP: What do you mean by the most articulate and politicized workers?

RR: In the course of the struggle which went on for a year and a half, these workers got politicized in a way that did not just reflect the immediate goal of forming a union. They were asking very fundamental questions of management and addressing themselves to the larger working class population in that industrial area.

They were questioning the production process and profits, they were looking into the economy of running the plant and also coming up with new and radical ideas for the area. For example, there's always been a mechanism by which the permanent workers and the contract workers have been prevented from uniting. Here was a struggle that was built on the solidarity between the temporary workers and the regular workers which was fairly unique. Because the union doesn't represent the temporary or contract workers.

LP: That's the company union?

RR: Yes, the company union.

LP: Was there no effort on the part of any other union federation or political organization to form a union against the company union prior to this?

RR: No. In this factory, opened in 2007, there was never a union—not even a company-affiliated union. Then the demand for the union emerged and the workers started organizing themselves. The company tried to foist their puppet union, which was functioning in the nearby Gurgaon factory, onto this new factory, something which was rejected outright by the workers.

So in 2012 the factory actually didn't have a union of any sort, not even a puppet union. So you see what happened was that the demand to form a union came independently from the workers. Once that demand came, various political parties got interested.

To get a union registered is a very, very tough task in India because you need to get it registered through the government labor office and to get that means you need to have the backing of a large existing union.

What mostly happens is that a lot of these unions begin with the demands of the workers, but then the big players take them on: the big central trade unions, the unions of the two Communist parties, the CPI [Communist Party of India] and the CPIM [Communist Party of India (Marxist)]. The Congress Party also has its union, and the right-wing parties have theirs.

In this case, the workers were aware of the dangers of becoming part of one of these formations.

LP: What particular dangers would those be?

RR: There is a general apprehension that most of these unions are corrupt and that they work hand in glove with management.

One of the peculiarities of this factory was that most of the workers

were in their 20s, both the permanent and the contract workers. They were in the same age group and they hung around together, they lived in the same areas.

They also had the intelligence to start a dialogue with a range of political parties. If you asked them, they would say, "Look, we are talking to everyone. We are taking everyone's advice, we are listening very carefully to what everyone is saying, but our decisions are our own." So they discussed with various people and listened to various ideas. They took the decision, in the end, not to affiliate with any of the big trade unions.

LP: Which raises the question, if the existing political options are exhausted, how do they see their struggle being advanced?

RR: Certain things were happening organically within the context of real struggle. I'll give you an example. The first time they struck, they decided not to move out of the factory, but to occupy it, which was unique to that area.

Most of the central trade unions would not agree to that. However, there was such popular support for them that none of the central trade unions could afford to be completely distant or critical. They were forced into a position where they would be supportive to the workers. But at the same time try their little games, making them part of their union—that went on forever and ever.

LP: You may have been following the situation in the United States where there has been a rebellion by the autoworkers against the contract imposed by the union leaders, and this becomes the decisive question, the question of leadership.

RR: Yes, I have followed it, and it's part of similar struggles in the entire industrial world.

LP: What is your background, have you done this sort of film previously?

RR: I'm a filmmaker by training. Most of my films have been about informal labor, unorganized labor. This is the first time I've worked with the organized working class.

I started filming on July 18, 2013 and I filmed for one year, until exactly July 18, 2014; July 18, 2012 being the day when the incident happened at the factory. So I started filming at a time when the 149 workers were already in jail and there was a court case going on. Some 2,500 workers had been dismissed, their case was going on in the labor court. There had been a one-year attempt to put pressure on the management and the state outside the factory because a lot of the workers came from villages around where this factory is. So there were attempts to mobilize support from the villages, and hunger strikes and demonstrations.

LP: How would you characterize the current state of the film industry in India?

RR: In India the big film industry is Bollywood, the commercial industry. But there is also a very strong regional language cinema. Besides the Hindi cinema, which Bollywood represents, there are these parallel smaller industries all across the country, and they are also as commercialized as Bollywood.

But the more interesting thing that has happened in the last decade or so is the rise of the documentary in India. From the time I graduated film school in 1987 until the mid-1990s, if we made a film that got picked up and appreciated, and if it had a hundred screenings, we'd think we had made a really big film.

But now, in the last say 12 years or so, a huge screening culture for documentary films has developed, which is completely underground, in the sense that it is very informal. It happens on a small scale, but it's happening all over—small towns to big cities, everywhere documentaries are being watched which is a complete radical shift in our own lifetime.

Now we have no real idea of where our films are being shown and this is happening without a formal distribution system. It's that much more difficult for the state to control it.

The Factory been received? How has

RR: I've been screening it recently and will be screening it much more intensively in 2016. In Mumbai I had a screening at a working class trade union center with workers, as well as trade union leaders there, and it was very well received. There's a demand now that I screen it with the trade unions in different parts of the country, so now I'm going to start that process.

LP: What is the current situation for the workers who are still in jail?

RR: The case is still going on. We're expecting the judgment in the next couple of months. Thirty-four workers are still in jail. The rest of them got bail four or five months back. The labor case is still pending. Nothing has moved on that front.

A few months ago there was a strike by the contract workers, and the tragic part is for the first time there was a rupture between the contract and permanent workers. There had been a settlement between the union and management where the regular workers got a big increase in their wages, while there was nothing for the contract workers. So the contract workers went on strike and about 500 or 600 temporary workers were dismissed. Then there was pressure and so management did come up with a settlement for the contract workers, which is peanuts compared to the regular workers.

LP: You talked about the difficulty in the film industry in India. More and more, we see parallels all over the world. In Hollywood increasingly everything is dominated by large corporations—what do you think of the global crisis in culture?

RR: If I were to look at cultural production in India as well as elsewhere, there was always in the past an important space that the worker had, there was always a certain representation which would come through. You might agree or disagree with that representation, but there was a certain interest in the working class and there would be stories and films about the working class. In India much more, in the West not so much, but even there you would find films that dealt with working class situations and stories. That has now changed.

In India you will not find one big film with a working class presence. And this corresponds with an actual growth in the working class. Now it's about selling a certain lifestyle in India. In the West, it's happened over a longer period of time, but in India it's happening at such a rapid rate you can sort of see it right in front of you. Films are more and more about the affluent, the rich. It's their life, it's their emotions, it's their stories, it's their struggles one sees now.

A certain part of India has gone missing completely which was not the case earlier. There are certain reasons for it. The commercial Hindi, Bollywood, Bombay cinema always had a lot of left writers and poets, because in India there's a lot of song and dance in the cinema. Poets have always been very intrinsic to cinema. The biggest names in Indian songwriting were all leftists, all had Communist pasts. They've gone. There is no one left.

LP: What do you mean gone? Do you mean since the collapse of the Soviet Union?

RR: One issue of course is that writers got old and passed on. The other is that the left in India—and you could even say the Communist Parties, who were much in tune with and following Soviet ideas about culture and cultural production—had very strong movements to intervene in the cultural field.

Those all collapsed as the Communist parties themselves started cracking up. And a lot of writers and artists were affected by the break-up of the Soviet Union, and a certain dream vanished. Before that, there was the issue of Stalinism and the questioning of the Communist Party in the context of the Soviet Union—I think that led to a lot of disappointment and moving away. So I think that all of those factors contributed.

Then there was movement that you could broadly describe as the Maoist movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s, which saw a lot of middle

class students and others joining it. With the Bangladeshi crisis in 1971, suddenly there was a lot of confusion about this too. China was supporting Pakistan, which was carrying out genocide in Bangladesh and millions of refugees were pouring into India. It was very contradictory. All of those things have in different ways contributed. The left artist no longer associated with the official Communist parties.

LP: You mentioned the upsurge in the popularity of documentary film in India, but of course this is an international phenomenon and even a commercial one. If you look at the recent Edward Snowden film, the possible influence of documentary film is enormous.

RR: What I keep arguing in India is that there is a merit to not becoming commercialized. One view is—why can't documentaries be shown in large theaters and have a proper release like the commercial cinema?—which to me is a dangerous argument because the moment you start becoming part of that the commercial interests are going to dominate and you then have to be profitable.

Then the people putting the money in will have more and more control as to what the story is. That's happening even in North America and parts of Europe. Then only one kind of documentary becomes the acceptable documentary—the kind that is about “the great human spirit,” and, you know, so-called “big stories.” By not being commercialized, we escape some of the pressure to conform to that.

We do films which we want to do. We don't have that kind of pressure on us to generate profits. We can get away with saying and doing whatever we want, and we don't even get censored that often and we still show the films all over. The moment you go into that larger scale, the state has an interest—they will look at it and give you certification, all those issues. So I think that the documentary has to survive as a rich and varied genre. Then it's important that it doesn't follow the route of the commercial fiction cinema.



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