Machines: An unflinching look at an Indian textile mill

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Written and directed by Rahul Jain; cinematography by Rodrigo Trejo Villanueva

In the early 1800s visionary poet William Blake bewailed the "dark satanic mills" of England's industrial revolution and their destructive physical and soul-destroying impact on thousands of working class men, women and children.

More than 200 years later, Indian-born, US-educated, filmmaker Rahul Jain has written and directed *Machines*, a 72-minute documentary about brutal labor exploitation in a Surat textile plant, one of the thousands in India's Gujarat state. An estimated 1.5 million people work in the city's massive textile industry whose working conditions are as bad, if not worse, than the "satanic mills" that horrified Blake.

Jain's documentary, which was shot over a three-year period and premiered in 2016, is the filmmaker's first feature. It is a significant debut and one that has been praised at various international film festivals and won several awards for its outstanding cinematography.

Machines is a visually austere but effective work. It has no musical score—the soundtrack is the constant din of the plant's machinery—nor is there any narration or explanatory on-screen titles, just brief comments from some of the mill workers and a company official.

Jain says that he was inspired by a childhood visit to a textile mill and years later by Sebastião Salgado's acclaimed book *Workers: Archaeology of the Industrial Age*, an extended photographic essay about some of the world's most exploited workers. These memories and images, he said, coming flooding back after the tragic death of over 1,000 garment workers in the Bangladesh Rana Plaza building collapse in 2013, and compelled him to make *Machines*.

The documentary confines itself to an unnamed mill in Surat, but typical of the thousands of factories in the region and other parts of India. The plant produces cloth for international retailers and fashion houses. Its beautifully patterned and brightly-coloured textiles stand in stark contrast to the bleak interior of the mill and its soul-destroying productivity demands.

Twelve-hour shifts, or longer, are the norm with constantly exhausted workers paid about 210 rupees or $3 a day. "We get nothing, no funds, no bonus, no holidays," one worker tells the filmmaker.

The mill is a virtual death trap—dark, cramped and with no proper ventilation or fire-fighting equipment—and dominated by the sound of weaving machines operated by workers using their bare hands. Cans of toxic chemicals and dyes are stored next to hundreds of bales of cloth. It is not difficult to imagine what would happen if a fire suddenly erupted.

Jain told an interviewer from *Variety*, "The factory smelled like an absolute vat of ammonia, the chemical. I'm serious. It was my sincere desire, in many ways, to bring ammonia to the screen, so that people can really feel the stench while they're watching this. Of course, that's not possible. But there's just this extreme sensory overwhelming nature of the way things are done there."

Exhausted teenage boys struggle to keep awake on the production line. Other workers are seen sleeping on bales of cloth during meal breaks. The mill does not appear to have any canteen facilities so workers eat next to the weaving machines or wherever they can on the factory floor.

Workers provide chilling accounts of their poor conditions and something of the economic circumstances that force then to endure the dehumanising and dangerous conditions.

One worker, originally from Utter Pradesh, some 1,600 km away, explains that he could not support his

family in that state and borrowed money to get to Surat where he eventually found work. He is still repaying the debt.

"Poverty is harassment, sir," he explains. "One has to forsake one's kids, wife and parents to come here. But you can't do anything, there is no cure." Later in the film a group of former farmers explain how drought destroyed their crops, also forcing them to migrate to Gujarat in search of work.

Another employee insists that he is not being exploited but works at the plant of his own free will. "Nobody is pressuring me," he says, but then admits, "We all come here in order to work because we are in debt. There are thousands like me."

The documentary features a chilling interview with the plant's well-dressed manager, who monitors the factory floor via CCTV in his office. Arrogant and full of class hatred, he bluntly declares that wage increases only encourage laziness.

Half the workforce, he says, "don't take care of their families" and only spend any pay rise on tobacco and other "rotten things."

The workers would be more committed to the company, he declares, "if their bellies are empty." Most of these workers, like millions of others throughout the Indian manufacturing industry, are hired on a short-term basis via contractors.

One thug-like supervisor boasts on camera, "I'm the union" at this plant. "If a contractor is good, nobody has the strength to organise a union. I'm strong … [and] nobody can do anything to me. I can just give them [workers] two slaps."

Some workers are intimidated or fatalistic about their plight. One young worker asks: "Why should I get angry if I'm being paid for work I do?" but then adds: "Pay is very poor, given the work we do."

Another man tells the filmmaker that if the workers were organised and united they could "get the bosses to yield … and their circumstances would not be so dire." He warns, however, that if an employer gets any sense of unity among the workers, the leader "usually gets killed."

Machines concludes with extraordinary footage taken by a drone camera slowly flying over a section of Surat's textile industrial district—a mind-numbing maze of hundreds of mills.

In a revealing moment towards the end of the film, a worker outside the plant directly challenges the filmmaker: "You will leave after listening to us just like [government] ministers do. [But] if you really want to do something for the workers, then tell us what to do?"

No answer is forthcoming.

Last June a *Dazed* website journalist asked Jain about the worker's blunt question. The filmmaker replied: "[W]hen the workers asked me what they should do, a part of my brain was screaming silently all kinds of things. But I didn't have any answers; I was a silent observer, almost mute, taking refuge behind the viewfinder."

Jain's comments are honest and revealing, but also point to the film's limitations.

In order to tell workers "what to do," it is necessary to explain, even in a rudimentary fashion, the historical and political context and circumstances that produced this brutal state of affairs.

Unfortunately, *Machines* does not mention a single India central or state government.

Nor does the film make any reference to the long-running "Gujarat Mode of Development," the free-market, cheap labour program ruthlessly imposed by the state's Hindu fundamentalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government and its former chief minister and current Indian prime minister Narendra Modi.

Jain also fails to note that similar anti-working class "big-business" policies have been implemented by Congress Party and Stalinist Communist Party administrations, with the active support of their respective union federations, who are equally committed to the defence of Indian capitalism.

No exposure of the exploitation of the Indian workers is complete without giving some indication of the role played by these political formations.