“Eisenstein, Pudovkin! We shall fight, we shall win!”
—slogan at student strike, Pune, India, 2015

A Night of Knowing Nothing (Payal Kapadia, 2021) begins with a grainy black-and-white shot of young people dancing in a room, with videos of popular Hindi film songs projected onto the back wall. The bodies are illuminated only by the light from the projector. There is no music on the soundtrack, or even ambient sound. If you were to recognize the videos, you might be able to conjure a music track in your head.1 Instead, the long take—about four minutes in duration—is overlaid by the voice-over of a woman writing a letter to her lover.

She speaks in a low and intimate voice, like someone falling asleep or someone who has been sitting in a room all alone for a very long time.2 She speaks of “things” that are making her uneasy. Her boyfriend’s parents have barred him from meeting her. Why? One can only guess that there is a social obstacle, of caste or religion, involved. Intermittently faint nondiegetic sounds of a political protest rally, with familiar slogans of “Halla bol!” (Hindi-Urdu for “Raise your voice!”) and drumbeats, can be heard. The soundless dancing bodies combine with the sonic space of the speaking woman to immerse the viewer in a complex world laced with an inchoate edge of tension.

Payal Kapadia’s feature debut chronicles the turn to authoritarianism and Hindu nationalism (under the political ideology of Hindutva) that has engulfed India in recent years, with a focus on oppositional student politics.3 Even though A Night of Knowing Nothing (NKN) won top honors for best documentary at the Cannes Film Festival in 2021, it radically blurs the lines between fiction and documentary. While much of the film is composed of footage of protests and standoffs shot between 2015 and 2019, it has a central plot line that presents the viewer with a set of love letters supposedly “found” by the filmmaker. Through these letters, and the letter writer’s intimate voice, the film places the public contestations between students and government into the orbit of personal loss and longing. Watching NKN as my first in-theatre experience of the pandemic was cathartic. My face was wet with tears as I left a screening at MoMA in November 2021. Because of the pandemic, I hadn’t been back to India in almost three years. During that time, I had watched many of the events in Kapadia’s film unfold as horrifying videos on the news and on social media. The two universities in Delhi where I had first learned to think with cinema—Jamia Millia Islamia and Jawaharlal Nehru University—had both been violently attacked by the police and right-wing groups. Scores of students were injured and many detained, some still languishing in jail today.

It is largely Kapadia’s stylistic choices that call up my first-person reflection. Her film does important work as witness testimony, recording the ongoing social and political turbulence in India. At the same time, the film has a distinctly oneiric quality, similar to Kapadia’s previous short films, that produces an intensely sensory audiovisual experience.4 Through an experimental bricolage of fictive and documentary genres, poetic voice-over and informational section titles, quirky animation and densely layered sound design, NKN offers an immersive aesthetic space within which to process the heartbreaks of recent years.

Strike | Andolan-jeevi

In a speech to the parliament in February 2021, the Indian prime minister, Narendra Modi, coined a new term to describe political activists:

“We are all familiar with buddhi-jeevi [intellectuals] and shram-jeevi [workers], but now, a new category
The immediate occasion for this dismissal of protest politics by the nation’s premier was the ongoing farmers’ protests that would continue for over a year, galvanizing popular imagination and support from a wide cross-section of society. The Hindi word *andolan* means “protest,” “movement,” “struggle,” or “agitation.” It has a long history of use in colonial and postcolonial India to signify resistance movements against state or corporate injustice.

The neologism *andolan-jeevi* was hurled as a witty new insult that could be taken up by Modi’s masses of adoring vigilantes to further demonize democratic dissent in India. But rather than a parasite, the word literally describes someone who has made protest a way of life (*andolan* = “protest” or “struggle”; *jeevi* = “living being”). Instead of using the word to punitively mark out certain individuals, as was the intention with its parliamentary debut, it might be now appropriated instead as a signifier of profound beauty. *Andolan-jeevis* are creatures who continually struggle, agitate, and protest against intolerable conditions of life, not only for themselves but for a larger collective of fellow beings.

*NKN* centers student protest as its subject, reflecting on the meaning of life itself as a constant struggle undertaken with others. Here cinema becomes a means of documenting life in all its flux as well as a medium for finding oneself. The film’s fictional narrator, “L,” is a film student who is trying to make sense of a failed relationship even as she breathes and dreams “cinema”—from the French New Wave to Indian experimental films—while her college campus explodes into the heady agitation of a student strike. In a fundamental sense, therefore, this is a film about becoming an *andolan-jeevi*.

*NKN* begins with the actual events that led to a student strike on the campus of the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII) in Pune in 2015. Established in 1960, FTII was founded on the premise that a newly postcolonial nation needed to train its own filmmakers in order to create new visions of art and storytelling. The state officially sanctioned cinema as a creative form that had a legitimate place in the project of nation building. Over the years, some of India’s best-known film practitioners—in the realms of both commercial and art cinema—have studied or taught here. Since 1960, several private filmmaking schools have cropped up across the country, but FTII still retains significance as a publicly funded educational institution with a reputation for a rigorous curriculum, residential campus, legendary studios, and illustrious alumni.

In 2015, students rejected the appointment of Gajendra Chauhan as the institute’s new chairperson. They argued that this was an arbitrary appointment of a person with no demonstrable commitment to the cinematic arts, alleging instead that Chauhan’s main merits were his affiliation with the Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP, the ruling political party in India) and the fact that he had portrayed a heroic Hindu mythological character in a long-running television series in the 1980s. The students saw this regime change as a signal of increased state oversight of the everyday affairs and ethos of the film school. The student strike that ensued drew a great deal of media attention and quickly provoked
a national debate as to whether this appointment was part of the BJP’s systematic stifling of public educational institutions, expanding to concerns about the relevance of a state-subsidized film education in the twenty-first century.

Vocal opinions were stacked against the students, who were accused of leeching off taxpayers’ money in a barb evoking Modi’s description of the andolan-jeeti as parasites. At the same time, a counterwave of solidarity emerged as students across the country (largely from prominent public universities) stood up in support of the FTII strikers.

Andolan-jeeti was a term initially designed to reprimand those who did not understand their station in life. Student protesters demonstrated that dictats and divisions between who can think (the intellectual) and who can act (the worker), who is a student and who a protester, can and must be erased. In the last few years, several protest movements have shown the power of crossing boundaries and making allies across social divisions. Farmers and lawyers, students and sex workers, have displayed unexpected modes of solidarity that disturb the divide-and-rule policies of tyrannical states.

It is in the flux of this moment that Kapadia’s film begins. She and her frequent collaborator-partner, Ranabir Das, who is credited as cinematographer and editor of the film, were both students at FTII at the time.

**Caste | Vemula**

The unseen protagonist, L, initially writes to her lover in Hindi, talking about the mundane details of life in a student dormitory. In the film’s first “chapter”—entitled “Yesterday Mukul Came Over to Have Tea”—L recounts a strange recurring dream that her friend Mukul has shared with her. Mukul’s voice-over, speaking in Assamese, describes a nightmare in which a furtive love is discovered by parental authorities who are determined to forbid any such erotic transgressions. As Mukul is escaping from the censuring violence in store, he reaches a river. To cross the river will ensure safety but also oblivion: this is “the night of knowing nothing.” The visuals in this dream narration are clips taken from found footage of a wedding ceremony, highly saturated color shots with dominant yellows and reds as seen in color-reversal stock or slides.

This early sequence alerts the viewer to the film’s central theme: romantic love challenged by social, religious, and linguistic divides. As L continues to recount the happenings of her daily life and her campus, Kapadia gently introduces the strike into the film. Slogans of “We shall fight! We shall win!” overtake the soundtrack, along with documentary footage of strike meetings and rallies that were shot by numerous FTII students and alumni. Soon, the localized strike bleeds into a national landscape of violence and resistance.

The solipsism of L’s student-filmmaker existence is shattered by a series of horrific hate crimes that erupt across India: the flogging of Dalit men in Una in 2016, the assassination of journalist Gauri Lankesh in 2017, the lynching of Pehlu Khan in 2017, the gang rape of a Muslim child in Kathua in 2018. Many of these events are portrayed by newspaper clippings and other news media. Through the figure of L, the film reflects on the status of these serial images of violence that flash on TV screens and mobile phones and the front pages of newspapers, only to be swallowed up by the next atrocity.

Images might feel ephemeral, but they can also linger like bad dreams, haunting with stubborn returns and forcing viewers to think and, perchance, to act. Thus does L write about the revolutionary suicide of Rohith Vemula, a doctoral student at the Hyderabad Central University who took his own life in 2016 in a final gesture of anticasteist refusal. Vemula’s death was read by many as “institutional murder” caused by a sinister confluence of casteism and the corporatization of education. It sent a lightning bolt across college campuses in India and forced a public reckoning of the systemic depletion of Dalit bodies and minds.

NKN marks its midpoint by centering on the question of caste, with footage from the many rallies, candlelight vigils, and impassioned speeches in the aftermath of Vemula’s death. L writes another letter now, this one far less hopeful, more clearly accusatory. The viewer becomes privy to L’s personal realization that her lover has abandoned her because of her lower caste status. “You are not the person I thought you were,” says L. “I don’t understand… You
shouted slogans alongside me during the strike, railed against the authoritarianism of the government, but when it comes to the casteism of your parents you don’t say a thing.”

With this statement, the film initiates an internal critique of the student movement itself. The viewer is shown home videos and photographs of prettily dressed children at birthday parties and religious festivals, as L is reminded of the many mundane caste markers that separated her from her childhood peers. She understands that activism can be partial, that even in the revolution there are thresholds that cannot be crossed: caste is that threshold in this film.

Kapadia is not the first to highlight either the reinvigoration of student activism against caste in recent years or Rohith Vemula’s role in this revival. In 2018, veteran documentary filmmaker Deepa Dhanraj made a film focusing on Vemula’s life, his death, and the student upheavals that erupted in its wake. That documentary, *We Have Not Come Here to Die*, dwells on the Dalit student experience via the iconic figure of Rohith Vemula. Structured chronologically, it archives an unfolding moment in all its messiness.

In an online film discussion, Dhanraj shared that she was emotionally and morally compelled to make the film: “It was very emotional for me … like being stabbed…. You know the line [in Vemula’s suicide statement] … ‘Never was a person considered as a mind.’ … I was so struck by what Rohith Vemula was proposing in the letter.” She refers here to the message that Vemula left behind in a letter that can hardly be called a suicide note. Rather, it is an elegy for the brutal lack of imagination that slots individuals into noxious identity boxes, delimiting the potentiality of a human being. Perhaps it was that letter that would prompt Kapadia to choose an epistolary structure for her film.

**Love | Viraha**

L’s letters speak of lovers separated by caste and language, by the politics of food, clothing, and touch. In fundamental ways, this crisis of young love is emblematic of everything that is wrong in India today. Upon first viewing, I thought the letters and love plot were mainly a clever narrative device to guide an audience through the main subject: the wave of student protests across the country in 2015–20. But now I realize that I was wrong, that the whole point of the film is precisely this matter of love and loss.

Amid the heady mix of images of different categories put into play by Kapadia—from found footage to animation—there are several scenes, which were actually staged, of students in the FTII dorms, cooking, sleeping, daydreaming, watching movies. The cinematography of Ranabir Das composes languid frames that bring interiority to the surface in these moments of solitude. A young woman makes breakfast in a tiny corner of her cluttered dorm room, dressed only in her underwear; a shirtless young man sleeps fitfully on a narrow cot while tiny starry dots of light shimmer on the wall behind him; a man and a woman stand very still on a concrete terrace as it starts to rain.

These are among the most stylized sections of the film as well as those that come closest to a “student film” aesthetic. I use the term “student film” because there is a shared impulse in the way emerging filmmakers are drawn to visual explorations of their everyday lives. This aesthetic, presented as a student signature, works as a powerful device in *NKN*. The self-conscious poetry of these shots is a reminder that the narrator, L, is a very young woman who is slowly developing a sense of self and politics. In fact, this aesthetic strategy heightens the surreal mood of that moment by juxtaposing individual eros with collective tragedy, as L continues to chronicle the harms caused by persons both known and unknown.
NKN’s appeal to spectatorial emotion draws on a deep vein of cultural memory. The knowing viewer or situated viewer familiar with South Asia is viscerally addressed by both a knowledge of the recent past and a particular history of sentimental training. The trope of separated lovers that forms the film’s central emotive anchor is a cue to enter into the allegorical aesthetic space evoked by *viraha*—a mood, or *rasa*, that connotes the pain of erotic separation. In South Asia, *viraha*, the expression of longing for a lost beloved, has been a key aesthetic register through which to articulate yearning, both secular and sacred, and is notable for voicing female desire in particular.

Kumkum Sangari writes that *viraha* “as it developed in the contexts of devotional, romantic and mundane separations … tacitly acknowledged material and patriarchal constraint, social segmentation and hierarchy, the proscriptions of class, caste, region and religion on marriage.” At the same time, “even as it emerged from a socially determined world … *viraha* also imagined a transgressive love (un)able to transcend these barriers.” This sensory-affective complex became the bedrock of mainstream Hindi-Urdu cinema from the 1940s onward, just as the capacity for *viraha* to speak to both the individual and the social has made Hindi-Urdu cinema itself an attractive site for the study of national sentiment.

Sangari has framed this aesthetic complex as one with a special affordance for mapping epochal transitions in the Indian subcontinent, such as the transition to capitalism and the anguished move through Partition into postcoloniality. Seen in Sangari’s terms as a “register of profound loss” as well as “a transformative emotion that could open into a multiplicity of resolutions,” the concept of *viraha* allows Kapadia to address the million cuts suffered across India in the last eight years.

By centering her film on personal separation and betrayal, Kapadia articulates the profound sense of loss that
many Indians feel today for a vision of a secular, pluralistic nation that seems irrevocably lost. Unlike melodrama with its generic features, *viraha* is both aesthetic mood and existential condition. The beloved here is the self that has turned against itself. The wounds of love betrayal are felt as a sundering of the self, a separation from that which was once a part of oneself but now is unrecognizable. Today, many who once loved their classmates, colleagues, even parents and siblings, are quick to label them as “anti-Indian” for simply raising their voice against the government and its religious fundamentalism. In the terms laid out by NKN, they can be said to have crossed that river of knowing nothing. On this side of the river there are only those who have been forsaken, mourning their abandonment.

*NKN* formally addresses this sense of a present that has been tragically sundered from the past through a use of archival home movies that index a seemingly lost India. However deep and difficult the pain of this alienation may be to articulate, the film never gives itself over wholly to nostalgia. The past is not untainted: in some sequences, L recalls her early training in caste consciousness as a child forced to see herself as lesser than other children. Moreover, the past can be activated in imaginative ways to offer new futures.

One of the most charming moments in the film is a scene in which a friend shows up with a festive cake to celebrate the birthday of the legendary actress Madhubala (1933–69). Everyone is elated by this unexpected, eccentric expression of love for an actress. In celebration of Madhubala’s life, and of cinema itself, they all sing an iconic song of romantic defiance pictured on Madhubala in *Mughal-e-Azam* ([The Great Mughal], Kamal Amrohi, 1960; Lata Mangeshkar, playback singer):

![Image of a festive scene with a cake and people celebrating](image)

[L’s voiceover plays over footage of a party from an anonymous 1970s home video.](image)

\[Jab pyar kiya toh darna kya? (Why be afraid, once you have loved?)\]

Kapadia’s genius here is that she does not stage this scene with actors. Rather, the birthday celebration is described through L’s voice-over, which is played over visuals of another party from an anonymous 1970s home video. The bricolage is so seamless that I had to watch the sequence again at the time of writing to realize that I had not actually seen a birthday cake on-screen. Madhubala, candles, singing, and a cake were all fused, conjured in my imagination through the voice-over and the found footage.

**Dancing in the Archive**

Part of the aesthetic power of *A Night of Knowing Nothing* arises from Kapadia’s use of “archive effects” in the “sense that certain sounds and/or images within these films come from another time and served another function,” as Jaimie Baron has theorized. The film switches between black-and-white and color while, even in the color sequences, there are indications of multiple stock and film formats ranging from the 1960s to the present. Interestingly, all the contemporary footage shot by Kapadia’s crew and other FTII alum is rendered in black-and-white, while the home-video clips are in color. Kapadia revels in the materiality of film, playing with the viewer’s knowledge of how color saturation and grain can date a filmed image and reversing audience expectations of technological time lines. The intricate sound design brings a heady mix of temporalities, layering the present-day voice of L with sonic palimpsests of vintage film songs and recent news bites.

There is something playful, citational, and deeply empathetic in an “archival imagination” that urges its audience into new futures of becoming, not individually but with each other. Gil Hochberg has written of the archive in the specific context of Palestine as an entity that needn’t be a dead and static place but rather a space for imagining. The archive also needn’t be a place to only recuperate facts and evidence, for in authoritarian and militaristic regimes, facts can always be countered by “alternate truths” and fake news. A minoritized citizenry can barely keep up with this production of truths, given the mightier machineries of falsehoods of the majoritarian enemy.

Images, even photographic ones, are fundamentally unstable, for they blur and fade; mediation means loss and translation, and every frame contains decisions about placement and choreography, inclusion and exclusion. Kapadia turns the ambivalent status of the image into an affective
force that reminds her viewers that all knowledge is mediated—by language and mistranslations, by touch and its taboos, by past images and the weathering effects of time. Found letters and found dreams, lost people and lost times, broken bodies and broken promises—all are vulnerable to misreading.

Toward the end of the film, L becomes increasingly despondent and fearful, signaling the onset of fatigue from constant struggle. In a breathless voice, gasping for air, she describes how students across the country are being beaten and jailed by formal and informal armies of the right. In one memorably chilling sequence, Kapadia includes three minutes of blurry CCTV footage that was recorded in the Central Library of Jamia Millia Islamia University on the night of December 15, 2019.22 Hundreds of police entered the campus to beat and round up student protesters, firing tear-gas shells and ransacking the library. The CCTV footage shows the absolutely horrifying scenes of uniformed policemen in riot gear as they enter the library, destroy furniture, and attack students at their desks. The visuals are excruciating: pure terror on the faces of the students, with many begging for their lives. These images were also deliberately misread at the time, playing for hours on sycophantic news channels that added commentary portraying the students as Islamic terrorists.

Kapadia achieves something new with this old footage. By playing the scene out in a durational manner, by leading up to it with a steady accumulation of images of state violence, all narrated through the affective authority of L's voice-over, NKN repurposes the Jamia CCTV footage into a damning indictment of the state. L's shaking voice recounts: “I had a dream … we were at a protest … the water cannon … it started to erase my friends … Devangana, Safoora, Natasha, Umar.” These are names of
real students who have been arrested by the current political regime, many of whom remain imprisoned today. The Jamia sequence finally ends when a cop smashes the CCTV camera in a gesture that harks back to similar reflexive moments in the brutal genealogy of political cinema.

“Archives for the future are counterhegemonic meta-interventions into the political status quo,” says Hochberg, and these must be crafted through acts of creative intervention and speculation. The past is not a stable place that can be unearthed once and for all but is what Stuart Hall termed a “positioning” to urge new generations to forge ahead. For Hochberg, the past must be animated not through historiographies of causation and explanation but instead as storytelling and memory making, embodiment and dance, touch and singing.

Hochberg is making an urgent call to action that is poised resolutely against despair. In times of unceasing crisis, it is critical to keep struggling toward possibility, choose imagination, and reject fatalism. I find this formulation particularly useful. NKN does not report anything fundamentally new about either the deep past or the recent past, but it successfully opens up a world of possibility for the future, both of politics and of filmmaking. In its promiscuous crossing of boundaries between documentary and fiction, genres of realism and surrealism, animation and archival footage, NKN does more than simply mobilize archive effects: it collates its own archive of loss and longing, resistance and repair. Not incidentally, it begins and ends with dancing.

In the final moments, Kapadia returns to the FTII campus at the time of the strike. It is raining, and the footage is once again in black-and-white. A small group of students has gathered outside the main studio, where they start to dance. Their faces reflect unfiltered joy, and their bodies convulse with different expressions of abandon. Dancing, too, is a collective movement, an effort to make joy and freedom by moving together. As Anjali Arondekar has noted, “andolan, after all is also a movement in Hindustani music … a combination/ornamentation of notes that oscillates between one fixed note and its counterpart, touching and suffusing all that lies between them.” The removal of diegetic music in this scene, as in the opening scene, enhances the emotions that oscillate between the dancers.

**Woman | What Gender Is Cinema?**

Perhaps it is obvious that, when a historic strike takes place on the campus of a film school, it will be filmed. Less obvious is the fact of who is chosen to do the filming, who takes on the burden of steadily accumulating hours and days and weeks of footage, and why. Two FTII strike films exist (counting only those that I am familiar with), and both are by makers who identify as women.

In 2001, at the age of twenty-one, I went to film school at the Mass Communication Research Center (MCRC) at Jamia Millia Islamia. It was the first time that I ever felt radically gendered in an educational institution. Perhaps this was because I was lucky to have mostly studied at all-girls schools until then, but I also intuited that this gendering had something to do with the aura of filmmaking itself as a technological art. It was especially in the interstices of everyday life as a film student—between classes, shoots, canteens, editing rooms, and parties—that the gender differentials bore heavily on me. My male classmates carried an air of being to the camera born from the very first day in college. My female classmates frequently doubted their work and their abilities. The guys would volubly admire their own photographs and footage over copious amounts of tea and cigarettes, great auteurs would be invoked, and the lifting of heavy camera equipment became a crude show of physical strength.

Something of this film-school machismo spilled over into the FTII strike in 2015. The other film about the event, Kshama Padalkar’s *The Strike and I* (2019), follows a similar chronology to Kapadia’s NKN but sticks more closely to the strike itself. This focus allows the film to interrogate the fissures within the student body with a close-up view. Many of the internal student conflicts hinted at in NKN—a renewed confrontation of caste and patriarchy—receive full exposure in *The Strike and I*.

The two films are good companion pieces. Much of L’s personal churning in NKN is drawn from the turbulence within the wider FTII student community. In Kapadia’s film it is mostly the male student leaders who are making the speeches and leading rallies on the FTII campus, while Kshama’s film reveals that many women on campus deliberately withdrew from the strike space. Some women found the strike action too loud, others found it too male, and still others were dealing with their own past traumas. More than anything, the strike generated an atmosphere of intense debate and reflection, forcing the students to reckon with every aspect of their lives. The two films together thicken the shared story of a strike and a larger student movement, for Kshama’s film shows why it is inevitable that L had to be Kapadia’s protagonist: a lower-caste woman from Bengal who was dealing with the harsh realization that her politically idealistic upper-caste Hindi-speaking boyfriend was drawing the line at inter-caste marriage.
Did Kapadia know all the feminist histories upon which her film was building? There are some tantalizing suggestions that she did. In one brief silent shot, a woman dressed in trendy sixties fashion is posing for the camera dressed in slacks, cat-eyed glasses, and a bindi. She is carrying a portable radio, while Kapadia, who is also the film’s sound designer, mixes an English-language song into the soundtrack. The scene is shot in black-and-white and looks like an archival home movie. But I recognized the song: it is actress Shanta Apte’s famous rendition of Longfellow’s Psalm of Life in the Marathi film Kunku (The Unexpected, V. Shantaram, 1937). In Kunku, Apte plays a social rebel, Neera, at one point singing a song in English to illustrate her philosophy of life:

In the world’s broad field of battle
In the bivouac of Life
Be not like dumb, driven cattle!
Be a hero in the strife!

This inspiring scene of feminist determination was, in fact, shot on the FTII campus in the 1930s, when it was the actual studio complex for the legendary Prabhat Film Company. The film school still uses the original Prabhat studios, and the campus houses a small museum to commemorate its history as the erstwhile film production house. Shanta Apte was a salaried actor at Prabhat and would go down in history as the first film practitioner in India to go on strike against her employers. In 1939, right by the front gates of FTII, where the striking students of 2015 would make many public speeches and hold their press conferences, Apte staged a hunger strike dressed in slacks. Her strike, one of employee against management, thus foreshadowed another strike, the longest in FTII’s history (139 days), that was to take place seventy-five years later.

It Begins with a Film

In We Have Not Come Here to Die, Deepa Dhanraj traces the time line for the proliferating student protests of 2015–19. The film looks back to August 2015, when the right-wing student group ABVP (commonly considered the student wing of the BJP) shut down the screening of a documentary film at Delhi University. The censored film, Nakul Singh Sawhney’s Muzaffarnagar Baqi Hai (Muzaffarnagar Eventually, 2015), interrogates the events leading up to the religion-based riots that took place in Muzaffarnagar in 2013, injuring hundreds and displacing thousands. Sawhney’s film finds multiple political parties guilty of
provoking and facilitating the riots, particularly members of the BJP with their standard Islamophobic scripts.  
Sawhney responded to the violent disruption of his Delhi screening by sharing free copies of the film and by organizing thousands of free screenings in partnership with the grassroots film screening collective Cinema of Resistance.  
Many college campuses across India decided to screen the film in solidarity, including Rohith Vemula’s own Hyderabad Central University. There, the Ambedkar Student Association (ASA), a Dalit–Muslim alliance, organized a screening, which was viciously trolled by the ABVP. 
The ASA student leaders were labeled “anti-national,” and inflammatory slogans were raised. For Dhanraj, these events marked the beginning of a long and bitter fight by progressive students against Hindutva, Brahmanical, and upper-class power at the university. The retaliation was severe: the scholarships of ASA student members were revoked, and some, like Vemula himself, were evicted from their dormitory rooms.

That the struggle begins with a film is a reminder that the ruling class is extremely fearful of the power of cinema despite the state’s own unparalleled media machinery. One of India’s longest-running independent filmmaker networks—VIKALP: Films for Freedom—was founded in 2004 after films critical of the ruling BJP government were “unselected” at important documentary film festivals.  
Defining itself as a “platform to defend freedom of expression and to resist censorship,” VIKALP held its first screenings in Mumbai. But one can go back even further, to the state of emergency imposed by Prime Minister India Gandhi during 1975–77, in the shadow of which emerged a nascent documentary film movement marked even then by the unwavering voice of Anand Patwardhan. His Prisoners of Conscience (1978) presented haunting testimonies of violence inflicted on political prisoners during that twenty-one-month reign of terror.

The Pasts and Futures of Cinema

A Night of Knowing Nothing, too, is a harrowing chronicle of an emergency, though this time the reign of terror is diffused, has widespread public support, and operates with cooperation from corporate entities and their mass media. One of the signal successes of NKN is its easy melding of the different aesthetic trajectories of the political in cinema. Memories of auteurism coincide with memories of students chained outside the Cinémathèque française, as L invokes Pasolini’s views on the May 1968 student protests and as FTII’s strikers coin new revolutionary slogans inspired by Soviet filmmakers: “Eisenstein, Pudovkin! We shall fight, we shall win!” They also invoke FTII alumni, avant-garde and experimental filmmakers of revolutionary cinema such as John Abraham and the Odessa Collective, and the rarely screened, absurdist cult film Hun Hunshi Hunshilal (Love in the Time of Malaria, 1991), by Sanjiv Shah. 

To the realist, socialist, satirical, and agit-prop stylistics of these filmmakers, Kapadia adds an oneirism that signals a new politics of the imagination that refuses to stop dreaming.

Beyond the political beliefs of these filmmakers, both the striking students and Kapadia herself are concerned with the question of artistic freedom and how it is manifested in film form, film content, and the conditions that nurture the filmmaker. At its broadest, NKN is about cinema and, more specifically, about what it means to study cinema and why it is necessary for film schools to exist.

Cinema in all its conjunctions makes up the deep context of NKN. Encoded in its sound design and visual bricolage are deep histories of filmmaking in South Asia that go back to pre-Independence visions of personal freedom (as with Kanku), and to filmic assertions of intellectual, political, and artistic freedom in the new nation-state. Kapadia, and the student strikers of FTII, cite scores of films and filmmakers who embody models of anti-authoritarian cinema. It is a satisfying cinephilic exercise to try to trace these in NKN. At the same time, Kapadia tempers this impulse for the canonical by including found footage and home videos made by anonymous or amateur filmmakers for whom cinema meant something quite private, an expression of prosaic pleasures and domestic anxieties.

A Night of Knowing Nothing is at once a political chronicle of its times, an ode to the intimate struggles of love, and a love letter to cinema. It stays uncannily close to the individual even as it confronts some of the most violent and unnerving moments in the collective life of India since 2015. Payal Kapadia foregrounds emotions and the importance of friendship, solidarity, empathy, recognition, and reciprocity. Through its irreverent mixing of multiple audiovisual artefacts, its blurring of genres, its palimpsestic sonic narrative of cultural memory, its conspicuous multilingualism, and its determined muddling of fact and fiction, NKN embodies Kapadia’s artistic commitment to boundary crossing. There is a faith in cinema’s power to dream, to bear witness, and to bring joy. Through this faith and the film’s critical citational ethics, A Night of Knowing Nothing stands as a reminder that, although the struggle has been long, and may be ongoing, cinema has been there from the beginning.
Notes

1. The songs are popular dance numbers from Hindi films, including the Helen number “O Mungada” and the Shahrukh Khan-Malaika Arora “Chaiyya Chaiyya.”

2. The voice-over was performed by actor Bhumisuta Das.


11. In an interview with Devika Girish, Kapadia said that the strike footage in the film was compiled from material shot by Ranahir Das as well as by other FTII friends, including Ashmita Guha Neogi, Prateek Vats, Shubham, Vinay Sharma, Mukul Haloi, and Vamsi Telugu. It includes footage from other campuses such as Jamia and JNU. Devika Girish, “Interview: Payal Kapadia on *A Night of Knowing Nothing*,” *Film Comment*, February 24, 2022, www.filmcomment.com/blog/interview-payal-kapadia-on-a-night-of-knowing-nothing/.


13. Author’s notes, online panel discussion, Center for Modern Indian Studies, University of Göttingen, January 17, 2022. Dhanraj’s film was screened as part of “Crossings,” an online festival of Indian documentary films curated by filmmaker Lalit Vachani.


17. Sangari, 277.

18. Much of this material was sourced from Pad.ma, an archival online repository that invites filmmakers to share and annotate their unused or extra footage. The home movies are from the collection of Sumesh Sharma and were shot by his grandfather. See Girish, “Interview.”

19. The term *picturization* is commonly used to discuss song and musical sequences in Indian cinema because playback song recording/dubbing is the norm there. In *Mughal-e-Azam*, Madhubala lip-synchs a song on-screen, while the singing voice is provided by Lata Mangeshkar, the playback singer. For more on playback singing and the term “song picturization,” see Neepa Majumdar’s essay “The Embodied Voice: Song Sequences and Stardom in Popular Hindi Cinema,” in *Soundtrack Available: Essays on Film and Popular Music*, ed.


31. The striking students organized their own film screenings and coined political slogans in the name of John Abraham, Ritwik Ghatak, Andrei Tarkovsky, Sergei Eisenstein, and Vsevolod Pudovkin. Kapadia additionally directs scenes with students watching Jean-Luc Godard’s *Breathless*, and plays clips from *Hun Hunshi Hunshilal*. 