The book dates.sites, first of all, is a teasing reminder of the fate of various 'artistic formats' when they are self-consciously empowered to mutually meet up - the format of book, cinema and the city. Thematically, here is a book-like compilation of chronologic facts about Bollywood cinema, before it was called so; as well as that of Bombay or Mumbai before it was not called so! Speaking in a more academic tone, the book is about the concept of the book format as perceived at the beginning of the twenty first century, deliberately designed so (by artist Shilpa Gupta) in order to make a novel attempt to draw parallels between specific history of the evolution of twin-cultural occurrences called Indian cinema and the urban.

What 'dates.sites' contains is a chosen chronology of the occurring in the city of Bombay and Mumbai throughout twentieth century, since the arrival of plague and cars into this city (1897). (i) The dialogue around the book, (ii) the complementary travelling visual art exhibition about it; and (iii) the interactive works within the show - cannot be placed in any known hierarchy because all three of them hint at the growth of cinema as an industry, in parallel dialogue with the growth of Bombay/Mumbai as urban phenomena. Hence, the very theme of this book-format is about 'cultural forms being mutually analogous' on one hand and about being a concentrated recipe of synoptic possibilities about the relation between an entertainment industry and fact that are not so entertaining. For instance, consider one of the facts about Bollywood cinema which is generally categorically located as pure masala fictions till cultural studies began to dislocate them onto a serious premise. The suitable artists to colour black and white film reels during the unavailability of readymade colour reel during world war times found Bora Muslims the most suitable ones to do that. The immediate association that one can make with this caste/religion is between Indian cinema and the Mughal miniatures. Also, in another instance, an Indian cinema was 'banned' because a religious-pious protagonist of that film looked like Mahatma Gandhi, in the pre-independence era, that too while another film with a total nude figure got away from being censored! Casteism, religiosity, colonial struggle and the notion of political disturbance overtake the aesthetic debate about cinema as a mere artistic expression in such cases. And this book is goaded with archival information that acts as potential synopsis for elaboration, put together...
by Madhushree Dutta. However, there is a double-coding attested to it, wherein it grasps our attention to seriously probe such luring and tempting research materials in the book while confronting the reader/viewer about the reliability of the authenticity (not factual though) of such information since such facts are inevitably interwoven with the construct of the book-format! Hence, it provides the pleasure inherent with chronological facts contained in a volume, yet refuses a safe premise while doing so.

One thing for sure, this volume is a reminder of all possible variations in which the book-format has been empowered through the centuries. One more thing for sure, that is what exactly cinema has done to Indian psyche over the century! In other words, the epistemological and discursive format meant for addressing the predominant media of expression of the twentieth century (cinema) has been contested as well as made to react to its technological versions (of the web world) wherein the sequencing, order, design, indexing and similar nuances are jeopardized. Consider an example: in the late 1990s Amitabh Bachchan closed down his ABCCL company and announced bankruptcy. In the same year, Rekha got the best actress award for playing the role of a vamp. These two facts appearing in the same page in a conventional book might not avail reading more between the lines. This book, because of the way it is designed to act like various contradicting formats of a book at the same (a lexicography is read in no certain order, like say, a poetry collection, unlike a novel wherein randomness is to be abandoned, and so on and so forth). The delight of the writings of Ramachandra Guha and Bill Bryson, facilitated by and due to the 'non-fiction book format' (also called as Third Culture) is what is adopted in the 'designformation' of this self-conscious book.

In this background, what does this book mean and do to the notion of urban, the entertaining Indian films and the attested art exhibition? First of all, Madhushree's preface rips open and presents all possible reading into the book; and in the same tone she also confirms that it is an open ended format! Hence the book is about Mumbai and Hindi cinema, then it is a module for how books in the age of digital technology is to be perceived about other Indian cinema; and further, it is a volume indicating how the relational aesthetics between visual and verbal artistic formats can get into a dialogue in between, from outside the premise of a hierarchical host (film) and pest (critique through books).

Hence, even before you browse through it, that too even before going through it sumptuously, the deliberate erasure of a specific book format becomes obvious. The text and the visuals refuse to mutually illustrate but agree to stand parallel to each other, like the way regional cinemas in India have agreed to do so next to Bollywood cinema. Being Madhushree Dutta's brainchild, the volume "is not a narrative in itself" as she aptly proposes. To draw one more quick analogy, the 'Wounds' series of prints by Somenath Hore has relief-like wound submerged into the paper, categorized as a printmaking format. That refutes the divide between 'image-on-the-surface' divide between the content and the contained. In other words, the book doesn't distinguish between the matter (text and visuals) 'upon' an empty page. "dates.sites" is not a book that contains visual/verbs but is an obvious reminder of what Indian films have done to: (i) our perception, (ii) perception about films; and (iii) how they have changed an Indian's very perception about life itself!

Thus the facts and figures (literally) inside the book, hence, is always viewed and then perceived on a self-conscious mode of the structuring of a book. This is no coincidence, since it becomes an analogy to the essence of the book and its content. First thing first, the book refuses to 'contain' verbal and visual text, but in itself sinks in and out mutually (both the book format and the matter within), like say the islands of Mumbai and the sea around it play in order to mutually colonize during the rainy season.

dates.sites is a volume, not a book in essence. The exhibition held in relation to the volume had works that resounded this essence (Kaushik Mukhopadhyay and Archana Hande's works in particular were interactive, hence, inconclusive). From an art historical perspective, this is a remarkable achievement. Gregory Ulmer's notion of "Object of Post-Criticism" jeopardizes the relation between visuals and words used in known formats like a catalog, an artwork and films. Though published as a book by Tulika, it is not an aftermath of an event (a show). Instead it (book) could be another artwork, which treats the show as a preliminary supportive manifesto. Just like the bus stop till where the queue to watch 'Sholay' film was named as 'Sholay bus stop' here is a book that hints at artistic production, which is not only a postmodernist double code, but is also self reflexive about what it addresses. This shift from self-reference (reminder of an earlier artwork/text/film) self-reflexivity is perhaps the main focus of this open ended book. And the reason as to why this volume becomes potential lies in the fact that the heroic narratives so much inherent in the historiography of epistemology of cultural forms like cinema, artwork, books and catalogues in the Indian context are arrested. It is a good module for breaking a set hierarchy and also for not establishing another one, instead.

Deep Focus Cinema