

**DOCUMENTING AND INHABITING FLUX:
A CONVERSATION WITH FILMMAKER PRIYA SEN****INTRODUCTION**

Priya Sen's films nimbly play with narrative modes while being deeply grounded in social, civic, and political spaces. *Noon Day Dispensary* (2014), a one-take short filmed at a government clinic in suburban Delhi, offers a stark glimpse into an overburdened state through a spontaneous eruption of discordant voices. *This Freedom Life* (2018), Sen's most recent feature documentary, provocatively sketches an ambiguous scene of desire, thriving in the margins of urban Indian queer politics but refusing to be named. Sen's uniquely experimental and politically charged voice reveals the potentials of realist documentary as a productively defamiliarizing enterprise. A graduate of the Mass Communication Research Centre, Jamia Millia Islamia in New Delhi and the MFA Program in Film and Media Arts at Temple University, Sen has developed a multilayered prac-

tice that frequently involves intricate juxtapositions of video, sound, and/or text. She has been a member of media collectives such as the Sarai Programme and its Cybermohalla Project (a community effort to respond to large-scale structural changes in Delhi through media labs and networks in working-class neighborhoods), and the Insurrections Ensemble (a collaboration between poets and musicians in India and South Africa).

In this interview, Flaherty 2019 participants Ani Maitra, Aparna Sharma, and Pooja Rangan continue their conversations with Sen that began at the seminar about her commitment to cinema as a life practice, the importance of Delhi as a space-in-flux in her work, and her evolving documentary politics of listening.

Interview by

**ANI
MAITRA**

**POOJA
RANGAN**

**APARNA
SHARMA**

DOCUMENTING AND INHABITING FLUX | SEN

INTERVIEW

Priya, all of us encountered your work for the first time at the Flaherty, so I thought we might begin with your impressions of the Flaherty Seminar. What was your experience as a first-time featured filmmaker, and as a participant watching Shai Heredia's program unfold? How did you see your work fitting (or not fitting) in the program, and what did being part of this program reveal to you about your own work?

**ANI
MAITRA**

First, thank you all for your interest in having this conversation with me. Having my films screened at the Flaherty was definitely a high point. Since my films fall between the cracks of genre, they do not circulate well. Being in the company of the filmmakers and films that Shai programmed at the Flaherty gave my films and me a world and a continuum of sorts. I felt that most of us who were at the Seminar find our way to practice cinema as a practice of life—and just as importantly, for me—as a practice of form. It was incredibly freeing to be able to talk through cinema as a process, and as a way of seeing and being in the world. I saw my work as being part of cinema-thought/language, and not merely as cinema that is instrumentalist or functional.

**PRIYA
SEN**

To me, the audience was incredibly generous and present. Their questions and responses enabled me to inhabit my work

INTERVIEW

newly and, to see it through new eyes. But this encounter also afforded a synchronicity that allowed me to speak very directly—from my experience of making the films and being in those places—to an audience that was both familiar and unfamiliar with the contexts from which my films come. There was a sense of many things converging: places, people, time periods, the times of filming, editing, different temporalities of night and day. And I felt inside of all of those things. It felt very alive, I felt very alive.

The biggest surprise was having *This Freedom Life* in the same program as Carolee Schneemann's *Fuses* (1967). I had never seen *Fuses* before and I was completely transfixed by it. I felt the connection between the two films as being love—love as extreme, actualized, transcending, and elusive at the same time. There was a dissonance of course, but in a very productive way. I loved that tension throughout all the programs.

APARNA SHARMA

Priya, we got a very distinct sense of the breadth of your practice at the Flaherty. In *Noon Day Dispensary*, you film an altercation between a government doctor and his working-class patients in a free clinic in Delhi. *About Elsewhere* is a more personal piece where you shuttle between spaces that you have inhabited or continue to inhabit simultaneously. In *This Freedom Life*, your camera documents the precarious and nonnormative love stories of two Delhi residents. But speaking more generally, what is your motivation to make documentary films?

PS It was very interesting for me to watch my films at three different screenings at the Flaherty. It was like I was being revealed in parts! *About Elsewhere* (2007) was the most personal and secretive perhaps. It's also the one that has changed most for me and the one from which I feel most distant. All three films feel very distinct formally: I was working through a different form in each one.

At the time of making *About Elsewhere*, the unit, as it were, of language and thought, was a significant question for me. I was interested in exploring how different fragments coalesce and what that does to narrative, time, and the form the film takes. I was thinking a lot about subjectivity and language at

the time, and was in a context (in India) where queerness was continuing to be formulated through language, through the image, through politics and resistance in the fight for decriminalization. It was very exciting of course and I was surrounded by new queer friends whom I had recently met, after finally being back in Delhi from film school in the United States. At the same time, there was a discomfort and limitation that I felt in those formulations and conversations, and the lack of a space for subjectivity. I was very excited about the possibility of a form that engaged both impulses—of being situated both outside and inside, and of being within the collective as well as deeply solitary. That is what I tried to explore and give voice to in this film, a way of being, perhaps, in constant transformation and made through endless parts and places; something that eluded me about the language of identity politics around queerness at the time. The language of film opened this space up for me.

Figure 1.
Noon Day Dispensary
(dir. Priya Sen, India, 2014).



Noon Day Dispensary was the opposite of the fragment—a single shot that lasted twenty-seven minutes. In that shot, a government dispensary became a site where a burdened state started to unravel, through a fight for dignity. The site itself was a resettlement colony, Savda Ghevra, which has a very particular genealogy that I will explain later. What surrounded the making of *Noon Day Dispensary* was a return to Ghevra through a fellowship to document through video and sound, how a place “re-settles.” Delhi is made and “developed” through continuous erasure, where “re-settling” is a term that is both bureaucratic as well as a mode of living. This literally entails the ways in which people restore their lives and homes in the face of multiple erasure. I had been going to Ghevra through my work

in Sarai, and had documented it since 2006, when the plots were being parceled out and the markings were being made to prepare for those being newly resettled here, after the latest phase of demolition around the Commonwealth Games slated for 2010.¹

This Freedom Life had a very different chronology—it was made over two and a half years. Each shoot felt episodic, as if it could be autonomous and stand by itself. During the edit, the episodic nature of the filming was often at odds with the narrative.

To answer your question about motivation: I think *filming* makes me pay attention to multiple and simultaneous ways of inhabiting space as well as being inhabited by it. It isn't premeditated, but it often feels like *déjà vu*. Maybe it has to do with the (altered) image in the viewfinder and perhaps the sameness of the act, the repetitive stance of filming. *This Freedom Life* was the only film that I did not shoot entirely on my own.

Often, I don't see anything and I don't sense the energy at all. Each part of making a (nonfiction) film is so different from every other.

I think my motivation behind filming might be about inhabiting a moment that is slipping away that possibly reveals something of itself before entirely disappearing. I am interested in what that revelation might allow me to see and find a frame for. Filming is not therefore about giving shape to a formless world. Rather, it is to be able to heighten the experience of existing patterns through which people live, resist, and form the conditions of their lives. It is also a chance to retreat into a different place or dimension that contains its particular mythology, its own set of conditions, constraints and realities; I am excited and equally daunted by its depths. Of course, it is not about going after the "truth," but more about bringing something subterranean to the surface of consciousness. Something has to transform—either the shot, or the set of circumstances, or the form, or my presence. I am acutely aware that through that moment of the shift, I might momentarily inhabit something else, something without a frame, something more open and expansive. And that it might possibly allow me to transcend the limits

¹ Delhi has grown and expanded through continuous waves of state-sponsored demolition of "unauthorized" slums and settlements. The displaced are expected to prove their eligibility for resettlement through documents that have to respond to arbitrary state categories. Those who are eligible are given vacant plots on which they have to build their homes in these new settlements that are usually on peripheries of the city.

of my experiences, of how I am to live and what I know. It allows me to not settle, to not be within social walls and boundaries.

The city of Delhi—it is a big motivator. The fraughtness, the segregations, the breakdown of systems, the human excesses, the extremes, the constant fight and what lies beneath. Also the inequity, the humor, the resilience, the weather, the pollution, the lack of explanation, the activism, the hall of mirrors to power, the wealth, the abjection, the refusal to stop, and the will to continue. I am not motivated by passivity or calmness, I have no idea what to do with it but to bring it in contact with something less settled, with the idea that there are only untethered realities and vagabond truths.

Somewhere, the motivation lies within these conditions of being unsettled, unmoored, not finding peace in structures of work, of family, yet being most at ease when there is a search. How do we proceed, when it appears that this transience itself is the greatest certainty?

You often describe your approach to filmmaking as “observational” and many shots in your films unfold around a fixed frame. I sense though, that you plan your shoots exquisitely, as we learn so much about the social textures of the encounter from the way people move in and out of the frame, and from their facial expressions and gestures of fatigue, irritation, resignation. Can you talk about how you approach your task as an observer, and also as a listener? Your films are so sonically and linguistically rich, cacophonous even. Perhaps you could speak to this focus on the auditory, especially in *Noon Day Dispensary*. You are so very patient in this film in the midst of an altercation that escalates and defuses around people who don’t seem to be able to hear each other.

**POOJA
RANGAN**

Thank you for putting this question so well. I have been deeply influenced by observational cinema/cinema vérité as a way to “be” in places and situations, and the transformations that occur in both the filmmaker and the place. To be present when things start to shift, because they invariably do. *Noon Day Dispensary* felt like a performance to me between the camera and the subjects in the frame. I would like to think that a cinematic gesture was produced—the unsettled gaze in this case—in response to the situation that I was asked to be part of. This

PS

took shape in the kind of observational strategies of framing (for both camera and sound) and off-camera space where the “system” that was being observed/witnessed/documentated, was unveiled and unraveled. Since I was handling both camera and microphone separately but simultaneously, it definitely felt like a slow dance despite being rooted in one spot because there was very little room to maneuver. I was guided by the sound—who was speaking; whether or not to frame them; usually there was more than one person speaking at a time—how to decide whom to frame? The microphone and the camera often moved in separate directions.

I have a distinct sound practice—perhaps it has to do with my training in music, and also my time at Cybermohalla (2005–2011) during which I focused on listening practices with young practitioners at experimental media labs in different parts of Delhi. We thought through “ways of listening,” writing through listening, seeing and listening, and importantly, silence. I think it brought us in contact with listening as a separate dimension in a cacophonous city like Delhi. About being patient in the dispensary that day—I wasn’t thinking about that. There was nothing else to do but be present and recognize what was playing out. I found the language of everyone there to be extremely revealing of an acute and astute understanding of power. It was mesmerizing, to be honest. The challenge was to translate at the time, the noise and possible chaos, into something less inchoate through the frame. Not legible necessarily or coherent even. Sound helped direct the observation. I have learned to do that over the years. I did not necessarily know what it looked and sounded like while I was there.

At the heart of this unraveling, was the demand for dignity. The people in the colony were no longer illegal occupants of the city, forever having to prove their existences through tenuous documents. These occupants were no longer *jhuggi* (slum) dwellers, but legally resettled occupants of the Savda Ghevra resettlement colony who would have to negotiate this shift in all kinds of ways, including this overriding claim to dignity alongside access to basic amenities. *Noon Day Dispensary* perhaps witnessed a moment in this shift.

AM I would like to hear you talk about another film, *I Feel a Rhyme Coming on* (2016), which thematizes speaking and listening very

differently. In *Noon Day Dispensary*, speech and intonation reflect and reinforce classed and gendered conflicts in the resettlement colony, perhaps most explicitly when a Hindi-speaking female patient accuses the male doctor of only pretending to be polite to you “by speaking in English.” But in *I Feel a Rhyme Coming on*, your subject Borsha alerts us to a dimension of language—or perhaps “thought” that is irreducible to socially legitimized speech—that neurotypical subjects often take for granted. Could you speak to these rather distinct goals and outcomes of listening in each film?

PS *I Feel a Rhyme Coming on* emerged from a series of conversations we were having about writing. I had set up the Media Lab at the Indian Institute of Cerebral Palsy (IICP) in Kolkata in 2015, an institution my mother worked at until she retired. I grew up with IICP and when it turned forty, I decided to do a workshop with text, image and sound, which then grew into the Media Lab. The main impetus for this was to make a space for creativity and language within an institution that mainly focused on advocacy. Borsha is a writer and a poet with very severe physical disabilities including that of speech. *I Feel a Rhyme Coming on* touched upon something ephemeral and fleeting—a spark of inspiration from the world that allows things to clear for a brief moment and for language to flow. But Borsha speaks through pointing at a board, that has to then be interpreted. The IICP Media Lab brought many things into focus—the things we take for granted, like mobility, language, and time. They all needed to be reformulated in terms of practice, and that has been incredibly illuminating for me.

AS Listening in these two films appears to have distinct goals, as you have put so astutely, each with its own language universe and set of constraints. The question becomes formal for me, as I mentioned earlier, and I respond using a cinematic stance, to try and gauge the manner of presence. The space determines to some extent what this presence might be. In *Noon Day Dispensary*, listening to the various subjects (of the state, in the frame) led the image. In Borsha’s interview, it was about going from the board to her, to the interpreter, and back to the board. The difficulty of speech and yet the absolute clarity of language, was to me the spark that allowed for this little piece to form.

Language, speech, dialect, and tonality inevitably raise questions about location and locality. Could you expand on your motivation and commitment to make films in Delhi? What do you see as the value of making films in a site where one is deeply embedded?

PS There are a few reasons for that commitment. Delhi is the city I came to after school in Kolkata, and became an adult in. I learnt to navigate it, maneuver it, even circumvent it when necessary. It happened as I studied, worked, left and returned to it. Delhi was where my closest friendships and deepest loves were, and continue to be made and broken. I think Delhi, to me, represents different cycles of “self” and “world,” and the impossibility of one without the other. It remains formative and foundational.

It was difficult to make films when I was away and teaching in Bangalore. For what I was interested in, not understanding Kannada (the local language) was a hindrance. English and Hindi are also the language of migrants to the city, and the distance between linguistic worlds and hence actual worlds was something I did not know how to traverse.² It just seemed opaque to me as a result. Although there are many reasons for opacity, this is just an example. I have been able to engage with how Delhi works in relation to power and its effects; perhaps that is what being embedded allows. I have been fortunate enough to engage in multiple sites where the city is being made and broken, relocated and erased, and the ways in which people navigate these massive power imbalances and continue to build their lives. To me, this embeddedness in place allows for further questions to emerge. For instance: Would it be possible to query and rethink the separations we make between “observer” and “observed” in documentary practice—to inhabit a different set of relations? To be neither “inside” nor “outside” and become both and neither? Can framing and how we are present in the frame make more space—more room—for “representation” to grow into something less damning (or implicating)?

I also think about the ways in which place *makes itself known*; how we are sensing it and how it is sensing us. I think it changes our orientation if we can see where the boundaries merge.

² India is a multilingual country with hundreds of regional languages. Twenty-two languages are mentioned in the constitution.

To give an example through listening and sound: during a walk that I was leading in Old Delhi, I was struck by the separation of spaces through sound. The old city is very dense and the borders between spaces are very porous. It would appear that sound especially would work in the same way—simultaneous and difficult to demarcate. Going into the courtyard of a shrine in the thick of this density, we encountered a silence that was almost inexplicable. A silence through which we heard someone calling out to feed the pigeons on a neighboring rooftop and the rustling of wings. The shrine was its own sound portal, its own zoomed-in shot. Yet we were surrounded by the layers of the old city, right outside the wall of the courtyard.

What are these connections? To what? How do we inhabit them and what do we make of them?

Perhaps *locality* is a useful point of entry into *This Freedom Life*, and into what language can or cannot do to capture the complexities of the lives that this film documents. As Aparna noted earlier, the protagonists of this film are in relationships that could be called “queer” in that they involve nonheteronormative desire. But during a Q & A at the Flaherty, you said you did not want to use the word “queer” to describe this film or its protagonists. Could you tell us why? Also, how has *This Freedom Life* been received in India? I ask the last question bearing in mind the recent decriminalization of homosexuality by the Supreme Court of India after decades of queer activism. **PR**

Describing this film as “queer” takes away some of its power. I say that because if we watch *This Freedom Life* through the assumptions of a certain idea of queerness that is so overly articulated, the film tends to fall very flat. “Queer,” in the context of India, is also intrinsically connected to the political mobilization against Section 377 of the India Penal Code that criminalized same-sex desire until last year.³ The relationships that we see in the film fall outside this set of politics that has for so long been tied to a particular language around queerness. In this film, nothing is named. We encounter possibly, the ordinariness of love. It is nonheteronormative desire of course, but the imagination around this desire could not be more heteronormative: here, marriage is seen as the culmination of love, family comes first, gender roles remain fairly intact. But what **PS**

³Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, long considered an antisodomy statute, was introduced in India in 1861 under British rule. It was repealed by the Supreme Court of India in September 2018.

was fascinating to be in was the slow subversion of precisely all these institutionalized ideas that presented limits to love and its imagination.

This film has been received in India with a sense of intrigue, perhaps, but also in queer circles, with an anxiety around precisely this non-naming. I was asked whether we talked about transgender issues, and there was a comment once about how this film felt like the early days of the transgender movement. There have been a range of responses but I think also a sense of relief around questions of representation. I think the form of the film opens representation up to a more mobile sense of life being lived and that made everyone breathe a little easier, I think.

In September 2018, Section 377 was repealed. The film was shown right after that. I tried telling the protagonists of the film but we didn't get very far. Subsequently, the repeal has come to mean more, because they are free to make decisions that the law would actually regard a lot more than their social contexts are willing to! It's very ironic.

AS *This Freedom Life* is also visually very rich, with several deftly developed sequences focusing on contemporary visual culture. I am thinking of the saffron-themed communal baby shower with which you open the film, the rituals and colors associated with the *karva chauth* ceremony performed by married Hindu women for the well-being of their husbands, the popular iconography of Indian brides, Hindi film songs, and TV shows. At one of the Flaherty discussions, you said you do not use B-roll in your films. How would you describe the function of these sequences in this film?

PS To give you some background, this film was shot in Dr. Ambedkar Nagar in Delhi. Dr. Ambedkar Nagar falls within the South Delhi constituency and has various localities within it—urban villages, resettlement colonies, regularized and informal settlements. Each of these urban formations has a specific genealogy. For example, Dakshinpuri, where the beauty parlor in the film is located, is a resettlement colony where people were moved after mass evictions in Central and Old Delhi in the 1970s. The inhabitants of Dr. Ambedkar Nagar comprise largely the working classes and also the urban poor.

It was very important for me to be able to *situate* Dr. Ambedkar Nagar in relation to the rest of Delhi, that is to say, where it exists in the larger imagination and power dynamics of Delhi. The film starts at a Government Health Fair at Talkatora Stadium, a prominent venue for such events, with a baby shower for pregnant women who have been brought from Dr. Ambedkar Nagar for it. The bizarre, as you say, saffron-tinged rhetoric around women's health at this fair, reveals this particular state—this right-wing Hindu state with its majoritarian and divisive fantasies—in our bodies. The state requires numbers for its various programs. Places like Dr. Ambedkar Nagar provide a steady supply of subjects for the state to act through, on demand. This opening, though far removed from the realities of the film's protagonists, also provides a frame (not *the* frame, but one of many) for the film, even though I never return to it and it is hopefully forgotten by the time the film ends. Mainly, the opening sequence was to situate Dr. Ambedkar Nagar in Delhi's political and ethical imagination of itself.

The other scenes that you mention are the rituals, festivals, weddings, the markers of time and seasons that we were present for during our fifteen months of filming in Dr. Ambedkar Nagar. These were part of the fabric of the place, a constant and accompanying presence alongside the events in the protagonists' own lives. It is how time is perceived; cycles through which lives and loves proceed.

I find the term B-Roll to be too technical and functional, and a strategy that gives itself away too easily. I would prefer not to call it that, but possibly do similar things by another name! The TV images, the marriage video footage, the constant interruptions by mobile phones even, all constitute the sound-and image-scape, perhaps a mindspace that is mirrored back to the protagonists. Again, these images and sounds accompany the protagonists' erratic and intense relationships, sometimes echoing it back to them, sometimes being in opposition, and mostly always interrupting an already fractured sense of togetherness. But they are essential and constant, mundane, and fantastical—a continuous playback of a parallel universe of desire and pain that resonates with their own.

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POOJA RANGAN Pooja Rangan is Associate Professor of English in Film and Media Studies at Amherst College. Her book *Immediations: The Humanitarian Impulse in Documentary* (Duke 2017), won the ACLA's 2019 Harry Levin Prize for Outstanding First Book. Rangan is Board President of the Flaherty, and has published in *Discourse*, *Feminist Media Histories*, *Film Quarterly*, *Camera Obscura*, *differences*, and other venues. Rangan's current project, *Audibilities*, examines documentary listening and auditory regimes.

APARNA SHARMA Aparna Sharma is a documentary filmmaker and scholar. She makes films on the cultural life and practices of communities living in Northeast India, where she has worked for over ten years. Her most recent film, *Mihin Sutta, Mihin Jibon (The Women Weavers of Assam, 2019)* will be distributed by the Royal Anthropological Institute, UK. Sharma also writes on documentary cinema and is the author of the book *Documentary Films in India: Critical Aesthetics at Work* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). She is Associate Professor at the Department of World Arts and Cultures/Dance, UCLA.

