

Lines in the Sand(bar): Collective Perspectives and Shifting Temporalities in *Char... The No Man's Island*

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ABSTRACT: The tasks of documenting and narrating stories of climate change and border environments have become increasingly urgent in recent years, and discussions around effective approaches to environmental storytelling have intensified accordingly. The film *Char... The No Man's Island* (2012), directed by Sourav Sarangi, is a noteworthy example of a work that seeks to represent one such unstable environment that exists on the border between India and Bangladesh and to explore the daily lives of the beings who inhabit it. Although the documentary has a specific regional focus, its scope is far from limited, as the film examines various dimensions of life in this border environment as well as the historical and political factors that have led to the current realities of the space and the communities established there. In this paper, I examine how Sarangi's inclusion of a multitude of distinct human and non-human perspectives throughout the film signals a move towards a form of environmental storytelling grounded in the notion of a collective, wherein narrative agency is distributed amongst multiple entities rather than invested in a single individual. Moreover, the paper argues that the usage of these various perspectives also enables *Char* to depict alternate temporalities and experiences of time which contrast heavily with ideas of linear time and progress and invites audiences to consider the multifaceted temporal and spatial realities of life in a precarious border environment.

KEYWORDS: South Asia, Bangladesh, India, borders, environmental humanities, documentary filmmaking, climate change, temporality, bodies of water, perspective

Introduction

Before we ever see the mighty river that shapes Sourav Sarangi's 2012 documentary *Char... The No Man's Island*, we hear water coursing through the planet's largest delta: the borderlands and borderwaters of India and Bangladesh, where the Ganges drains into the Indian Ocean system. The rising noise of the river beckons the audience into the film's field of vision. As a nebulous illustrated map of the area unfolds, the camera shifts onto a tranquil scene of someone rowing a boat across a sun-streaked expanse of water; the forceful, dynamic noise washes away. Immediately thereafter, Sarangi firmly places his viewer within the region his film is concerned with through another diegetic auditory device, a radio news station dispassionately reporting the details of an impending cyclone approaching the Bay of Bengal, all while the person rowing the boat continues to move on the water and the cries of a bird overhead mingle with the voice of the news anchor. For a moment, the prophecy of disaster hangs over this serene landscape. It is quickly replaced, however, by the increasing urgency of the newscaster's tone as the river's waves pick up in speed and height. The camera shifts again to show us a billowing stream of smoke emerging from a factory on the horizon, and unidentified sirens blare out and shatter the peace entirely. Disaster, it seems, has not only caught up, but

embedded itself into a scene that had begun in static timelessness.

It is precisely by pitting sight against sound and constantly mediating the dynamic, textured lines between land and water that the film approaches its titular space and the subjects who inhabit it. *Char* in Bangla refers to a sandbar that straddles the geopolitical border between Bangladesh and India, its own boundaries shifting constantly even as it serves as home to thousands of people displaced by flooding. Sarangi's environmental storytelling is as deeply embedded in the geology of this "no man's island" as it is in the stories of its inhabitants, who support their families by smuggling livestock and goods across the border. The only constant in their lives is instability and impermanence, both in terms of the physical precariousness of their home and the way they are at once keenly surveilled and abandoned by the respective governments on either side. Cutting between conversations with *Char*'s inhabitants is the director's narration of the historical and current events of the island. Much like the sandbar itself, fluid scenes capturing the daily lives of its subjects are at once deeply intimate and expansive in their breadth.

In what follows, I propose to examine Sarangi's *Char* as a compelling project involving borders and bodies shaped by environmental change. This essay ponders the ways in which narrative agency is distributed amongst a combination of human and non-human entities throughout *Char* by way of shifts in perspective and focus,

and how these shifts in turn enable the film to represent the altered and mutable temporalities of the border environment it is centered upon. To further elaborate upon the significance of the film's mode of environmental storytelling, I draw from critic Amitav Ghosh's idea of the "collective," as delineated in *The Great Derangement* (2016), wherein he contends that mimetic realism, centered on individual protagonists and enshrined in the conventions of literary fiction, is woefully inadequate for grappling with human interactions with the immense scales of climate change. The time has come for another kind of storytelling, Ghosh urges, which would abandon the modernist fixation on individual narrative forms and create new possibilities for collective meaning-making of events that confound human measures of space and time. Although Ghosh's work is concerned with literary fiction, I would like to argue for the importance of the collective in other forms of storytelling, including documentary filmmaking. If narratives that center an individual are founded upon a notion of linear time and capitalist progress, the inclusion of a multitude of perspectives which experience time differently may thus make it possible to represent multiple modes of organizing and relating to time as well. The multiplicity present in *Char* thus enables a transition beyond a singular, one-note perception of its subjects, and towards an understanding of how the beings, times, and spaces within this environment are neither isolated nor in stasis, but perpetually interlinked and influencing one another.

The Environmental Documentary and Styles of Narration

The task of representing and narrating environmental change is one that seems to have grown increasingly urgent over the past few years, as increasing swathes of the earth's population experience its effects and climate crises grow in number and severity. Much of the discussion on how to go about fulfilling this task centers on the effectiveness of a given piece of media, or the possibility of offering a narrative centering on an environment and its inhabitants that encourages audiences to connect with these spaces in ways which heighten social awareness and perhaps even inspire tangible, organized action. As K. Hedemann discusses in "Ecological Citizens with a Movie Camera: Communitarian and Agonistic Environmental Documentaries" environmental documentaries which seek to be effective generally assume a standpoint that is either accusatory, grounded in pointing out the political, cultural, and various other fault lines with the help of expert testimony to tell stories of changing or destroyed environments, or constructive, utilizing activism and community participation to depict possibilities for future-building. Hedemann goes on to draw a parallel between these filmmaking styles and the two forms of ecological citizenship which Anneleen Kenis had previously identified: agonistic and communitarian, and writes that agonistic ecological citizenship

refers to implacable protest activism that opposes exist-

ing power structures in discourses and actions, while its communitarian counterpart practices and spreads the word about attractive alternative modes of living, consumption and production [...] the distinction between agonistic and communitarian citizenship seems to correspond with findings about a shift from accusatory to constructive styles of environmental documentaries in recent years (Hughes 2014, pp. 123–24). Against this backdrop, documentary shouldn't be understood as a value-free image of reality but as an audio-visual rhetoric through which movie-makers perform politically. I suggest to call this communicative performance: ecological citizens with a movie camera. (Hedemann 1)

Although there are certainly threads of optimism and future-building drawn present in *Char*, the film additionally offers a striking critique of the systems whose function and/or dysfunction render its subjects' existences and livelihoods unstable and illegal. Moreover, unlike many environmental documentaries, *Char* does not seek out "expert" testimony to verify what its subjects, the inhabitants of the island, recount about their lives. Nor do community activists have a presence in the film, if indeed any concerned specifically with the issues the film ponders existed during the time frame of its production. In this framework then, *Char* seems to exist between these stylistic binaries without feeling the need to commit to one, occupied with tracing the root causes and realities of the environmental issues it presents while retaining a sense of potential for the island's inhabitants if not for the unstable sandbar itself. Moreover, Hedemann's conception of "ecological citizens with a movie camera" is an interesting element of the environmental documentary form with regards to *Char*, considering much of the film is shaped by Sarangi's voice as narrator, providing important exposition and making conversation with his subjects, although he himself never appears onscreen. In fact, during these moments where Sarangi speaks, the viewer nearly seems to share in his perspective as his voice sounds from behind the camera and the viewfinder swings to the direction and focus of Sarangi's vision. In this way, the film invites audiences to identify themselves with the filmmaker, imagining themselves into the role of the "ecological citizen with a movie camera" for which Sarangi serves as a model and placeholder.

There is another character whose perspective frames much of *Char*, although with a far more visual presence: a fourteen-year-old boy named Rubel who lives on Char and is forced to support his family by smuggling rice and other goods across the India-Bangladesh border. Yet while Rubel provides the viewer with a way in to perceiving and understanding the lives of the people who inhabit Char, his is certainly not the only perspective at play here—the other members of his family, the young boys who do similar work, various members of the community, the police force, and even non-human beings such as the cattle being smuggled and the birds who live on the island are often depicted in a way that makes their autonomy

and distinct perspectives clear. The film benefits from not being beholden to a linear narrative which traces only Rubel's development throughout the film, an organizational mode which would have highlighted other experiences, beings, and natural phenomena solely within the context of how they relate to him. Instead, *Char* jumps through time and space, moving freely in and out of Rubel's perspective to bring other people and non-human entities into conversation.

Non-Human Temporalities and Agency

Ömür Harmanşah, in his essay "Deep Time and Landscape History," one of several thought-provoking pieces included in the anthology *Timescales: Thinking Across Ecological Temporalities*, writes of how the notion of an Anthropocene brings with it a new understanding of temporality which enables a mode of thinking deeply both into the past and the future. Drawing from Dipesh Chakrabarty's critique of Fernand Braudel's *longue durée*, an approach to the study of history that relies upon the assumption of gradual, cyclical geological movement, Harmanşah writes: "We are in need of an understanding of landscapes and ecologies that are by no means static backdrops or dependable environments upon which cultural practice is inscribed, but are themselves agents that take part in the constitution of the world" (Wiggin 41). If indeed there is such a "need" to seek out and understand environments which visibly shift and change rather than serving as silent and immobile scenic backgrounds to active human life, Sarangi seems to be attempting to fill it through his film's depiction of the river and the islands which form, crumble, and reform within it. Interspersed between images of human interaction amongst themselves or with other creatures are moments where the environment itself is centered as a momentary protagonist.

One of these moments occurs towards the beginning of the film, as the camera stills and captures the process of erosion taking place in real time. During this scene, swatches of long reeds and large chunks of dirt sway and break off from the island, before falling into the river and beginning the process of transforming into mud. After a few moments of this, the film cuts to Sarangi's older footage, depicting entire trees falling into the water as people look on. In a similar scene towards the end of the film, humans and animals retain a presence—we hear birds chirping in the background and the scene cuts to a single bird on the ground letting out a mournful cry—yet when the camera fixates on capturing the movement of erosion, they are not foregrounded. Although the viewer can see a few people fishing or performing other labor on another end of the island's shore, their movements are indistinct and fade into the background as our gaze remains with the rapidly changing boundary between land and water in the center of the shot. For a few minutes, we watch the repetitive motion of the chunks of dirt dissolving into the water, and yet when it comes to the last of these

unstable portions, the camera pauses, perhaps to make the viewer wonder if this sandbank will somehow escape gravity's compulsion. After several moments of suspense, however, it too falls into the water, and the attention that the film pays to the image of the displaced dirt merging with the river forces audiences to reckon with the speed of the changes occurring. An urgency thus seems to take root as one realizes that the river erosion the film has been explaining to us has been materially taking place all this time, and thus our perception of it is fundamentally delayed. Between the moment of filming and the moment of viewing exists a gap made even more difficult to breach by the knowledge that these processes have apparently been taking place the entire time. Elizabeth Cowie writes in *Recording Reality, Desiring the Real* of the incommensurable loss that exists in the documentary's attempt to depict a "true" reality: "documentary is concerned with the transformation of the ephemeral and the transitory into the significant through re-presentation, and it, too, anxiously commemorates as loss what is not preserved, recorded, and remembered" (Cowie 135). Loss is thus enfolded both into the images we see upon the screen and the documentary's attempts to capture these moments in all their ephemerality. *Char* is a film which I would argue is deeply concerned with this quality of loss—there appears to be an awareness that no "complete" representation of the island's degradation can ever be transmitted to the viewer. Yet by honing in on these transient moments and shifting between footage recorded at different times, the film asks us to dwell in a partially recreated temporal instability which might make a deeper, more involved connection between the audience and the depicted environment possible.

Moreover, the notion of "agency" with regards to the ecologies represented in *Char* is something the film's narration seems to evoke, particularly in the description given of the Ganges. Over the course of a sequence depicting the Farakka Dam, the barrage developed by India to control the flow of the Ganges into Bangladesh, the narration characterizes the river as a living, forceful entity with desires and goals of its own:

The real snake doesn't scare us, we are scared of the river. The mythical, heavenly, three eyed river, mother Ganga is now a snake. And the snake was strangled at Farakka Dam by humans. They [the villagers] told me. In order to survive, with all its might, the snake strikes its tail in vengeance once over upstream areas of Farakka. Goes Malda District. Once more it strikes, downstream of Farakka Dam... goes Murshidabad" (Sarangi).

The "real snake" referenced here is seen only briefly in the moments leading up to this new information given about the river, during a scene in which the village elders employ rituals to treat a man bitten by a snake during a nighttime boat journey, turning to spirituality rather than medical care due to the lack of an actual hospital in the vicinity. As the film moves away from this scene of suspended pain

into an explanation of the way the inhabitants of Char see the river, a link is drawn between the singular creature of the snake whose venom poses a present, temporary threat and the immense power of the river, whose presence surrounds these people and perpetually threatens their homes and lives. Yet the narrator, and by proxy the villagers, also make it clear that the destruction caused by the river is not entirely chaotic and unexplainable—instead, state power enabling the creation of the Farakka Dam is provided as the basis for the river's fury. Enfolded into this comparison as well are the spiritual implications of both the figure of the snake and the Ganges river in this localized context—across a variety of Hindu traditions in Bengal, people worship a snake goddess known as Manasa Devi and view the river itself as a mother goddess, often referring to it as Ganga Ma. In establishing the snake and the river as mirrors of one another, Sarangi thus evokes the complex spiritual bonds that the inhabitants of the sandbar have long had with the natural entities with whom they share this space.

It is telling that the film begins with a quote from Jawaharlal Nehru, the first elected leader of the newly democratized Indian state after the British Raj ended, in which he lauds the importance of dams: "Dams are the new temples of modern India" (Sarangi). As Veena Hariharan writes in "Death by Water: Environmental Documentaries, a Brief Overview," the building of dams across India was heralded as an important development drawing the nation into modernity after gaining independence, and many environmental documentaries produced in India during this time period took an idealizing stance regarding dams, serving as tributes to "concrete, steel, gigantism, scientific modernity and hydroelectric power" (Hariharan). In characterizing the river as a living creature who has been displaced and throttled by human machinations, and the flooding that heretofore takes place as its desperate attempts to survive and enact vengeance, the river is granted a brand of agency within this narrative that argues against such depictions of dams as productive, even sacred projects. Moreover, the river is not demonized—just as the film emphasizes that the issue caused by the "real snake" might have been successfully mitigated if the residents of Char simply had reliable access to healthcare, the issues caused by river flooding and erosion are deepened and made acute by the Indian state's desire to control the river, and by both states' abandonment of the people who are subjected to the impact of these attempts at reshaping the environment in which they live. Interestingly, in the scene with the real snake, the waters of the Ganges are sprinkled as part of the rituals performed upon the man suffering from the snakebite, thus indicating the continued role of the river in this community as spiritual caregiver and resource, even as it wields the capacity to obliterate their existence. The rooted presence of the river in these people's lives is therefore in direct contrast with the inaccessible "temples" of the dams, which function as lofty state structures and have no such spiritual, embedded connection with the people whose lives they affect so deeply. Thus, the film casts the river as an agential being in its own right, one whose relationship with human beings is rich

with emotion and spirituality, and always rather tenuous. Moreover, the interplay between the human and non-human perspectives rendered throughout this scene asks us to consider these subjects as a collective, in which no singular understanding of the environment dominates, and the subjects and viewers alike contend with diverse yet interconnected modes of temporal engagement.

The Varied Human Subjectivities of *Char*

This complex connection with the river and the temporalities enfolded in living in such a changeable environment thus perpetually shape and reshape the contours of existence for human and animal subjects who inhabit the island. As Sarangi makes clear to us by interspersing older footage with more recent recordings, the human population here is one which has consistently suffered displacement. Sarangi originally interacted with several members of this community ten years prior to the primary timeline of the film, during which time he recorded the refugee camps which formed as a result of devastating floods that completely engulfed entire villages across Bengal. In the years since the destruction of their homes, these environmental refugees migrated to Char and began to rely on smuggling to survive. One of the narrative methods that Sarangi frequently makes use of to provide an apparently honest depiction of the perspectives of these people who live on the outskirts of legality is conversation, as described in a 2013 article in *The Hindu*: "His [Sarangi's] methodology is marked by a conscious rejection of the interview in favour of the conversation. 'In interviews you create a line between the director, camera and character. But in conversations you create a zone where the characters can move freely'" (Bhattacharya). Certainly, there is an element of informality and even intimacy to the way that Sarangi as a storyteller interacts with the subjects of the documentary. Touching upon everything from deeply personal details of their day-to-day lives to broader discussions about the island and histories of the border, Sarangi alternates between giving his subjects space and time to tell their own stories and guiding certain, often one-on-one conversations with what might be argued a rather heavy hand on occasion. In fact, during the moments in which Sarangi seems to commit to the notion of Rubel as protagonist and representative of life on the island, Rubel appears to push back against this characterization of himself and insist on opacity. One such moment occurs during a sequence that starts out lighthearted, with the pair joking about Rubel's love life, and then takes a darker tone as Rubel recites a common adage about living well and then says that he tries to do so, but is made into a "bad guy." In response, Sarangi asks "Who makes you a bad guy? The river erosion? Or your family pressure?" causing Rubel to abruptly retreat from this line of questioning (Sarangi). While viewers can only guess at the reasons Rubel refuses to provide an answer, among them perhaps a desire for privacy or a refusal to make a statement that might be construed as either harshly political or

overly critical of his family situation, the scene makes it clear that the representation of Rubel which Sarangi provides and we can access is limited—unlike the fictional protagonist of a novel, there are features of Rubel's life that cannot be made visible. It also belies the necessity for the inclusion of other perspectives and methods besides the conversation, which offer forms of knowledge about life on the island beyond what Rubel alone would be capable of transmitting to the audience.

Throughout the film, some of the most striking scenes occur when Sarangi shifts from engaging the subjects in conversation to recording their strenuous and highly surveilled activities in real time. As a viewer, I found myself particularly drawn to the scenes which take place as the women of the island, including the mothers of Rubel and many of the boys who smuggle rice and cattle across the border, attempt to evade the police as they smuggle sachets of a brand of cough syrup banned by the Bangladeshi government due to its alcoholic content. Often taking place at nighttime, the gray-green night vision allows viewers into both the furtive, unpredictable reality of these illicit activities as well as the surveillance technologies used to track and observe the women. These female smugglers are set apart from the other people who perform such activities by nature of the fact that they are transporting illegal and traced substances, and that they do so by hiding them inside their clothing and relying upon the hope that societal norms surrounding male officers searching women might make it difficult for the police to arrest them. In *Women, Mobility and Incarceration: Love and Recasting of Self across the Bangladesh-India Border*, Rimple Mehta describes how female subjects who cross the political border between India and Bangladesh find themselves in the position of also having “transgressed the given social norms of expected behaviour” (Mehta 26). What these women face after having “transgressed” in such a manner is the threat of retribution from political authorities, discarding any social norms that may have protected them from direct confrontations and physical violence up to a point, if not the state violence on a broader scale which drove them to this work in the first place. As the film progresses, we watch the police increasingly become aware of the women's activities and develop plans to cut off the pathways they use to cross the border and find tangible evidence of smuggled goods. Evidently, no timeline of progression and development exists in an accessible way for these women, who are simultaneously deemed irrelevant and criminalized in the capitalist state. Rather, the temporality they experience is fraught and often dependent on chance and the weighing of deadly risk against their families' survival. The women's perspectives as people who cross the border consistently are therefore key to understanding the specifically gendered experience of life on Char, and the precipice they find themselves on as surveilled and hunted subjects driven to risk their lives to support their families in a contradictory and perpetually shifting environment. Yet, even as they live within such an unstable framework, some of the women of *Char* also appear to find true value and a sense of liberation in being inhabitants of this

border environment, distanced in certain ways from the political structures and social expectations of the mainland. During the final minutes of the film, Sarangi highlights a snippet of a conversation between a family that takes place as they perch outside their home, floodwaters having risen to their door. An older man speaks of the need for elected representation of Char that might actually “take care” of the people who inhabit the island, yet the young women of his family offer a swift rebuttal: “You live in the past and always talk the same,” one woman states, while another adds “Now we live free in this no-man's island, papa!” (Sarangi). Despite the lack of aid and protection offered to the people of Char due to the island being configured as a border space to be regulated and not represented, these young women vocally reject their older male relative's hopes of incorporation into either country's political formation as a sentiment of the “past.” In doing so, they locate a concept of freedom in living as part of an abandoned environment, and thus conceptualize a future for Char and the people who live there that is positively dissociated from the project of the nation-state.

Conclusion

As a work of environmental storytelling, *Char... the No Man's Island* is difficult to summarize or categorize in a meaningful way—although many reviewers and commentators portray the film to be Rubel's coming-of-age story as an inhabitant of Char, the scope of the film is far more expansive and multifaceted than might be feasibly contained in one linear story bound to an individual protagonist. In foregrounding non-human entities such as the Ganges and capturing the erosion of the island in real time, as well as depicting a multitude of human inhabitants with distinct experiences, Sourav Sarangi provides a representation of Char that is as mutable as the island itself. He does, however, return to Rubel as a touchstone in the film's conclusion, as the two discuss the possibility of a future whilst Rubel rows a boat, propelling them forward across the river's waters. The island, Rubel says, has no future, but he himself does. As the camera lingers on the earth of the island for a few final moments, *Char* leaves its viewers to grapple with the possibility that this land may soon cease to exist in the form depicted.

Yet it would be an error, in my view, to consider this a wholly defeatist ending or an inevitable return to the notion of an individual's persistence against a backdrop of environmental loss. Rather, Sarangi's immensely rich and multifaceted depiction of the entities which exist upon, around, and in tandem with Char throughout this film gestures at the importance of Ghosh's collective as a mode of organizing narratives of environmental change. Despite the potential of the island as a physical space eventually being lost, the film's own existence as a complex record of this environment and the various, interconnected realities of its inhabitants works against the looming threat of systemic erasure with regards to any of its many subjects and the community they have endeavored to form.

Furthermore, *Char's* layered engagement with the scale and time of the island as a perpetually transforming environment suggests an array of possibilities for how documentary films may engage with the question of constructing narratives of environmental change that are capable of reaching and resonating with a variety of audiences across disciplinary boundaries and international borders.

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