

Interview:**Dipankar Sarkar****In Conversation with Praveen Morchhale**

[**Praveen Morchhale** is an Indian photographer, and filmmaker. He is known for his subtle, natural and simplistic style of cinema and he mostly uses non-actors in his films. After making short films and directing theatre, he made his first feature film *Barefoot to Goa* (2013). His next feature film *Walking with the Wind* (2017) had its world premiere at the Busan International Film Festival in 2017. It has won UNESCO Gandhi medal at IFFI 2018 along with three National Film Awards as the Best Film in Ladakhi, Best Sound Design and Best Re-Recording. His third feature film *Widows of Silence* (2018) was screened at Busan International Film Festival, International Film Festival Rotterdam and at 24th Kolkata International Film Festival where it won the Best Film Award.]

“I am a filmmaker and I make movies about ordinary people using ordinary people as actors. It’s like a crazy idea”. Multiple Award-winning independent filmmaker Praveen Morchhale begins his TEDx Talk at Institute of Rural Management at Anand, Gujrat acknowledging that his conviction to cast non-professional actors in his films is a risky proposition. Praveen Morchhale was born in Hoshangabad in Madhya Pradesh and did his schooling from different places in MP, high school from Radhaswami Higher Secondary, Timarni, MP, and later college from Indore. His cinematic experience takes inspiration from stories of everyday life as well as his microscopic observation of society. He debuted with *Barefoot to Goa* (2015) and then went on to make two award-winning

films *Walking with the Wind* (2017) and *Widow of Silence* (2019). ‘Who can imagine that a small Ladakhi film can win three National Awards in a competition which has many mega-budget films’, the filmmaker remarks at his second feature film’s triumphs at the 65th National Film Awards, India. The film was also awarded the ICFT UNESCO Gandhi medal at the 49th International Film Festival of India. His third feature film had its world premiere at the 23rd Busan International Film Festival, 2018 where it was nominated for the Kim Jiseok Award. The Indian premiere was at the 24th Kolkata International Film Festival, where it had won the Best Indian Film Award. The primary characters in his films are always involved in a journey which can be physical, as in the case of Diya (Saara Nahar) and Prakhar (Prakhar Morchhale) in *Barefoot to Goa* decide to head for Goa, without informing their parents, to bring their aging grandmother to Mumbai. Or it can be a spiritual journey, awakening our social conscience and desire to live a better life within a village in Ladakh, like Tsering (Sonam Wangyal) in *Walking with the Wind*. The journey can also be psychological as revealed in *Widow of Silence*, where Aasia (Shilpi Marwaha) finds herself in crisis when she attempts to get her missing husband’s death certificate from a rogue government official in conflict-ridden Kashmir. Praveen is a self-taught filmmaker whose cinematic sensibility flourished with his second feature film that narrates the story of a 10-year-old boy, who accidentally breaks his classmate’s chair and takes it back with him to repair it secretly. The broken chair serves as a metaphor for a broken relationship, a not-so-perfect democracy, or just a social burden. Interspersed with the visual design of an uneven landscape, desert, covering most of the frames, the film incorporates the minimal use of dialogue. Keeping aside the touristy aspect of the region, the film is a comment on the social aspect of the region. The villagers survive without modern technical intrusions like television, the internet, or mobile phones. So, when an old man brings an old radio to the village square, he is eyed with suspicion. The scene appears comical but it also comments on the insular surroundings of village life. In another scene, one finds a Japanese tourist, who needs to make an urgent call. She is unable to get a telephone signal anywhere. Finding no other alternative, she climbs a hill to talk.



The voyage to virtuosity continues with *Widow of Silence*, which is the tale of a half-widow, Aasia, and her daughter Inaya, surviving an isolated social life and face a lot of harassment, sexual exploitation, and humiliation. Remaining true to reality, the film expresses the women's conditions in one corner of the world, away from the spotlight. To a varying degree, the film moves forward with a languid pace hooking the interest of the viewers with its visual style, narrative progression, and the demeanor of the characters inhabiting the milieu. Told straightforwardly and simply there are themes beneath the surface that forms the basis for an interesting narrative. The film uses long take and dedramatization to create dead time, where narrative causality and progress are abandoned to facilitate contemplative viewing. The filmmaker mutes dramatic intensity and foreground idleness and ambiguity for a more aesthetically rewarding cinematic experience. The silences express a deeper sense of absence, loss, and vacuity. The characters in the film communicate less. Because the core of human existence is on the verge of death. The death of the human soul. Silence betokening absence, loss, and emptiness-the deaths that have occurred in the valley.



Despite busy with scouting location for his next project, Praveen Mochhale took out time from his schedule and responded to my questions for the interview.

DS. When you got yourself enrol in management studies in IMRA (Institute of Rural Management, Anand), were you already interested in cinema?

PM: My interest in theatre and cinema was initiated from my early school days. Even during my management days in IRMA my keen interest in the medium did not fizzle out. But I still believe it was more of a chance than planning to make cinema.

DS. How did theatre happen in your life? Was it beneficial?

PM: I started doing serious theatre when I was studying at the College of Agriculture from Indore, MP. It was something I loved and gave me a lot of understanding about characters, storytelling, and more important about the use of space on the stage. Weaving a story through the

medium of character, using lesser dramatic moments, is something I had learned from the theatre. I believe it has a lot of contribution to my understanding of cinema.

DS. What motivated you to the cinema?

PM: To express my anger against issues prevalent today in our society and life, I started making cinema. I firmly believe the cinema made me what I am today.

DS. How did you begin your journey into the world of filmmaking?

PM: I made a short film around 2004 or 2005 and then 10 years later, I started making feature films. During this period I have written many screenplays and tried my best to get some producer to help me with my kind of films. But it was all futile. So I worked hard, saved money, and produced my first feature Barefoot to Goa. The film was released in theatres with the support of crowdfunding.

DS. The stories and theme of your film are not conventional and roughly falls within the category of art-house cinema.

PM: I just make the cinema without thinking much about anything. Whichever story gets me excited, I try to make those. I try to be honest with the story and characters and mostly my stories are based on real-life or inspired by real life. My films are not plot-driven and are about ordinary peoples' lives and situations in extraordinary circumstances. My films are almost like docu-drama and filled with reality.

DS. What is your perspective while choosing the subject of your story?

PM: I try to remain neutral and non-judgmental while telling stories through the medium of cinema. I try to weave a simple narrative with multiple meanings within the

story which may be a satirical take on a situation or set of conditions. My stories are mostly carried forward by the characters who are rooted in reality and the locations of the story. My films do not try to make any judgment or provide a solution to any problem. It is up to the discretion of the audiences to decide what could be the possible solutions.



DS. Did you approach production houses for your first films?

PM: Around five to three for all of my three films. But Bollywood is all about profit-making and a star system where my kind of cinema does not fit. Even after so much change in the present scenario, finding a buyer or OTT platform to beam the film is tough for me.

DS. What do you mean by 'beam'?

PM: Beam is like keeping the film on its platform.

DS. How did you raise & save money for your first film?

PM: I worked a lot over many years doing many things and saved money. I realized this is the only way to make the kind of cinema I want to. And I am still doing the same despite having made three films. Producing my films give me full freedom without any influence or interference. I am fiercely independent in my art and work.

DS. Do you prefer having a producer for your films?

PM: If I get full liberty from choosing the subject of the story, from characters to shoot style, from edit to sound design, till the final film then I would love to have a producer for my films. But I know it starts with a promise and ends up incorporating so many influences that the final film becomes something else. I have a vision for all my films and I do not like to compromise. For me, my cinema is like writing a novel and I like to author it the way I wish it to be.

DS. How long do you take to complete your films?

PM: From writing to the final film, it takes not more than five to six months. I work very fast. Also, my team members know my pace, so we all are aligned in the same mindset. Shooting on location is generally seventeen to twenty days with a very small dedicated and passionate crew.

DS. How did you assemble your crew?

PM: My crew size depends on how many names I can remember. I call everyone in my crew by their name. My team members comprise twelve to fourteen professionals and a few local support. I am very uncomfortable working with a large crew say around seventy to eighty people and I have that kind of experience too. But a larger crew does not mean the work will be faster. It also depends upon the scale of the film.

DS. Your anger against injustice provoked and motivated you to make cinema. Is that reflected in your first film too, which is about two grandchildren who travel from Mumbai to Goa to bring their grandmother back home?

PM: Yes, you are right. I have observed that in our present-day society, in cities and smaller towns, families do not want to keep their elderly members with them.

From joint families, we have become nuclear families. Children do miss the golden opportunity to be with their grandparents. I found this is quite hurting. Thus it provoked me to make Barefoot to Goa.

DS. What were the hurdles you had to overcome to give a shape to your first feature film?

PM: None of the crew members in the film had any experience of working in a feature film so I was a bit worried. But this itself became our strength. We were having no baggage of our past experiences and so we took full liberty to do whatever we wanted to experiment with. Filmmaking is an adventure filled with surprises as well as hurdles. One has to enjoy the process and intelligently overcome all the hurdles.

DS. Why did you decide to have a song sung by the legendary singer K.J. Yesudas at the beginning of the film?

PM: We decided to keep the song, in the beginning, to give the film for creating a certain mood and feel. It was like a launchpad for the emotional turmoil we see later in the film. Also, it hinted at the subtle emotional bonding with our elders and parents in the family.

DS. The grandmother (Farrukh Jaffar) is a mute old lady. Is there a reason why you didn't want her to speak or talk at all?

PM: I think the situation was more vocal than verbal. When no one is listening to her feelings, I thought silence will lend her voice. The kind of impact silence had, dialogues would never.

DS. The mother (Purva Parag) abominates her mother-in-law. She dumps the box of homemade sweets into the dustbin, hides the letter, and gets irritated at the

mention of her name. So, is she a bad human being by nature, or have the circumstances made her cynical?

PM: No one is bad in this world. We always react to circumstances. The space we live in, the thinking, and experience shape our behavior. As a filmmaker, I am not judgemental.

DS. Do Prakhar (Prakhar Morchhale) and Diya (Saara Nahar) discover a sense of belonging and freedom within the rural surrounding on their hitchhiking?

PM: There could be many interpretations of their journey. I think their journey was more to understand human kindness than anything else. It is also a reflection of the loss of social and family bonding.

DS. In the last shot of the film where Diya is roller-skating and we come across the figure of an old lady with her back to the camera. Is it a dream sequence or a reality?

PM: I have no fixed answer and I leave my films to the audience to decide what they want to take away from it. Everyone has a different understanding of the situation and will make their judgment.

DS. From Barefoot to Goa to Walking with the Wind your cinematic language has evolved in a very mature way. So, do you consider your debut was a learning experience?

PM: Each film is a learning in itself. We evolve with story, time, and location. Even after making three films, I approach my next film as if I am doing that for the first time. I still feel I know very little about films.

DS. How did you come across the idea to narrate the story of 10-year-old Tsering

(Sonam Wangyal) who accidentally breaks his classmate's chair and takes it back with him to repair it secretly?

PM: It is a moralistic film with a theme that we have to repair our own mistakes. This core idea got into this film and the story revolves around it. I thought of a small boy who will quietly do the right thing even though no one is watching him.

DS. Were all the characters in the film non-actors?

PM: Yes, all characters are non-professional actors.

DS. Tell us about your experience regarding the casting of the film?

PM: I made two visits to the locations and found real-life characters like the differently-abled person, carpenter, poet, etc. It made the film look more realistic, believable, and special. I do not involve myself with any kind of screen test or auditions. I meet them over a cup of tea and discussed the general day to day conversation of life. That is good enough for me to decide and cast.

DS. Does the broken chair trigger an allegorical journey for Tsering to unravel the bitter truth and realities of life?

PM: This journey to repair the chair is a journey to within. It makes him understand the world and himself as well as the hard truth and realities of society and family.

DS. How did you come across Mohammad Reza Jahanpanah, the cinematographer of the film?

PM: At the Mumbai film festival (MAMI), 2015 I saw an Iranian film shot by Mr. Reza. I loved one particular shot, which was similar to the kind of vision I had for my film. I contacted him and he agreed happily.

So, far we have shot two films together and hoping to continue our creative association.

DS. How do you decide on the look of your film with your cameraman?

PM: We do not discuss much on look. I believe the location, story, and characters themselves form the look. We hardly discuss this aspect. But there are certain aesthetic choices, which I do share with my cinematographer. It is very important to have a common vision for the film.

DS. A mysterious lady with a hat is busy painting and her subject is Tsering crossing the valley with or without his beloved donkey. What was her function within the narrative?

PM: I thought to depict a superpower through the character of the painter. Whatever good or bad we do, someone is watching us. Beyond this, those three scenes have multiple philosophical meanings.

DS. The Japanese documentary filmmaker carries with her a book on Abbas Kiarostami. Is it your homage to the filmmaker?

PM: We came to know the demise of legendary filmmaker Kiarostami during the shoot. Everyone in the crew was very sad. The next day we thought to dedicate the film and a few scenes in memory of the legend. Thus those two scenes were written and came alive into the film. It was a small gesture from our side to the filmmaker.

DS. How has auteur influenced your cinema?

PM: I learned about simplicity in cinema through the films of Kiarostami. Films can be about ordinary people, their life, and struggle. We do not need heroes to make film impactful. Common men are the biggest

heroes. That is the best learning I have from his films.

DS. The people in the village exist without TV, the internet and mobile phones. One old man is regarded suspiciously when he brings along an old radio to the village square, the Japanese tourist relishes the unique bread from Laddak. What was your research process to provide such realistic details to the film?

PM: I stayed more than a week in the village and observing their way of life, living, and culture. I brought all of my experience of living and laughing with those good souls in the film.

DS. At the bus stop, the blind man is going to the city of Leh to collect a pension of only 300 rupees. And the young man says that maybe the government feels that how can a blind see what is been given to him. And he wonders that only God knows who is the real blind. Is it a kind of sarcasm on the government policies?

PM: At a time when it is very difficult to make comments on the present political scenario, satire is the best way to comment. My cinema is full of satire and absurdity. The audience understands what characters want to tell and why. They are intelligent.

DS. The climax of the film reveals the subject of the painting to the viewers. At the same time, Tsering is lying on the ground and relaxing, while his friend, riding on the donkey enters the frame. What is the symbolism of the scene?

PM: As I said earlier, I leave it to the audience to decide what it was meant for. There is no certain answer.

DS. The protagonist Aasia's husband in, *Widow of Silence*, is missing for the last seven years'. She is having a sort of an affair

with a school teacher. At the same time, she wants the whereabouts of her husband from an informer. Is she in a perplexed state of mind?

PM: Half widows have no right to decide their fate in Kashmir. Somehow her indecisiveness depicts a bigger picture of the situation as well. Her internal fight has a reflection of her external existence and directionless life, though she is a strong and firm lady.

DS: The van driver is a free-willed and warm-hearted person. He engages in cynical and poetic quips with everyone he comes across whether it is his passenger or the army officers at the check post. He even criticizes the Islamic law prohibiting women from sitting next to men. What is his function in the story of the film?

PM: He is the person who drives the story forward. He looks like a peripheral character but in my opinion, he weaves many stories parallel to Aasia's story. He is the one who sets the mood and the invisible painful environments around their life.

DS: The van driver is shocked when he is informed by the cook that the army officer for whom he has brought a book is dead. But instead of taking the book back why does he give it to the cook?

PM: I believe he left it for the next officer who may come in place of the dead officer. The book was a symbol of love, culture, and affection.

DS: The government officer (registrar) is a dishonest and corrupt man who sits on a comfortable chair beneath the framed photographs of Nehru and Gandhi hanging on the walls of his office. Was it a deliberate choice?

PM: It depicts a conflict of vision concerning what the leaders and founding

fathers had for India and what it has become today. The idea of India has become just an ornamental object.

DS: Inaya is bullied constantly at school by her friends about her father. Her mother is not willing to discuss her father's disappearance. In one particular scene, she tears the photograph of his father to pieces and then puts them back in place. Later she scares her troubling school mates with a kitchen knife. What were your thoughts on her characterization while writing your script?

PM: In reality, many children of half widows are bullied and they suffer psychological disorders and alienation from family and society. Living in a constant state where one is not sure if her father is alive or dead is not normal. I had read many factual stories about those children and felt their pain, sorrow, and hurting and that's how I had incorporated those feelings in the screenplay.

DS: The ailing grandmother is tied to a chair who doesn't utter a single line of dialogue throughout the film because she still could not recover from the shock of her abducted son. Does she represent the sense of being a prisoner, both psychological and physical, felt by every woman in their native valley?

PM: Yes, it depicts the helplessness of women not only in Kashmir but in general, everywhere. Women have little choice and are tied to someone else's choice.

DS: Before killing the government officer (registrar), did Aasia think about the fate of her daughter, Inaya?

PM: Aasia took an extreme step when she found that all the doors were closed. She had a friend, the other nurse, with whom she was sharing her pain and hopelessness. The other nurse also offered her to shelter Inaya as

she could not manage to study when Aasia's mother-in-law was sick. The offer to help and keep Inaya was a subtle indication that Inaya will be taken care of. Also, we do not know what had happened to her later after she kills the officer. There is a possibility that she might be released. It is an absurd situation where the government has to first prove that she is alive and then they can punish her because on record she is dead.

DS. After Aasia has committed the murder she puts one of the flower bouquets beside the dead body, and the other one she carries with herself. What is the significance of the bouquet?

PM: That bouquet is for the dead system whom she defeats as well.

DS. Do you have any model of generating revenue for your film?

PM: No. Independent cinema rarely makes revenue except for award money and festival screening fees. A theatrical release is now out of questions and OTT platforms are rarely interested as they don't see many possibilities of profit in such films.

DS. Do filmmakers get a fee for screening their films at the festivals?

PM: Yes, they do.

DS. How much do they range?

PM: Around 300 USD to 600 USD depending upon the number of screenings.

DS. How do you manage the returns of your film in terms of money?

PM: When I make a film, I know very well that I am investing in independent cinema which is an art form. From the beginning, I have no expectations of any monetary returns.

DS. Does winning an award at festivals help?

PM: Certainly it helps. My last feature *Widow of Silence* won 5 international awards and has been to more than 40 film festivals across the globe. So some cash award and festival screening fee certainly helped me to recover part of the expenses.

DS. Is it important for independent filmmakers like you to have a Networking and Sales Agent?

PM: Independent filmmakers are dependent on others to make their film as well as take it to the audience and festivals. Anything which helps the film, the filmmaker must do. Having a sales agent will certainly make a film to reach more places. Networking works if the film is good. No amount of networking will help if the film is not deserving.

DS. Does having a World Sales Rights help?

PM: Yes, it does. It makes a film reach world over and as well as filmmakers, where most of the buyers and sellers meet. The film business is complicated and having a sales agent will make the journey easy.

DS. Your film is screening in Mubi. What is your opinion on the current trend of online streaming?

PM: MUBI is a fantastic platform for indie art films. It also targets specific cinema interested viewers. Cinema has to walk along with new technology and trends.

DS. Your films are not beyond 85 minutes. How do you determine the length of your film?

PM: The story decides the length. I believe the audience is very intelligent and does not need to be spoon-fed and explained. So when films avoid this, the length will automatically come down.

DS. At present What are you working on?

PM: I am working on a few subjects but due to the current covid-19 situations, it looks difficult to start soon. But I am trying to make it possible as early as I can.

Mr. Dipankar Sarkar who writes regularly on cinema, based in Mumbai and passed from FTII, Pune.