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# Insights into Indian Children, their Spaces and Lives through Four Films

Lisa Petheram

Through the films within *Delhi At Eleven* I was given a fascinating glimpse of life in a part of India, from four endearing children's perspectives. As a human geography researcher, I gained insight into the way children of a particular socio-economic background in Delhi interact with their living spaces and other people, as well as other aspects of their lives they chose to reveal. I found myself wondering how Indian adults and children from that same region would respond to these films and how the children were hoping their films would be received by others. As a development practitioner, I was able to perceive aspects of their lives that helped me to gain an insight into the level of poverty in these inner city communities, as well as the potential factors that may limit or promote resilience in these people's lives. The making of the films appears to be important to these children as a means of expressing aspects of their lives and self. Each film reflects a very distinct personality and elements of special significance to each filmmaker.

All four films appeared to be uniquely different from a child's perspective. Their unpolished style, shot from barely above the ground, gives them a rawness and realness that is compelling to watch. Although from a child's perspective and often focused on topics that adults might perceive as trivial everyday scenes, the films achieve a surprising emotional depth, through the earnestness and unselfconsciousness projected. For example, in Aniket's film, his fascination for his aunt unfolds throughout the film, as we watch very slow, everyday scenes of her chores and activities interwoven with Aniket's unabashed singing of a love song. Anshu's very sincere film of the lives of girls appears contrived at times, as we detect her prompting (from behind the camera) her subjects to talk more about their mistreatment as women and girls. Despite this, her dogged expression of the unfairness she faces as a girl compared to the boys leaves us with a strong sense of Anshu's deep passion about this issue in her world. Even though some of the films were serious at times, they all showed moments of playfulness and humour (not always intentional) that were refreshing reminders of the uniqueness of a child's perspective and the importance of the lighter moments in life.

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Striking in all the films is a physical intimacy in the relationship between people and their living spaces. The buildings are close together. In Ravi's shop there is little room to move and every space is utilised. Subjects are often filmed interacting in very close contact with one another, in living spaces that clearly serve multiple uses, with a myriad of belongings crowded in the same place. In Shikha's film, a stove is set up on a shelf above a bed in a small room. And in Aniket's film, children dance in a small gap between beds piled with clothes. People and their domestic interactions, food preparation, eating, daily tasks and children's play outside are common themes in all four films, suggesting that these activities are important and/or feature prominently in the children's lives.

It was particularly interesting to observe the reactions of adults to being filmed by the children. Although some adults (particularly when caught up in other activities) look quite oblivious, most appear confused, curious or sometimes uncomfortable about being filmed. The sight of children filming in this area is probably unusual and perhaps this unfamiliarity gives these children a certain power, as adults are uncertain how to react. The children continue to film despite the subjects' responses: the camera providing a barrier of sorts—against the reactions. Thus, it seems that filming allows these young filmmakers to view and reflect on their every day world from a refreshing step away from it.

The potential of this technique of filming the home lives of children is well worth considering. Clearly the children were able to capture some scenes and angles of home life that could not be filmed by outsiders. To me, the subjects and perspectives projected in the films are unique, and so provide valuable insights for social and environmental development and welfare professionals, as well as cultural theorists and other researchers. Insights from the films could be assessed to help understand the livelihood and poverty levels of these communities and, if appropriate, aid in the planning of new development activities, while assessing existing strategies and projects in sustaining livelihoods.

It may be helpful to watch these films together with the filmmakers, children or adults from these communities and use parts of the films as prompts to discuss certain aspects of these people's lives, and ask the community participants their perspectives of the assets available to them, and perceived strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats in their lives. This could be important for discussing with participants if there are ways they may like to strengthen their capacities to build more resilient futures for themselves. These conversations may not arise naturally through interviews alone as many of these lived everyday experiences are so embedded in people's lives. Produced in relatively uninhibited ways, these films capture raw and real glimpses into people's lives and could function as valuable tools for both the investigator and participant to create meaningful reflection and discourse together.