Synopsis:

The Last Sketch is a feature documentary that chronicles the arduous lives of Kolkata's hand-pulled rickshaw pullers and their relentless struggle for survival.
The film follows three pullers: an 80-year-old man who still pulls a rickshaw to survive; a father striving to keep his daughter safe and educate her so she can fulfill her dream of becoming a doctor; Bashir, from the remote village of Mograhat near Diamond Harbour, who sustains his entire family by pulling a rickshaw in the city; and an old, ailing man abandoned by his family, who survives among fellow pullers. Their pathos runs deeper than any narrative can capture.
One puller compares his life to that of street dogs, and finds the dogs better off, as they can at least find shelter during the rains, while he has no roof over his head.
The hand-pulled rickshaw of Kolkata is not merely a colonial hangover; it is a mode of survival for those who are not equipped to do any other job.

Director's Statement:

I first visited Kolkata (the City of Joy) almost a decade ago, in 2013-14. That is where I encountered the hand-pulled rickshaw, a man pulling another man. At first glance, I found it very colonial and strange. The first thing that came to my mind was Bimal Roy's film Do Bigha Zamin, in which a poor peasant comes to the city and pulls a rickshaw to feed his wife and child and to reclaim his mortgaged land from the landlord in his village. I saw all rickshaw pullers through that lens; helpless, poor, like the protagonist of Do Bigha Zamin.
To understand Calcutta better, I read Dominique Lapierre's book City of Joy and later watched the film adaptation featuring Om Puri, but those were all second-hand experiences. I wanted to know more about Kolkata's rickshaws, and my interest deepened when I spoke to my friends in the city. The brother-sister duo Surabhi and Abhijit came on board to help me make this documentary. They produced the film.
Initially, our hypothesis about the rickshaw pullers was different and very colonial. People call rickshaws and trams the heritage of Kolkata, but both modes of transport are on their last breath. The West Bengal Government banned hand-pulled rickshaws in 2006. License renewals were stopped and they were permitted in only a few areas. The government assumed they would vanish on their own, but the rickshaws still remain. The government has never really cared for these modes of transport.
Most of the pullers are old and malnourished, but a few I met had pride in their eyes. They do not want to be seen as victims; they want to be seen as professionals, as labourers, like factory workers or others. They have a rickshaw union, but it is not very active, and its leaders exploit it for their own benefit. Their numbers have dwindled, their health is deteriorating, and they have no support.
Kolkata was once a city of reforms and revolutions. Now it seems to me like any other city in India; cold, unempathetic, and inhuman.

My Take:

My take on this film was very simple. I wanted to shoot without following any particular pattern of filmmaking. I wanted to keep it as real as possible. We shot the entire film hand-held to stay in sync with the rickshaw pullers and to capture the rhythm of their feet. We kept the sound very raw to showcase the soundscape of the city, a bit loud and chaotic. We did not focus on any single story to avoid imposing our views on their lives, but captured them as realistically as possible. Our editing pattern was not mechanical but simple, trying to tell their story in the best way possible. We did not design the background score sitting in a studio in Mumbai; instead, we went to Shantiniketan to capture Baul folk songs. Most of the voices in the songs are of peasants and random people singing Baul and folk on the roads, and even the instruments used in the background music are raw and handmade. The colour palette is close to reality, sharp and edgy, to capture the mood of the film and the expressions of the characters.
My approach is to present the film as raw as their lives are, without manoeuvring the narrative or being influenced by any motive, just to showcase the dark side of a glittering world. A filmmaker should work with ethics and be cautious while telling stories; righteousness should be at the core, and one should try not to distort the idea of justice. My aim is to highlight the issues of the subaltern, a marginalized section, to garner support from communities across the globe. They need our love, care, and respect.

Personal connection:

My personal connection with the theme and material began during my research and academic years, shaped by the values ingrained in me. As a student of literature, having studied humanities and completed my PhD and post-doctorate from India's leading institutions, Allahabad University and Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. I developed a sense of empathy and an 'idea of justice' that taught me to stand with marginalized and subaltern voices. This sensibility has only grown over the years.

Rickshaw pulling is just one aspect of society. There are multiple issues that cause me discomfort and that I brood over. One thing that touched me deeply while researching the rickshaw pullers was meeting an old puller, around 90 years old, who had promised his wife that he would bring her to Kolkata and show her the entire city. He has not been able to fulfil that promise so far, but he remains adamant that he will bring her one day and fulfil her wish if he can earn a few more rupees. The happiness of earning even ten rupees as fare brings satisfaction and a smile to their faces.

This documentary gave me a different perspective, changed me a lot, and made me a different person. I am sure I would be a very different person had I not made this film. I became very much a part of their world while working with them. I laughed and cried a hundred times. It took me 6-7 years to make. I started this film long before the pandemic. During Covid, what worried me most were the rickshaw pullers of Kolkata. Time flies. I visited again in 2024 and saw that many of them had died and a few were bedridden. Their numbers have reduced. But the memory of being with them still lingers in my mind. I can still feel their footsteps in every corner of the city.

This documentary is not just a film, but an archive of the most beautiful people I have ever met and worked with.

The new world revealing through this film:

The new world I am revealing through my film is a perspective where humans are so vulnerable and yet such an indifferent species, though considered superior. I cannot pass any judgment, but I am putting forth the binary, or the dichotomy, between man and man. Do we really care about the least common denominator that Mahatma Gandhi and our democracy speak of? The film reveals the vanity and the manipulated data that claims India has the third largest economy in the world. What is growth if poverty is so deeply embedded in their nerves and a large section remains unfed and malnourished? They are not insects but very much like us, and the wheels of humanity. They are the footsteps of the city. They deserve better rehabilitation, health, and aid to sustain them, at least until their extinction.