

Interview**VK Joseph****Interview with Saeed Mirza**

The films of Saeed Akhtar Mirza, one of the prominent faces of Indian parallel cinema, are stark reflections of ordinary men in their day-to-day lives. He portrayed the political and social conditions of Indian life through his films. In 1992, he directed 'Naseem', a film set against the backdrop of the Babari Masjid collapse, and then expressed his wish to retire from cinema so that he had nothing more to say to this world. This way, Saeed Akhtar Mirza articulates creative politics with his own life while the film 'Naseem' won National Award that year. Amidst boring mainstream masala films of Bollywood, this genius portrayed the lives of men on the streets of Bombay, seeking the reasons for their hunger, unemployment, and injustice done to them. He stayed with them for months and made films as one of them. He directed films and documentaries like 'Arvind Desai Ki Ajeeb Dastan', 'Albert Pinto Ko Gussa Kyon Ata Hai', 'Salim Langde Pe Mat Ro', and 'Naseem'. The Kerala government appointed Syed Mirza as the jury chairman for the State Film Awards in 2021, one of the reasons for the highly praised quality of the awards list. Syed Mirza has a lot to tell us about the importance of memories in this day and age of fascists who forget history and make distorted new history.

VK Joseph: Let's start from the 70s when the Indian new-wave cinema movement started, where the notion of parallel cinema was of slow-paced films with long takes. But your films, especially 'Albert Pinto Ko Gussa Kyoon Aata Hai' (1980) and 'Salim Langde Pe Mat Ro' (1989), stood different from those of their contemporaries at that time. When we look back, what changes did this new wave movement make in film spaces in India?

Saeed Mirza: The late 70s and early 80s were the eras of new-wave cinema, clearly flaunting an enhanced quality from popular cinema. But I think this new wave has influenced popular mainstream films as well. We had to ask and share with the history of cinema the fundamental question of why cinema should not reflect real life. We tried to find cinema from within life and not from outside of it. Our films were described as pulses of the city because we depicted the realities of life in cities. Look



at directors like Mani Kaul and Kumar Shahani. It is remarkable how far they have taken the language of cinema. The new wave is fundamental to honest cinematography. We would consciously be a part of history and contribute to the same. Be it in Kerala, Bengal, Assam, or Odisha, filmmakers at that time consciously felt the need for a change in films where the new wave became a part of the history of Indian cinema.

VK: Can it be considered as also a political reading of history and time?

Mirza: Of course. My films were evidently political. Films of my contemporaries in parallel spaces were also directly or indirectly representations and readings of the country and its times. We were all the same minds. At those times, a collective was formed.

VK: Wasn't your 1978 film '*Ghashiram Kotwal*' due to such collaboration?

Mirza: K Hariharan and Mani Kaul were the main characters in that film. Kamal Swaroop also collaborated with me in that film. It is a film adaptation of Vijay Tendulkar's play of the same name. It was a completely different experience where different directors, and their perspectives, all being part of a process. That film was completed with three and a half lakh rupees. Those days, movies could be made with so little money because everyone interacted creatively with each other. It is uncertain whether such cooperation is possible these days when everyone has confined to their individual spaces. Back then, we used to discuss all the films we were writing with each other. I used to know about every movie by Kundan Shah, Ketan Mehta, and Sudhir Mishra. Those sharing fuelled our creativity.

VK: In Kerala, too, there was such a practice where filmmakers like TV Chandran, Chinta Ravi, Pavithran, and Aravindan used to discuss each other from the scripting stage of their films.

Mirza: It is a process that widens our world and fills it with light. They are not competing but creating a more extensive world together, cooperating. I'm not saying that it's a great thing, but these interactions with each other make the film better.

VK: There are still such associations in Kerala. Rajeev Ravi, B Ajith Kumar, Kamal KM, Geethu Mohandas, etc., make their films and immediately collaborate technically and creatively.

Mirza: That is very commendable. The results of such collaborations are reflected in Malayalam cinema.

VK: Your film '*Albert Pinto Ko Gussa Kyu Ata Hai*' deals with the working class and their problems. A red flag with a hammer and sickle is seen raised several times in it. That Mumbai is now saffronised. How do you look at this?

Mirza: In fact, not only Mumbai but the whole of India has been saffronised. We need to ask ourselves where we have failed. We should be ready to introspect and ask ourselves what is happening to this

nation and how history works like this. Being on the left, we also need to contemplate from our side. We still need to understand how religion, caste, and individuality work in the lives of people in India. If we don't ask ourselves, if we don't analyse this carefully, the Left will eventually fail. It is not only the people's fault. We must examine why other ideologies cannot make strong movements. We should examine the fact that the Left, which the most rational people adopted during feudalism and famine, has not been able to take root in the masses of Indian society.

VK: One night, we were walking through the streets of Mumbai; you had completed the film '*Salim Langde Pe Mat Ro*'. I was surprised that even the gangsters associated with the Mumbai underworld laughed and shared talks with you as if they were a friend.

Mirza: To accomplish my film, I had to earn people's trust in the streets. Otherwise, the shooting will stop within two or three days. I talked to them, gained their trust, and ate with the people on those streets for months, being one of them. I attended the celebrations with them. Humans should be like that, and so should the practical left. Let those who go to the temple go; let those who go to mosques do so. We cannot have a revolution by excluding anyone. Party should also be part of all human celebrations like Christmas and Onam. If not, it will not be able to take root among the people. Ultimately, we need to stand with people and not look for their right and wrong without a black-and-white attitude. When we stand with all men, we become more clearly leftists. Are we to decide the right and wrong of others? I stood with the people on those streets. That's why I'm on the left.

VK: I think that you are also a Marxist.

Mirza: What is Marxism? To me, that's life. It's poetry. It's brotherhood. It is the great philosophy that when another man is sad, his sorrow is ours, and when he is happy, we share it. We can feel it when we are together with people. Not textbook-driven, but Marxism is truly an experience of the human condition. I am a Marxist who stands with men because I recognise that feeling.

VK: Unlike many other films about the Mumbai underworld, your movie, '*Salim Lang Dey Pe Mat Ro*', explores the role of capitalist forces, unemployment, and anti-Muslim sentiment in forming the underworld. What made you approach the film that way?

Mirza: Yes. And I think Muslim fundamentalism is also a reason. The reality is that hunger, unemployment, and insecurity of minorities have all contributed to the violent formation of the Mumbai underworld. Anywhere in the world, if there is a majority, the minority will be hunted down. They will be insecure, which paves the way for a paradigm shift. I tried to say through the film that the Mumbai underworld is proof of that. It is in such an insecure society that we should read and understand Ambedkar, Gandhi, Bhagat Singh, Periyar, and Marx. They spoke to the world about surviving in a world of inequalities. Out of 130 crore people in India today, only 30 crores are living happily and peacefully. Where are the remaining 100 crore people? What is their status? We are now in a country where 30 crore people are happy while another 100 crore people live in poverty amid inequality.

VK: Your film '*Naseem*' can be read as a representation of India after the demolition of the Babri Masjid. Its protagonist Kaifi Azmi, a madman, dies when the Babri Masjid is demolished. Isn't that the death of Indian secularism itself?

Mirza: Yes. Indeed, it is. He died the same day the mosque was demolished, as did the Indian secular dream and its Constitution. At the beginning of that film, I was saying that India would be a country where people fight each other because of contempt and religious differences, which is the future of the new India. After that film, I decided that I got nothing more to say because of the undermining of the Constitution. What remains is an India of sectarianism, communalism, and hatred. I have no dreams there. Hatred is the only catalyst for a party having two seats coming to power in India. What is India's biggest problem? Though we are united or a fragmented crowd, our country has unemployment, hunger, poor public health systems, and poor public education. These are the fundamental issues that need

to be addressed. But apparently, these fundamental problems are not the main problem of this nation because it does not affect the 30 crores mentioned earlier. I am concerned that we are evading these problems. The question that haunts me is what future we have as a nation.

VK: But do you think this question bothers others in the film industry as much as you?

Mirza: Many of my friends have the same outlook on this issue. The reality is that many people are weak to see this clearly, which makes them silent. They are just ordinary people. Only these people can find a solution to this impasse and rebuild our country. I have travelled about 55,000 km through this country by road. I spoke to ordinary people, whom I think can redefine India. That journey gave me hope in Indian Democracy. I assure you that if our democratic political parties can touch their lives, this country will rise again. If we can become acquainted with the most ordinary person in this country, we can see much hope in him. We become better leftists when we understand them.

VK: After '*Naseem*', you decided not to do films but became more involved in writing. You started writing novels, memoirs, and books. The title of one of your books is exciting. '*Memory in the Age of Amnesia: A Personal History of Our Times*'. Why was it given such a title?

Mirza: Because the government tells us to live without thinking. Stop thinking is their slogan. IPL, Wrestling, and Pornography are all entertainments that are indulged in. Because when people start to believe, things will change. So, I say people should start thinking again. I believe that it would be an opportunity for people to come together. I have mentioned Milan Kundera in that book. People are trying to forget our history in this fascist era, open to being filled with new memories and distorted narratives. We are facing fascism that erases memories while creating a new history. Fascism is essentially totalitarianism built on lies. It is a vile ideology that alienates people based on caste and religion. That's why I say the left has an obligation to

fight it. If we all are unified, then how is division possible?

VK: That is why they oppose resistance like from Kerala in every sense.

Mirza: Looking to the future, there are two political positions. One is cooperation, and the other is competition. If there is cooperation, there is no option other than the left. On the contrary, other players may rise if it is a competition. We must decide which side we stand on, Competition or cooperation? Cooperation is essential to democracy. Then the left becomes more relevant. We also need to understand that this is a time of great relevance for those who market religion. That is why the blind followers of religion keep saying Islam is in danger or Hinduism is in danger.

VK: You have a long association with Kerala. You maintained amicable relationships with PG, Nayanar, writers, and filmmakers from the state. How do you see the social and political environment of Kerala now?

Mirza: Of course, I have a long association with Kerala. It's a pleasure to be here. But I worry about the future, as we have Bengal and Tripura standing as an example before us. We should be careful not to repeat that situation in Kerala. The party should always be with the people. Political activities should be done by engaging with them and upholding a stance against lies and fascism. 70% of the people in America, whom we all think are rich, live from paycheck to paycheck. A better public health and education system is not there. They are constantly presenting fabricated lies about development in front of the world. Senator Bernie Sanders exposed this hoax. Exposing such lies and bringing out the truth is the political role of the Left in our country because they dream of an elegant world of equality of justice.

VK: You have once pointed out that only a book can express life while cinema is in the conceptual world of narration. What makes you feel that way, primarily as a filmmaker?

Mirza: A book is a collection of reflections on time and space. But films are linear to a great extent in

their narrative. I think a book gives you more freedom to experiment. The role of books is not just to tell a story but to capture life in its essence. Literature is now like an installation. It can accommodate both fiction and non-fiction at the same time.

VK: Films are mainly made for commercial purposes. Do you think non-commercial works of literature are serving their purpose?

Mirza: The problem is whether people's reading increases with the number of books that come out. One of my books will be released in September. But I'm not sure how many people will buy and read it. Even so, I think writing is critical to reflect on life. The most important thing is that poems must revive in our literature. All that is human comes to us through it. It is the only art that lifts us to the truths of another life. Only through art can one who is as privileged as I am in many ways feel the pain of someone poor. And most importantly, it keeps telling the people what is happening.

VK: A few years ago, you shared a comment that Kerala is an example of fighting fascism through art festivals. Isn't that possible in other places too?

Mirza: Because we are in Kerala, all the festivals of films, literature, of folk art are possible here. It is done district by district. Great movies, artistic talents, and literary talents share space here. The idea behind all these festivals is to uphold freedom, democracy, and humanity and implement equality and justice while forming collectives to counter fascism culturally through art. There is no corruption in it. Anyone who supports these ideas can participate. At a time when fascists were intervening in culture, such associations were political activity itself.

VK: You think the division is right that Indian cinema means Hindi cinema, and everything else is regional?

Mirza: That is pure nonsense. It is undoubtedly the exercise of power and arrogance of the majority. Look at the number and variety of Malayalam films submitted for last year's state awards, where I was on the jury, to realise the absurdity of saying Hindi cinema is Indian cinema. I was astounded by the

diversity of films in Kerala. I felt thrilled because Kerala's films have high-quality content and technicalities. I understand that good films come out in other languages, mainly Tamil. New film talent comes from languages like Malayalam, Tamil, and Marathi, those considered regional by Hindi filmmakers. Movies are reflections of time. With that, we must resist and fight the condition of history where memories are obscured.



VK: A documentary has been made on you, Saeed Mirza- a leftist Sufi. It's an interesting and philosophical title. The director took two years to complete the film. Could you explain this?

Mirza: What is leftism mean? It should be compassionate. It should talk about love, music, dances and the pain of the people. Leftism is not the black-and-white vision; there are many shades of different colours, and it is not very harsh. It accommodates everybody. It will not separate people. That is the idea of leftist Sufi. People can sing popular songs or film songs everywhere in the streets. It connects with people without the barrier of religion,

caste or beliefs. It is a kind of people's celebration. Instead of these songs, suppose you sing Jai Sree Ram or Allahu Akbar in the street; it will never entertain you. It never connects with people. But songs are beyond religion. There is a famous Sufi poet quote, 'Learn the technique of making a friend. Hi Pandit, if you go to a temple or a church, you want to learn that technique. I danced, sang, made a friend and reached god'. Let us be open and less serious. Of course, we must share the pain of the people. Gandhi said he was also a kind of Sufi. "Any decision you take, think how this will benefit the poorest in the country. It is very important."

VK: Yesterday, we discussed about Urdu. A language with a great heritage of literature, music and poetry. Why is Urdu sidelined now? What is the politics behind that?

Mirza: That is the politics of RSS. They think that it is the language of Muslims and is foreign. But Urdu is not a foreign language; it is an Indian language. RSS is trying to suppress it. They are trying to communalise even languages. It is a fascist way of thinking.

VK: What about your books? You wrote three to four books and completed a new book. Is it fiction or memories? What is about this book?

Mirza: It is about the friendship between Saeed Mirza and Kundan Shah. Two persons from the film institute onwards. And it is about our journey as filmmakers, thinkers, and writers and discovering the world. And it is about our times. A strong political, cultural, and social book. Our friendship and partnership through-the film making. We worked together for my film *Albert Pinto* and jointly directed the television serial *Nukad*.

A famous illustrator Nachiket Patwardhan illustrated the book, and Tulika is publishing it. I miss Kundan very much. I miss Mani Kaul. We were all in the same boat of thinking. When the Gujarat riots happened, Kundan came to me and told me, "As a Hindu, I take responsibility. I am ashamed of being a Hindu." That was Kundan Shah.