

Interview

**Pradip Biswas**

## An Interview with Mrinal Sen



*Mrinal Sen was at the threshold of 94, and I thought of talking to my 57-year-old mentor, the iconoclast, agitprop filmmaker, for an intimate conversation.*

**Pradip Biswas:** Mrinalda, do you feel like recalling the last script you nearly made ready? If health permits and financing are forthcoming, you would like to proceed.

**Mrinal Sen:** Over gulping down *nolen gurer sandesh* (which I brought for him as always), he looked at me and, with a bit of hesitation, said: “I see I had a strong passion over the subject (it is about my journey through my films) and time and health permits me, I like to make my last film. But, Pradip, you should note what I am saying now, may well unsay any moment.!”

**PB:** Why, Mrinalda? You seldom play poker with me! When you talk to me, you always sound serious! But what prompts you to be in doubt?

**MS:** You see, it is natural; at this age, long after I made *This My Land* in 2003, I was not strong enough to take a heavy risk in making my last film. But of course, I feel I could make one...

**PB:** Do you remember Ousmane Sembene, Senegal, your close friend filmmaker who, with ridicule told you at Karlovivary: “Mrinal, if you try to push this film (a Bengali film was there in the competition). I will kill you!”

**MS:** Oh yes, it was a film by a young director from Calcutta, which I, too, did not like. Yet I was thinking about g what to do!! At my hesitation, Sembene warned me! However, it was just fun, and we finally rejected the film.

**PB:** You are always a bit sceptical about the Russian director Tarkovski? You must admit, Tarkovski knew genuine filmmaking! His first film *Ivan’s Childhood*, won the Grand Prix at Venice!!

**MS:** I don’t deny that. But you must have noted that Tarkovski’s films, though tautly structured, heavily carry Biblical Christology, which I don’t like. I cannot stand it!!

**PB:** Adoor Gopalakrishnan is so special to you. You call him “chela”, and Adoor responds with “guru” with utter respect and grace. How do you rate his films or Adoor as director!!

**MS:** Adoor is very special to me; his films have true “Indian-ness” when measured in crystal judgment. He is, I think, the best original director of Indian cinema. Besides, he never repeats his subjects. Films after film are marked with fresh ideas, treatment, unique passion, and for the plots he tackles in the movie. He is an exceptional *auteur* of Indian cinema.

**PB:** What is the best film according to your personal choice?

**MS:** Of course, *Elippathayan*, *The Rat Trap*. This film never fades from your memory; so topical, so contemporary, so powerful, and metaphorical in many ways.

**PB:** Once you became critical of the Italian Communist Party when Almiro Togliatti was the head of the Party. Out of rage, you wanted to fight “fanatics among the Marxists”? Do you change your mind now?

**MS:** Well, there was a time in the 40s when Elio Vittorini quipped back, saying: “The point is not to pocket the truth but to chase the truth”. Though, at times when I became impatient with the Marxists of Bengal, I felt like Vittorini!

**PB:** Is there any change in the dictum now?

**MS:** Oh, surely. I often correct myself when I look back at things. I am always changing, you know.

**PB:** How do you rate Theo Angelopoulos, the *maestro* of new Greek cinema?

**MS:** Angelopoulos is the world's pioneer and forerunner of experimental cinema. His films are not only illuminating but also highly poetic. You need a different sensibility and a sharp eye to seize the nuances marked by sizzling poetic elements. If careless, you miss a great chance to come closer to the *maestro*. Look at his films such as *Beekeeper*, *Landscape In the Mist*, *Eternity And A day* etc. These are masterpieces. Bye the bye, did not you write two

books on Angelopolulos, which Basu Chatterjee and I launched at NANDAN??

**PB:** Yes, Mrinalda, You are too smart in your memories. In fact, Angelopuolos is the only director to have Golden Lion from Venice four times, a record of which is still unbroken!

**MS:** This is why I always say: “I confront. I fight. I survive on tension.”

**PB:** What is your opinion about the films now being made by the current filmmaker in Calcutta? Do you see any hope in them?

**MS:** With a positive NO!! These days I do not move out to see films made by many young filmmakers. So much loud drum beating about them! It is disgusting. After Rituparno Ghosh died, the last hope for good cinema was gone. For, I don't find any except self-exhibitionist filmmakers!! This is pathetic, but it is so true and painful!!

**PB:** What about Goutam Ghose?

**MS:** Well, I looked forward to his new kind of films. But he, too, is treading an alien path. I nearly liked his film, *Moner Manush*! But on second thought, I found the film too tenuous, plodding and laboured!!

**PB:** One last question. Which Marxist State out of three did impress you most?

**MS:** Of course, it is Kerala. Despite their historic blunder, Marxists in Kerala stand out in delivering goods to the rank and file. This is an exemplary Marxist State that took Marxist dialectics very seriously!! There is no full stop in it. Kerala is *God's Own Country*: but I say to the contrary, it is the *Marxists' Own Country*.

**PB:** How do you rate later-generation filmmakers of India? In this context, I recall your article South Wind Blows Hot, the then Illustrated Weekly of India.

**MS:** Surely, at one time, I wrote the piece as you mentioned. And I was proud of the views expressed in my survey then. It was a time B.V. Karanth's *Chomana Dudi*, Pttabhi Rama Reddy's *Samskara*, Adoor's *Kodiettom*, Ramu Kariat's *Chemeen*, Abhraham's *Donkey* in a

*Brahmin Village,*  
Aravindan's *Thampu*, T.V.Chandran's *In Search of Alice*, Girish Kasaravalli's *Ghatashradhha*, M.S.Sathyu's *Garm Hawa*, Girish Karnad's *Kaadu*, M.T. Vasudevan Nayar's *Nirmalayan* etc. came to create a deep impact on the filmmakers attending International Film Festivals.

**PB:** Do you believe that after the most creative age of Satyajit Ray, Yourself, Ritwik Ghatak, Rajen Tarafdar, Tapan Sinha, Tarun Majuder, and Ajay Kar, an ear of earth-shaking films, the current generation of filmmakers from Calcutta would be able to hold sway or somewhat carry your legacy!

**MS:** I don't think so. I am yet to confront and see the spree of films made by the young filmmakers of Calcutta. Their movies, as they stand, are hardly worth mentioning! I think so.

**PB:** Seen from the perspective, do you yet keep trust in filmmakers like Saeed Mirza and Ketan Mehta, who once sparked off enough hope and impressions?

**MS:** We met Saeed, and you were there too, and I felt Saeed seemed to have spent force once he had. Ketan is a spoilt genius. He can no more make good films.

**PB:** Mrinalda, at the end part of our conversation, I am eager to ask again what prompted you to make your penultimate film *Antareen* using Manto's short story!

**MS:** Many a time, I thought of making at least one or two films based on Manto's short story. Manto was a great short story writer; his motifs or themes always dealt with the marginalised people in society. He was an agit-prop writer, and his sensibility remains with much anger and spleen; he was like our Manik Bandyopadhyay. However, I could make only one finally.

**PB:** While making *Antareen*, you have almost taken nothing from the internal narrative; you have only

gleaned shadow ideas from his *Kingdom's End* and that too very thinly!!

**MS:** Probably, you are right. I just picked up two characters, a stolen lady and a vagabond with no standing of his own. However, my stress is on the deserted woman who seems forcibly snapped up like Tagore's invader *Beduins* from a desert in a helpless state. The lonely and confined beautiful woman is stolen from her near ones, as do the mercenary *Beduins* from the territory of the vast desert for misusing them. In *Antareen*, the beautiful woman has the image of Tagore's *Hungry Stones* with no future, sensibility, happiness and one's own! In the film, she is used as the one marked by sufferings, pangs, traumas, elegy and senseless boredom!

**PB:** I felt, if the picture was reversed as such, the beautiful woman kept in Gothic mansion and the vagabond, Manmohon, at the site of the young lady!!

**MS:** It did not strike me then in the time of making. Had it been so, it could have stayed near Tagore's *Hungry Stones*, say the dark Gothic mansion, emitting hissing sounds and spookiness pouring in from all angles, everything ghostly, absolutely ghostly! I did not want to make it a haunted mansion!

**PB:** Right at the moment, what is brewing in your mind?

**MS:** Time has been changing, and so has my attitude to cinema. I have passed through a period of pamphleteering, and I am not ashamed of using cinema as a pulpit of phappleer because that was when I wanted to point my accusing finger at the enemy outside. After some time, when I make a film, I am not a filmmaker; I am especially a social thinker, a spectator when I first watch my work. So, I feel I have done a good job when I watch it. I am at pains to say I can feel creativity is going by default to a large extent. I don't know why?