

Lecture

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**Centenary Tribute to Mrinal Sen**

My greetings to the organisers of the Bengaluru International Film Festival. Today is an extraordinary occasion for all of us, the film aficionados, filmmakers, critics, and scholars as we celebrate the birth centenary of Mrinal Sen, one of India's most influential filmmakers, and a chronicler of the turbulence and conflict of his time. His filmmaking career spanned roughly 50 years, making 28 feature films, documentaries, and short films. I have been following his films since my college days, primarily as an addict to cinema. Then, I saw his movies more critically when my senses were trained to appreciate films with all their elements and became

judgmental. Then, as a filmmaker, I saw his movies again and suddenly felt how his films influenced the works of our generation, somewhat unintentionally. I vividly remember the packed house of Metro Cinema in central Calcutta week after week after *Calcutta '71* was released. It was mainly the students of our age group who had not even reached 20 who would wait in the long queue to get a ticket to watch the tragedy of an eternally '20-year-old boy who walks through thousands of years of poverty, squalor, and death'. Occasionally, Mrinal Sen would eagerly meet the audience to discuss a point or two. We suddenly discovered a director

was talking about our time, talking about the youth of the country, Calcutta in particular. During this journey, at a juncture, Mrinal Sen became Mrinalda, indulging in our puerile discourses on cinema.

Here in this festival, we have a list of five very significant films of Mrinal Sen which you will be watching, *Bhuvan Shome* (Hindi, 1969), *Interview* (Bangla, 1971), *Oka Uri Katha* (The Outsiders, Telegu, 1977), *Akaler Sandhaney* (In search of Famine, Bangla, 1980) and *Kharij* (The case is closed, Bangla, 1982). Incidentally, he also made a film in Oriya language. I am sure he would have done it happily if asked to do a movie in any other language. For him, an idea capable of connecting with his time matched with his sense of cinema was of supreme importance. Right at the beginning of his career, he did not show much interest in the vast reserve of Bengali literature of celebrated writers such as Bankimchandra, Tagore, Bibhutibhusan, Tarashansakar or many others; instead, for his film *Nil Akasher Nichey* (Under the blue sky), in 1959, he preferred to adapt a Hindi story 'Chini Feriwala' written by the eminent poet and short story writer Mahadevi Varma. A Hindi story, adapted to Bengali, set in the city of Kolkata in the 1930s, on the background of the 'freedom movement', narrated the story of the life of a poor immigrant Chinese hawker, who, in the end, returned to his country to join in the Sino-Japanese war. So, the director, Mrinal Sen, announced his Indian identity and was not averse to taking up a contemporary political scenario of the country as well as the ensuing crisis of the world. The message was clear: the world had become small, and the power struggle between colonisers and the imperialist forces

would not remain only within a small circle of the First World; they would stretch further. Calcutta was bombed during the Second World War, and suddenly, Mrinal Sen was arrested, locked up for three days along with antisocial smugglers, taken to the court, and faced random questions, absurd but cruel. That was the time when the whole of Bengal was under the evil spell of a 'man-made Famine' that killed 5 million ordinary men, also causing damage to the city's infrastructure. This had a far-reaching impact all over the country. Progressive artists, theatre groups, and cultural groups formed the Indian People's Theatre Association. The objective was to represent the time's crisis through theatre and help people understand their rights and duties. The movement hit not only theatres but also cinema and music. Ideologically, these groups were inspired by the left movement. Mrinal Sen and his close friends, such as Ritwik Ghatak, Salil Chowdhury, Hrishikesh Mukherjee, Tapas Sen and others, had witnessed the disaster of Famine; they were all in their 20s and responded to the call of the time.

*Nil Akasher Nichey* (Under the Blue Sky) was the first Indian Film to be banned by independent India. The film was set up in the 1930s and released in 1959, but it was banned in 1962 when China attacked India! The producer of the film, Hemanta Mukhopadhyay, was already eminent as a singer-producer, screened the movie for Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, President Rajendra Prasad and Vice President Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan. The ban was lifted within two months. Sen's next film, *Baishey Shraavan* (22<sup>nd</sup> day of Bengali month Shrabon), dealt with the dehumanising effects

of 'Famine' and 'poverty'. An innocent teenage married girl commits suicide; she fails to understand her husband's selfish, cruel behaviour and how hunger metamorphosed a man to behave like an animal. Famine, poverty, and hunger haunted the Director throughout his filmmaking career despite syntactical changes in his films from the 1960's to the 1970's.

Mrinal Sen's oeuvre convinces us to divide it into three phases. In the first phase, post *Baiyshe Shraavan* Sen quietly handled mainly domestic issues in his films, such as 'problem of a working married woman in a family, how patriarchal system reacts when the wife has to leave the domestic space' (*Punascha*); 'widow marriage in a modern society', 'how second marriage of a young widow collapses when her five-year-old child refuses to accept the marriage' (*Pratinidhi*). Over ambition - 'the longings of a middle-class executive to rise in stature and greater social acceptability puts up an innocent bluff to a young girl'. Etc. Mrinal Sen was almost trading in the middle-of-the-road cinema, a well-crafted, well-acted, disciplined cinema with famous actors and actresses, with an expectation that all the directors aspire was to be cheered by the middle-class audience. But his films fared below the expectation. That didn't deter the director, as this was part of the movie business. Like a true artist, Sen was always very critical of his work; being dissatisfied, he felt that something somewhere was missing. Perhaps he was trapped in the convention.

During his student days, Sen was a voracious reader, completing a massive syllabus of modern literature, history, philosophy, and Marxist philosophy; he also

acquired a handsome knowledge of film aesthetics. As a great admirer of Chaplin, he wrote a book on the great performer's cinematic art as a tribute. And he translated Karel Chapec's 'The Cheat'. Sen was well aware of the new cinema proposed by the French New Wave movement yet could not implement his idea of cinema brewing in his creative mind.

He was also unhappy with the existing scenario of Indian cinema, mainly Hindi cinema. Sometime in 1968, Sen and his friend Arun Kaul, a less-known filmmaker and film society activist, created a short manifesto and published it in the magazine 'Close Up' titled 'Manifesto of The New Cinema Movement'. They argued that the Indian cinema was passing through the worst time. They wrote, 'spiralling costs of production, rocketing star prices, exorbitant rates of interest charged by financiers and widespread acceptance of black money transactions in all film industry sectors' were the damaging factors. Like Francois Truffaut's famous essay (1954) 'A Certain Trend in French Cinema' lambasted some screenwriters and producers. Sen and Kaul duo highlighted the need for more imagination and a dearth of ideas that made cinema a stale product, no original thinking. Filmmakers, directors, and producers were discharging their duties mechanically; they had forgotten that cinema offers aesthetic experience and is a medium of creative expression. Like firebrands of 'The French New Wave', they felt Indian cinema desperately needed a new kind of cinematic grammar and film language.

Initiated by the Nehru Government in 1949, the SK Patil Film Enquiry Committee's recommendation for state funding for cinema

took a long time to implement. It may also be noted here that from 1967 to the next five years, Indian politics passed through a very critical phase. Congress was divided, and the communist party faced division again as a fraction decided to take the path of armed uprising against the state to serve the rights of the workers and peasants.

*Bhuvan Shome*, Sen's ninth film, came in 1969. *Bhuvan Shome* can be placed between the first phase of issue-based cinema and the second phase of political cinema. *Bhuvan Shome* made a history of a sort with a meagre budget of 1.5 lakhs that the Film Finance Corporation in its initial stage offered him based on a synopsis and a treatment note of the film. All the conditions Sen and Kaul proposed in their manifesto for a new cinema were implemented – fresh artists, fresh images, out-of-studio shoots, minimum days of shooting, and avoiding post-production expenses as much as possible. The idea was to desperately reduce the film's budget and return the money to the investor, yet present a decent, off-beat, meaningful cinema for a limited audience. Sen enjoyed total freedom. He adopted a 129-page Bengali story of the same title written by Balai Chand Mukhopadhyay. The location in the original story was around the riverside area of the Bhagalpur stretch of the Ganga River, where migratory birds used to make their ideal abode. However, Mrinal Sen shifted the location to the vast seacoast area of Saurashtra. Shifting the location from Bihar to Gujarat meant a change of local culture with all its manifestations, architecture, environmental sound, costume, etc. Sen preferred to make the film in Hindi, but other languages, such as Gujarati, Rajasthani, and

Bengali, were used uninhibitedly. This was needed to serve the basic story and shifting of the locale from the Hindi-speaking zone of eastern India to the Gujarati-speaking zone of western India. He cast Utpal Dutt in the lead role, which made his debut in Hindi cinema. Eighteen-year-old Suhasini Muley had no experience in film acting, but she was cast as the female lead. K K Mahajan, a fresher from Pune Film Institute, got the chance as a cinematographer. Vijay Raghav Rao, who used to do the background music for Film Division Documentaries, was offered to do the music of *Bhuvan Shome*. When Amitabh Bachchan was nowhere in cinema, Mrinal Sen used his voice as the film's narrator. The film was shot outdoors. On the aesthetic part, Sen consciously eschewed the novel's literary structure, which dominated Bengali movies for decades, though not in a pejorative sense. He subtly used plot theory- the beginning, the middle, and the end. With dynamic camera work, quick cuttings, use of animation, masked shots, jump cuts, and brilliant performances punctuated with humour, *Bhuvan Shome* stood out as a celebration of cinema. Not a single shot out of 505 film shots brought any boredom. Eventually, the audience appreciated *Bhuvan Shome*'s syntactical unconventionality. Sen transported the audience to an unfamiliar corner of India and its local exotic culture. Viewers loved the backdrop of a long stretch of dunes, its emptiness where a man and woman of uneven age struggling to kill a bird or perhaps playing a game with each other. K K Maahajan's camera brilliantly captured the sequence. The film reached the section of the audience it was intended to. Despite the film's success, Mrinal Sen, the best critic of his



work, felt that ‘his idea of taking up the story was a critiquing post-colonial culture of Bureaucracy, but somehow the audience missed the point, and that was the film’s shortcomings’.

Be that as it may, it was the beginning of a new era of cinema. Film Finance Corporation, brought under the Information and Broadcasting ministry, financed two other films, *Uski Roti* by Mani Kaul and *Sara Akash* by Basu Chatterjee. Later on, under the banner of the National Film Development Corporation, ‘good cinema’ was encouraged by the state for quite some time.

After ‘Bhuvan Shome’ just like Jean Luc Godard’s announced shift in 1968 to political cinema, Mrinal Sen entered the second phase of his cinema, which was political cinema and lasted for a decade. It all began with *Interview*. It was a vitriolic attack on independent India that shifted the culture from ‘post-colonial’ to ‘neo-colonial’. Ranjit, the protagonist of the film, was working for a leftwing publication; when he wanted to improve his career and join an executive job in a Westernized company, he had to compromise his identity. His demeanour had to be changed; he had to wear a suit to replace his national dress, ‘Dhoti- Kurta’. While dealing with this idea, Mrinal Sen not only covered the chaos of the city of Calcutta but also drastically changed the form of his cinema. He attempted to break the wall between reality and illusion. He tried to use the Brechtian alienation effect in cinema-jarring, almost documentary-like scenes to break the fourth wall.

*Calcutta ’71* followed *Interview*. It was more aggressive, more experimental, and more desperate. He used four separate stories

representing four decades to return to the theme of Famine and poverty and also dealt with the 1970 Naxalite killings by the authority.

It appeared Mrinal Sen was shifting to the aesthetics of Latin American ‘third cinema’, proposed by Fernando Solanas, Globar Rocha’s ‘aesthetic of hunger’, and Julio Garcia Espinosa’s ‘For an imperfect cinema’. Naturally, Mrinal Sen faced the conflict of ‘form and content’ of revolutionary cinema.

The third part of the Calcutta trilogy was *Padatik* (The guerilla fighter), the director’s view on the disturbed state of the country and the city of Calcutta in particular. He began the film in his achieved style, narrating the situation of a failed state in every sense- socially, politically, and economically. Then highlighted the pathetic scenario of the city of Calcutta from a traveller’s point of view, with a narration, apparently on a pessimistic note-

“Every time I return to Calcutta, I feel it must be surely impossible

That it can continue much longer like this yet always does.

An interval of a year makes the visual impact more painful.

The squalor more squalid

The poverty more militant

The despair is more desperate

I find Calcutta an infernal city

Unredeemed and probably doomed.”

Mrinal Sen loved to identify himself as a ‘private Marxist’. In *Padatik* he told the story of a Naxalite in hiding but turned a self-critical eye onto the movement itself. The protagonist, forced into sequestration, used that time to reflect on the rigid establishment

politics of Leftist organisations, the underdog treatment meted out to the younger comrades by the senior leaders refusing to initiate a proper dialogue to settle genuine political issues. Although left parties were critical of this film, Sen did not undermine the movement.

In this phase of films, I loved the hard-hitting Telegu film *Oka Ori Katha* (The Outsiders), which he made in 1977. I was introduced to Mrinal Sen properly during a special screening of the film at the ‘Gorky Sadan’, and he encouraged me to give my critical opinion about the film. I could only offer a soft smile in reply. I saw the film only once but remember it vividly. Sen returned to the subject of poverty and exploitation again. *Oka Ori Katha* was based on Munshi Premchand’s ‘Kafan’. The Director shifted the locale from the village of Uttar Pradesh to the town of Andhra Pradesh, from the Northern part of India to the Southern Part of India. Sen was seriously interested in the rise of the peasant protest known as the ‘Telangana Movement’ of 1946 to 1951. When he was planning the film, the leader of the Telangana Movement, comrade P. Sundaraiya, helped him by providing a real guerrilla fighter who knew every corner of rural Andhra Pradesh to fix the actual location. As space of cinema, Mrinal Sen preferred Kolkata. Still, whenever he wanted to deal with a story based in the rural belt of India, he did detailed research about the culture of the particular district or districts to create a believable backdrop for the narrative, and he would not spare the rituals of a specific society.

In *Oka Ori Katha*, we saw the vast panoramic view of the village and the local

habitats’ daily chores, and the story was weaved into the space. Here, the film’s main characters, the old daily wage worker and his son, made a strange decision; they felt if they worked, then the profit would go to the land owner, so they stopped working and preferred to steal, rob, and grab. Director Sen appeared to be enjoying that decision. The older man became angry when his son decided to marry for a simple reason- marriage meant another member in the family, and more would be added in the future; who would feed them? But his son Kishtiah got married, and over time, his daughter-in-law conceived. Old man Venkaia refused to call a midwife when Nilamma was in acute pain; she died. Father and son decided to beg around the village to conduct the funeral rites. They gather some money but spend it on drinks! It was a cruel film indeed. Once again, K K Mahajan and Vijay Raghav Rao did a stupendous job. In an unforgettable performance by Vasudev Rao in the role of ‘Venkaiya’, he appeared to be a primitive man who had come out of a cave to survey the civilised world.

Mrinal Sen’s third phase of cinema was targeted for ‘self-introspection’. Till the ‘70s, Sen’s target of the attack was clear: the enemy outside. In this phase of his films, he questioned the morality of the middle class, a post-mortem of his society. His style changed again. For self-introspection, his camera rolled inside the drawing room- even in the kitchen of the middle-class society. It was austere cinema like his other favourite director, Robert Bresson. One of the essential films of this phase was *Kharij* (The case is closed). The death of a couple’s servant boy drove them into hysteria as they tried to work out an escape route from the crisis. Sen

questioned the underlying class antagonism prevalent in our society. The well-crafted end scene showed the boy's father paying respects to the couple instead of expressing frustration and anger. Sen did frustrate the audience by not punishing the irresponsible couple with a thunderous slap from the boy's father but demonstrated that for change, we have to go a long way, betrayal functioning in the blood while the enemy operates outside.

Mrinal Sen became more and more critical of himself, rather consciously, of his ideology and craft. *Akaler Sandhane* (In Search of Famine) demonstrated that best. Structurally, this film was Sen's most complex one. He again picked up 'Famine and poverty' as the film's subject but dealt with it differently. It was a film within a film. As the docu-fiction structure he devised earlier when he visited the rural areas, he also dealt with local people but as fictional characters. A film crew visited a remote village to recreate the Bengal Famine of '43, but while doing it, they got involved with the local underprivileged people. This premise eventually questioned the Director's position during a film production. It pointed a finger at the urban people who benefited from the conditions of poor rural villagers who eternally suffer from poverty. The film

remained incomplete; a few things that local kids learned were some cinema vocabulary. Sen declared that Famine still existed but of a different kind.

Mrinal Sen continued making exciting film after film till 2002; for instance, he made *Mahaprithibi* (World within, world without), which connected the Fall of the Berlin Wall with his city. If *Akaler Sandhaney* reminds one of his earlier films, *Baiyeshey Shraavan*, then *Mahaprithibi* would take us back to his second film, *Nil Akasher Nichey* (Under the Blue Sky). This confirmed that his progressive worldview was consistent. Other films, like *Khandahar* (The Ruins), *Genesis*, and *Amaar Bhuvan*, deserve more profound analysis.

Finally, Mrinal Sen addressed social issues in his films and their entanglement with contemporary politics with little of a cover. And no less important was his relentless pursuit of expressing his ideas in a modern film language. A Semioclast turned his critical gaze upon established sign- systems. His cinema was a mirror to society but sometimes reflected through a cracked or broken mirror. Finally, his films taught us to question and introspect.

Long live Mrinal Sen!

(This lecture was delivered to pay tribute to Mrinal Sen on his birth centenary at the 15<sup>th</sup> Bengaluru International Film Festival on 4<sup>th</sup> February 2024)



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