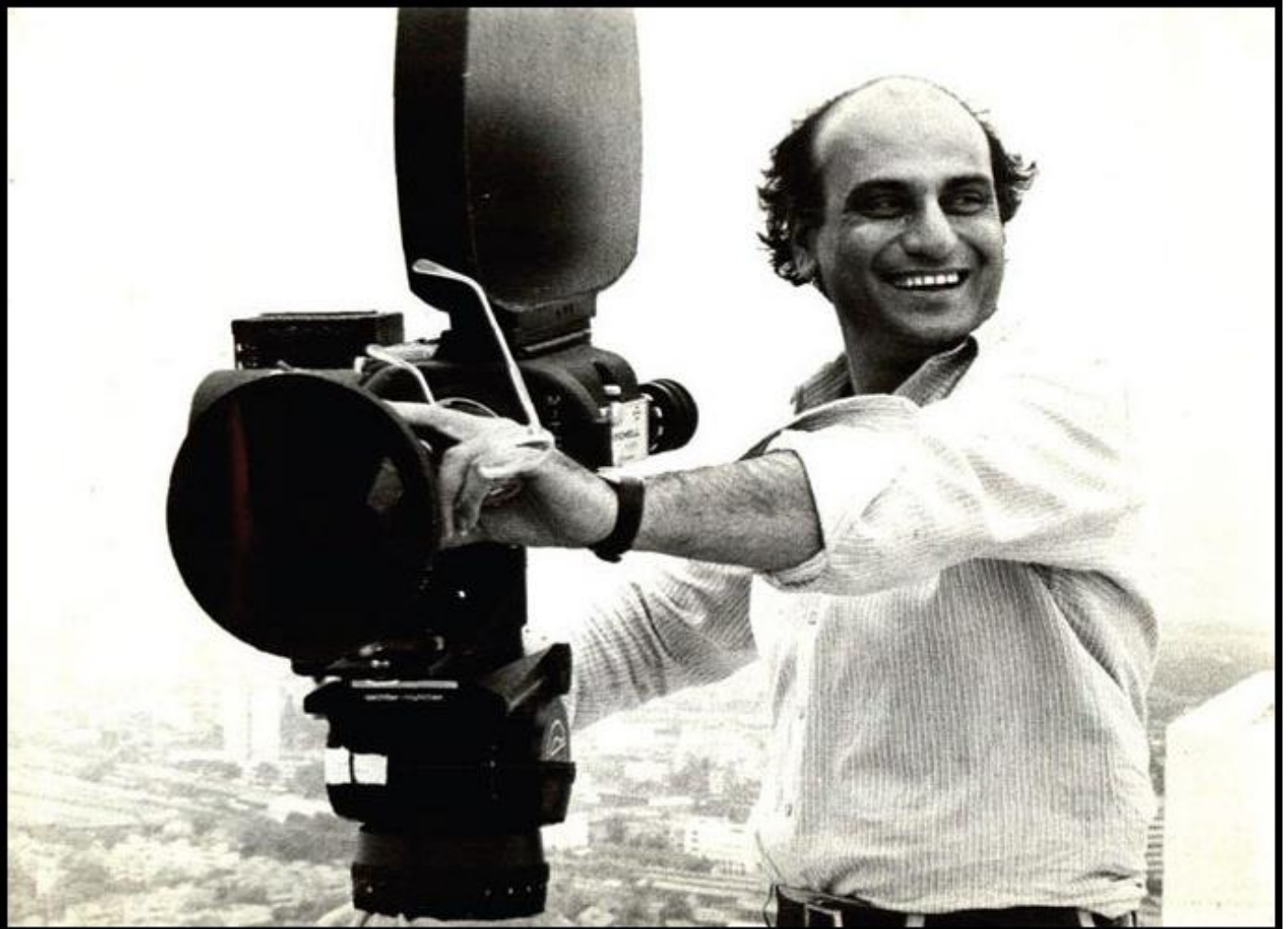


Tribute to Mani Kaul
Abhishek Talukder

The Bearable Heaviness of Being Mani Kaul



Reading Mani Kaul's films never seems so inexorable as it is now – when people are needlessly crazy and times are dangerously strange. He remains true to himself and the medium of art to which he is committed till his very last breath, without violating his conscience by preaching a particular system of tenets. His cinema is always marked by a powerful undercurrent of striving for change, denying cinema's natural inclination towards realism at a time when it was hailed as a plausible stylistic alternative to the overdramatic excesses of commercial cinema and exploiting the medium's possibilities to the hilt. He excogitates an outlandish path by the seat of his pants, embracing subjects that are not easy to deal with and being au fait with the game's rules, and blazes a trail in Indian cinema. Many savage storms, arranged by his detractors (some of them happened to be his boon companions who used to see him as an albatross who could lose them their show), have tried to buffet his coast. Still, he does not allow any concession and cuts a serious figure on the global stage. He aces it! It's an exalted dedication to liberty that he bequeaths to posterity. This article seeks to capture the cinematic brilliance of Mani Kaul without letting it be an abstract dilation of theory.

Unlike treatises that analyse a filmmaker's work from film to film, I would instead try to understand Mani Kaul's all-inclusive and paranoiac-critical approach towards the art of filmmaking on balance, fancies that

kept crowding in upon him and how he has ascertained his form that is manifested as an infallible aesthetic sensibility and acute responsiveness to traditional cultural impulses that makes his cinema resonate as a significant cultural event in India, and of course, throughout the world of serious cinema. Critics and scholars mostly talk about the complex web of temporalities in the maestro's cinematic space; however, here, I hanker after going beyond that, reflecting on his cinema's heterogeneity and interdisciplinary nature, unescorted by chronological order, assuming that the readers are more or less versed with Mani Kaul's life and work.

*'Inspired by this school of filmmaking and its immense possibilities, a whole generation of Indian filmmakers burst onto the scene in the mid-20th century. They identified themselves as artists, and they swore by realism. To them, portraying realism in their work was more important than anything else, often showcasing social ills and the struggles of the "common Indian man". These were spearheaded by the likes of Satyajit Ray and Mrinal Sen, later followed by others of their ilk - Shyam Benegal, G. Aravindan, Adoor Gopalakrishnan, Girish Kasaravalli, et cetera. By the 70s, it begun to be labelled as the "Indian New Wave".'*¹

Filmmakers belonging to the so-called 'Indian New Wave' era revealed a particular affinity for images and themes that conveyed feelings of anguish, alienation, a rebellion against the status quo, and dealt with contentious issues like poverty, social exploitation, cast politics, corruption, etc., bridging the popular and arcane strands in their oeuvre with fluidity and assurance. However, it was rooted in decades of progressive thought, in certain filmmakers' certainty that pragmatism would eventually overcome cheapjack film practices over time. The realist impulse in the then 'alternative Indian cinema' had manifested itself before the beginning of the post-independence era – starting from *Savkari Pash* (1925) by Baburao Painter. After independence, events like the French Nouvelle Vague and Italian neo-realist movements slowly exerted weighty influence on the newcomers, and the country was undergoing several socio-political changes as well. The concept of realism was eventually positioned somewhere between the established methods of classical cinema and the innovations and improvisations of the avant-garde. A handful of good films were made during that period as the Government primed the pump, although the country's economy struggled to potter along. Educated middle-class were gaga over the parallel cinema's outcome, and quite rightly so. Their impact on the educated middle-class film enthusiasts can't be gainsaid. It was a significant departure from their habit of enjoying Bollywood lowbrow stuff. Into this series of developments walked two filmmakers – Kaul and Kumar Sahani – who decided to discompose the equilibrium of 'New Indian Cinema,' relying primarily on visual tropes that would upend conventional narrative expectations. The road was arduous, but their performances were full of pizzazz. Their acts triggered an event of seismic proportions in cinema. And they did it not out of a bizarre yen to disconcert but to break through the cuticle of normality, to offer us the move away from reality that the Russian formalists asserted as the prerogative of art. Who could imagine then that their films would eventually be treated as a benchmark for formalist Indian cinema?

*"It will have become clear by now that Shaw is a terrorist. The Shaw's brand of terror is an unusual one, and he employs an unusual weapon-that of humour."*²

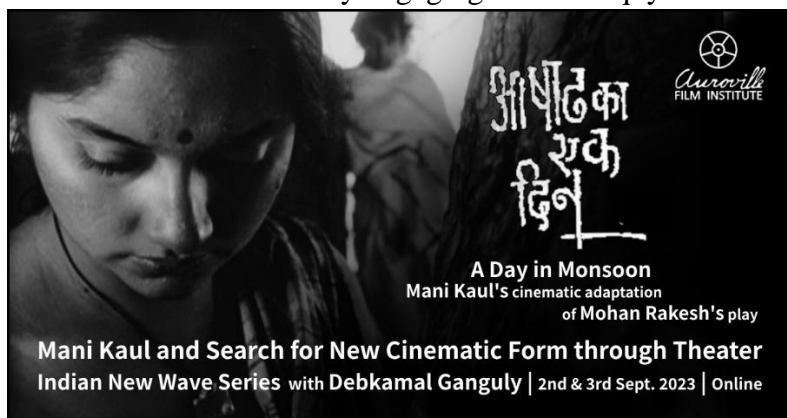
Bertolt Brecht cheered for Bernard Shaw thusly. Kaul's weapon is anti-narrative. His first attempt at filmmaking was a conscious departure from that tendency, betraying traits that would help distinguish his works from those of his contemporaries. His cinema is a space subject to multiple interpretations. Temporal ellipses, long takes, constant use of off-screen space, left-field dialogues and acting style, disjunctive editing, recurring interest in Indian cultural practices, fragmentary filmic structures, characters bereft of any motivation and delivering their lines matter-of-factly, and endings open to the viewer's decipherment – a cinema of subtraction, in the main, suggestive and unimposing. The theory formulated by Kaul endued him with a certain

sense of superiority, and by systematically applying it, he has effectively ensured that anyone who encounters him would find it incomprehensible that this man could have said or done anything in his life sans fearing that incorruptible eye. The works of Mani Kaul designedly presented themselves as disruptive fissures in the new Indian cinematic landscape at a time when Satyajit Ray (and his type of films) was about to gyrate to immortality and consecration of one's time and effort to produce such a thing as 'Mani Kaul Film' ranked at least as high as swallowing a hundred goldfish. His diverse experimentations revealed him not simply as an outlandish auteur but as a border-crossing maverick who shunned the grasp of simple classification. If you get to know him, you will realise his passion for cinema does not manifest in showmanship but indefatigability. Behind the show, he laid out a calculated method, although he always denied having any.

Kaul engaged with various subjects, including classical music, literature and theatre. The ability to uncover what was previously invisible and thus express the essence of things distinguishes him from any other Indian filmmaker. The opening sequence of *Uski Roti* (1969) bears testimony to that fact. We see a woman tossing stones at a guava tree. A hand waiting to receive the falling guava after being struck by a stone (not sure, as it is not in the frame) with some force; after a while, the guava falls and slips through the sprawled hand. We get to see the dusty earth upon which the fruit grounds. A man, then, picks up the fruit – we see only his hand. Then come his torsos, and the man offers the fruit to the woman by extending his hand. The fruit is snatched away by another hand – the woman's. The woman takes a bite of the apple, spits something out, and walks along the field. It was just as likely to be *sui generis* re Indian cinema. The film left out more questions than it answered. Kaul presented his musings in a way that did not let them lose their subtle charm but embellished them as the story unfolded, transforming the film into an alluring tale of vizards and the eternal pursuit of a deeper kind of truth, giving the language of cinema profundity. The dialectic here was not a result of the time sequence but rather the medium through which it manifested itself. It was not born of the incongruities between successive dialogues or ways of behaving but of the gesture itself – like epic theatre, indicating a significant swerve from the then celebrated 'realist cinema', paving the way for a new concept in India named 'non-representational cinema.'



Kaul's cinema's hybrid and defining quality implies that modernity would cease to exist if we don't re-read the past. His filmic space contains the India of globalisation and the Bharat of millennial traditions. The films work the miracle of fluidly engaging in a colloquy with these distinct roots without exposing the sources of inspiration or the script's architecture. There is no moralism or desire to judge the characters in any form of expression that interacts to make a film like *Uski Roti*. The same holds true for *Ashadh Ka Ek Din* (1971), where 'the experiment was confined to the inter-relationship of theatre and cinema; naturally to the dominance of the word.' And the reshaping of the soundscape in his films towards the resonant– to the sounds themselves rather than



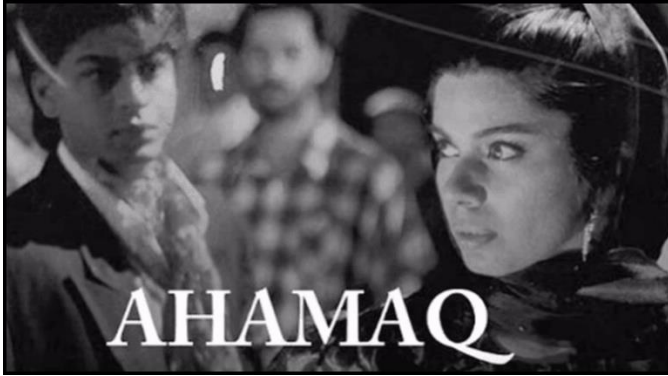
the meaning they offer (dialogues and score do not operate in garden-variety ways that root, adjust, and inform signification) –clearly works in conjunction with the candidness, disintegration, and complexity associated

with Kaul's fractured narrative. No other Indian filmmaker would dare to do this incessantly; therefore, his fellow filmmakers naturally went spare after his works had gained a global reputation.

"Whenever one makes a film, one tries to create a unique work, especially if one has to speak of freedom, which is all one ever wants. Dance and cinema come together to realise that individuated freedom, drawing from the sangeet of our civilisation, perhaps of all collectives."

– Kumar Sahani (interview with the NewsClick)

Ahmaq (1992), based on Fyodor Dostoevsky's novel – *The Idiot*, is an off-the-wall approach to cinema based on literature. Earlier, Robert Bresson – whom Kaul always considered as a big inspiration – and Akira



Kurosawa made films based on the same novel³; however, instead of constructing a coherent and wanted construction, Kaul develops his processes and actions that are intentionally interrupted, offering a critique of the zeitgeist and wising us up to the fact that we are watching a film – pretty Brechtian indeed. Unlike Kurosawa, he upends all the narrative expectations here. A sense of triumph arises when a text is recognised in a specific way, and the fact that it could

never be fully realised, never once and for all, that it is in some measure inexhaustible, that it holds and hides umpteen possibilities within itself (thus arises the capacity for development), is a gratifying recognition. That the characters could be influenced by their surroundings and could themselves change the surrounding world produces feelings of pleasure, obvs if they are not viewed as something mechanical, something that could be put into a slot, something lacking the resistance, as occurs nowadays under the weight of certain social conditions. Kaul aims to peel away at the surface to find new layers of significance, asserting the contrary of meanings rather than explicitly projecting it, changing the focus to delve into different aspects of a complex reality: a cinema determined to acquire its own independent form, liberating itself by breaking free from the servitude to literature or any other art medium, as Gulzar asserted in one of his interviews⁴.

*"The image must exclude the idea of image."*⁵ – Robert Bresson

In *Ahmaq*, Kaul questions the social conditions, exploring the relations between Miskin and the others. The more frequently one interrupts someone engaged in an action, the more gesture one is supposed to obtain. Kaul believed in this Brechtian hypothesis that sometimes worked and sometimes not, but the intention was apparent. The subtle distinction between the visual and the audible grippingly (and, of course, mutually) beefs up the quality of each - the visuals realise the phenomenological depth of its presence heightened by the spatial disorientation from the well-thought-out diegetic soundscape of the audio track. This strategy not only enforces a linear sense of time on the stream of moving images but also puts the 'past' recorded in them with the temporality of their presence, the projection time as the 'present'. Hence, it is a challenging watch. Talking about the film, the New York Times concluded, "It turns a literary masterpiece into a numbing soap opera as incoherent as it is technically crude." It clearly and miserably failed to capture Kaul's aesthetic jubilation as well as his politics of filmmaking.

And 'duration' is the tool he uses so eloquently. Kaul firmly believes – and so does his peer Sahani - that the elements of cinema can't be separated from the unifying sense of pregnant time, of potentiality within time, which the medium intensifies in human experience. According to him, "a film unfolds in space but at the same time in time too"⁶, and it must have taken a lot of pluck to walk along a road not taken by his fellow makers. His theories are more or less commensurate with his actions. From his first venture, it never feels like common-

or-garden youthful excess; this task entails careful thought and maturity. And it is essential to note that he has husbanded its resources well.

*“What is meant by the maturity of knowledge is that state of perfection to which any one individual can bring to it when an exact correspondence has been effected between the whole of his abstract ideas and his observations: whereby each of his ideas rests directly or indirectly based on observation, which alone gives it any real value; and likewise he can place every observation that he makes under the right idea corresponding to it.”*⁷ – Schopenhauer

The elongated duration of shots (e.g. the opening scene – a white undulating portiere - in *Nazar* (1990) or we may recall the scene from *Mati Manas* (1985) where a woman circles, clockwise and anti-clockwise, a clay



She had learned to make the masks of sparrows from us.

Activate Win
Go to Settings

pot) offers enhanced sensory perception of the spatiotemporal aesthetics. Kaul uses various techniques to create immersive spaces filled with sensual and emotive charges, wherein the spectator is held in fascination and then led astray. In Kaul’s films, we expect to encounter a series of shots with extended duration that will exceed the narrative economy. The dilation of time allows us to get engrossed in the spatial properties of the individual scenes and consciously aware of the screen time concomitantly. To put it differently, the spatial continuum of time creates a temporal perception in the observed present. The passing of

space in time subsequently overtakes a recorded presentation of the past time. The spatial manifestation of duration in Kaul’s filmic corpus, acquiring a balance between process and realisation - the concept (or its practice), however, slowly turns into an *idée fixe* for him - is unparalleled in Indian cinema. It’s an act of rebellion, and, unlike his contemporaries, the rebel finds his inspiration primarily in Indian cultural practices, which is why he becomes more relevant. The majority of modernist artists/authors did not require the use of images inspired by foreign sources: W.B Yeats could plainly explore the layers of Celtic memory and envision revitalising Irish society and culture; Federico Garcia Lorca had a wealth of mythical material around him in Andalusia; Eliot was able to rely on the suspension bridge that the migration of his ancestors had constructed between Britain and America; Ritwik Ghatak’s (Kaul’s Guru in every sense) fascination with metaphorical language stemmed from his extensive knowledge of Indian mythologies and epics; Manto’s was deeply moved by the turbulent time during the partition. Kaul’s attachment to the Indian organic tradition is pretty reassuring.

*“Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from those things.”*⁸

Kaul would have replaced the word ‘poetry’ with ‘cinema’ had he wished to borrow T.S Eliot’s sentiment. All the techniques, especially the attitude of refusing to accept the realist representation, would have looked like curtains had they not helped us find a language for our inner reality. In *Dhrupad* (1983), the distinctiveness of a classical style of North Indian vocal music corresponds to an impromptu realisation of a figure where the occasionally slightly sluggish performance by the artists does not seem to hinder the fluidity of temporal cadence, spatial transitions, and the sense of eudaemonia. Kaul turns the fortress’ roof into a ripple of time, unearthing the intricate nuances of one of the oldest forms of music in the world, deeply rooted in the country’s

cultural heritage, religious traditions, and philosophy (it is to be noted that Mani Kaul taught music at one of the Music schools in the Netherlands, and an elongated discussion is required to understand Kaul's score; however, this falls outside the scope of this discourse). It feels like the musicians have been playing music (raga Miyan ki Todi is used) since time immemorial, blossoming the cavernous landscape with colours. The occasional inter-titles are somewhat distracting, which is the director's intention.

'It is true for all that that that that that that refers to is not the same that that that that that refers to.'

The above will seem like grammatically correct sentences, but only if you are proficient in English grammar. The same New York Times that denounced *Ahmaq* compared *Siddheshwari* (1990) is also related to Hindustani classical music - with an abstract painting "wildly open to interpretation"⁹. Rightly so, as it is a film with uncommon motifs, which flows through scraps of Siddheshwari Devi's – a peerless Hindustani classical vocalist - imagination and history in queer chronologies, blurring the divisive line between fiction and documentary (which is hardly relevant in today's world). The film has an oceanic swell or surge of emotion that appears to be forming somewhere in its depths but never really breaks into a wave.

*"Godard's increasingly violent attack on cinema is not, as in the case of Americans, wholly focused on the constitution of a filmic ontology; rather, its deconstruction of the codes of sound-image relationships is aimed at the creation of a foundation for another, oppositional cinema, a militant cinema destructive of bourgeois ideology".*¹⁰

It's true for Kaul as well. An admirer of Godard, Kaul – who hails from an ambivalent Kashmiri background - is said to have taken a leaf out of Bresson's book and fixed his approach towards the art and craft of cinema: e.g., *retake*, which he does not mean to achieve the perfect shot but to wait for an off-the-cuff event to capture the random elements in the image-sound combination or the performances by the non-players. His distinct means of distinction allow for the intimacy of representation. For example, *Nazar* (1989) – the first of the two adaptations of Dostoevsky, resembles Bresson's adaptation of the same, *Une Femme Douce* (1969), in its highly stylised direction of the players and the sacrifice of drama for mood and passion for observation. In *Duvidha* (1973) – which is not at all a 'ghost story' as 'Hungry Stones' is not a 'ghost story' by Tagore – Kaul uses voice-overs, interior monologues, and on-screen dialogues, exorcising the ghost of realism. His use of close-ups and dissolves creates a phantasmic impression. 'Silence' in this film is not just an absence of sound, but the essence of it, and the subject's body is the origin and end-point – a cinema of the highest calibre.



*"That is why Kaul's reduction of the human element to faces and minimal gestures to crowds, seen from the back or from above (hence the clusters of turbans), seems to be the result of a plain lack of interest in human beings."*¹¹ – Satyajit Ray on *Duvidha*

Kaul has explored the distances between public images and indescribably private experiences. His depiction of human interiority intellectually is nonpareil. Like the French maven JLG, he begins with the image and

steadily works his way into the text. If anything sort of this exists, he prefers to open them up as a space of possibility. His art is less potent than empowering. His brief stint with Akbar Padamsee – before making *Duvidha* – enriches him further. Travelling several thousand miles to make a film requires more than just catering to an outlandish whim, which he did while developing *Mati Manas*.

“In your travels, you see different kinds of people and different kinds of lives, and that makes you think. You ask harsh questions of yourself. I try to understand what it means to be human. There are certain kinds of people in every culture. These kind of people ask similar questions about life and it doesn’t change in New York or anywhere else. You meet these people in Iran, in Singapore, everywhere. And these kind of people make another kind of nation. Through films, you find your soulmates, who live in the same nation as you.” — Nuri Bilge Ceylan
(source: Variety Magazine)

However, unlike Godard, Kaul hardly changes his guard and believes he is the only plausible approach to cinema. Moreover, his references to filmic narrative structures and the analogies they share with music or Mughal miniature painting are simply saintly claptrap. Cinema is an entirely different medium, a very advanced one. Although synthetic, it can’t be developed, keeping the disciplines and fantasies of any other art form in mind.

*“Ironically, the experiment of Kaul and Sahani has provoked angry polemics not only in the commercial cinema but also within the precincts of parallel cinema itself. That four films which have not had a commercial run could provoke the ire of every director ranging from Satyajit Ray to the latest debutant in the business must surely point to their disturbing qualities. The films have been called boring, slow, repetitive, difficult, academic, Bressonian, Antonionist, Godardian, Bergmanesque, “not-so-relevant-to-the-Indian-context” and so on. Many of these charges were levelled at Satyajit Ray when he made *Pather Panchali* in 1955. Ray...had also acknowledged the influences on him – Soviet filmmakers, Renoir, the Italian neo-realists – but hardly anyone then upbraided him for falling prey to “foreign” examples. Likewise, the accusation of wasting taxpayers’ money seems...quite amusing...when it comes from left-wing critics.”*¹² – Dileep Padgaonkar

Although Kaul is often accused of making things deliberately incomprehensible in this film, it is essential to state that pretentiousness is the risk he runs for believing that only the serious takers are worthy of this medium and the questions a filmmaker has to ask. The problem in India is that if someone takes a different artistic approach that others fail to apprehend, it immediately knocks the stuffing out of them. Then, the so-called aesthetes start censoring it collectively, despite sometimes being hoisted with their own petard. This tradition will never cease to exist. However, Kaul never tried to bridge the gap. He and Sahani once walked out of the symposium, headed by B.R. Chopra, organised to ‘exchange ideas and information on problems the filmmakers face.’¹² Courage, or stubbornness, call it what you will, but it did not help his cause, and what’s more, he dissed his fellow filmmakers, save Sahani, enthusiastically. His desperation to hurl every abuse and latch on to every straw is uncalled for and unseemly. He was hardly of a gentle disposition. As an aside, let me remind the readers how the sycophants would kiss the ground whenever Ray walked in. Everyone is not blessed to be constantly surrounded by apple-polishers.

“This dialectical perspective, where everything is pregnant with its opposite, and the eager eye with which Marx discerned the potential for change in what seemed to be the most unchanging of social structures, helped me to grasp the great contradictions of the capitalist era.”¹³

Kaul was deeply disturbed by how his colleagues interpreted Marx and his social theories. A man is known as his thoughts reveal him to be, and the idea becomes what everybody would display about him – his beliefs



and beliefs as beings. It is not what anyone understands or interprets, but it is instead what inspires one to communicate, as such, in an unambiguous language. And true artists reveal what they but believe to be true irrespective of method, approach, and reflection. Kaul has been a tireless composer in experimenting over the last two decades by using different means of image and sound techniques, which are entwined masterly with the mood and narration to make us see the unseen and absent, offering gossamer threads which will enable us to divine the abstraction of transitoriness. His

films are bold enough to question the very form it operates on. The word feisty wouldn't be sufficient to describe a Mani Kaul. He was childlike in savouring the beautiful moments life gave him, unafraid to live on his terms, generous and reckless, ruffling too many feathers. Gone is that time when filmgoers at festivals girded their loins reasonably happily for a Mani Kaul film. Parallel cinema jumps the shark, 'middle cinema' is all but dead, and the works of Kaul (or Sahani or Nabyendu Chatterjee) have become alien to people, especially Gen Z – thanks to the continuous curfew in the public brain. At this ugly point in time, Kaul's is a name we must take quite seriously.

*"If a film shows you something you already know, where will it lead us?" – Kaul,
Mani*

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