

Article**Ashok Palit**

Manmohan Mahapatra: Father of New Wave Odia Cinema (1951-2020)



Manmohan Mahapatra was born on November 10, 1951, in Khordha near Bhubaneswar. However, his childhood, schooling, and formative years were spent in Kolkata, where his father established himself as a businessman. The family has owned a house in Kolkata until today. Manmohan was the eldest of the six children of his parents – three sons and three daughters. He excelled in his studies, and his father wished him to join the Indian Administrative Service. However, the son had one wish – to lead a creative life.

Kolkata laid the foundation of Manmohan's love for cinema. "I spent my childhood in Kolkata, where I saw several films—good, bad, and indifferent. I could also see some films by the masters of the medium and was completely taken in by the magic of filmmaking" (Indian Express on August 9 August 1993) He got admitted to the prestigious BJB College in Bhubaneswar with physics as his honours subject for graduation. However, he left the course to join FTII, Pune, in 1972

FTII DAY

Film and Television Institute of India opened up new vistas for the students, and Prof Satish Bahadur's teaching of film appreciation particularly impressed Manmohan Mahapatra. His lectures about the structure and meaning, operating through visual language, proved helpful as Manmohan Mahapatra

was still discovering the medium and the new ways it can be employed to create meaning. Along with furthering his knowledge of the new Indian cinema, Manmohan Mahapatra also saw the masterpieces of world cinema. He could identify more with the Asian and European masters than their American counterparts.

He joined the institute in 1972. This was a fascinating period in film school. The impact of Satyajit Ray's Apu trilogy was absorbed by Indian cinema, and the parallel cinema movement began in Indian films just a few years ago. The three major films in 1969, '*Bhuvan Shome*', '*Sara Akash*' and '*Uski Roti*', underlined that new cinema was not an isolated incident but was turning into a movement. Although it was not spread widely across India by this time, several new filmmakers were poised to create something different in this largely under-explored medium. Manmohan Mahapatra learned the art of filmmaking with other prominent filmmakers like Girish Kasaravalli, Ketan Mehta, and Saeed Mirza, who were simultaneously students at FTII.

In a career spanning 43 years, Manmohan Mahapatra remained an unstoppable force of realistic cinema in Odisha, and he was the precursor himself. A year after stepping out of the celebrated Film and Television Institute of India (FTII), Pune, in 1975, he made his first film, '*Seeta Rati*,' a film centring around a young woman in Odisha's village setting, steeped in the class structure. Five years later, '*Seeta*

Rati was released on television and fetched Mahapatra National Award for the Best Feature Film in Odia. It became the first Odia film selected for the prestigious 'Indian Panorama' section of the International Film Festival of India. Mahapatra pioneered neo-realistic movies and soon became the 'Father of new wave Odia cinema'. His grip on the lives of the working class and poor, feudal structure, orthodox society, and corruption was unparalleled.

Manmohan Mahapatra Films

It may be mentioned those who keep a wee bit of track of Odia cinema and its 'humanist appeal' simply cannot ignore the contribution of Mahapatra, the lone fighter of Odia cinema, close to the aspirations of film lovers in Odisha. Mahapatra, who began his creative odyssey with the path-breaking film *Seeta Raati* (1982), has continued to make films, despite heavy sods and odds and has made twelve feature films in just two decades. Suppose his *Seeta Raati* shows his imagination and innovative ideas. In that case, other films such as *Neeraba Jhada* (1984), *Klanta Aparanha* (1985), *Majhi Pahacha* (1987), *Nisidhaa Swapna* (1988), *Trisandhya* (1988), *Kichi Smruti Kichi Anubhuti* (1989), *Andha Diganta* (1990), *Agni Veena* (1991), *Vinna Samay* (1992), *Muhurta* (2002) and *Bhija Matira Swarga* (2018) have indeed proved his agility and aesthetic sensibilities, shifted through various social plots, its conflicts, mainly based on agrarian milieu.

Mahapatra's debuted film "*Seeta Raati*" creates an authentic milieu in the village with the backdrop of factional feuds and petty politicking. The film depicts the love affair between a rich man's son, Pranab, and a poor girl, Aruna, which crumbles under the class conflict. Pranab's cowardice and docile nature contribute to the collapse of the relationship. The young woman has the strength to face the future with resolution and no tears. The portrayal of stark realism and the underplay of Aruna's intense emotions and feelings give a new perspective to the film. The romantic scenes are unique creations primarily because of the back-and-forth cutting of shots, the locations, painstaking track shots, and the scenes along the railway tracks, which are

unparalleled and unique masterpieces. It is a masterly work of art.

Manmohan's second feature film, '*Neeraba Jhada*' (The Silent Storm), a national award winner in 1984, portrays the stark reality of the poor peasants who mortgage their land to the landlord for survival. After the ubiquitous, evil landlord usurps their land, they migrate to the cities for survival. Can a peasant forget his village? Bhramar- and his daughter Phula- whose land has been usurped by the landlord, leave the village and go to the railway station to board the train to become the urban proletariat in the city. When the daughter, who was humiliated by village elders for having an affair with a boy, weeps inconsolably, the father tells her: "We will one day return to the village. Beyond the embankment lies our village. I was born there. My father was born there. We'll come back. Don't cry." These are stark realities happening every day in Odisha. The film is still very relevant."

"*Neeraba Jhada*" ("The Silent Storm") is a beautiful, gruelling film about a peasant's brave stand against a greedy landlord's determination to grab the peasant's holdings, the last bit of property in the region not in his possession. This is as uncompromising a film imaginable about a people mired in virtual slavery, upheld by ignorance, superstition, and tradition, yet it also is a tribute to humanity's strength to endure and even to hope.



Manmohan Mohapatra's third feature film '*Klanta Aparanha*' (Tired Afternoon), a 1985 National Award winner, depicts the lives of three unmarried female teachers of a village school, Neeru, Sandhya, and Veena. Neeru's marriage proposals dissolve no sooner than it starts due to the demand for dowry. Sometimes, when the demand for dowry is not conceded, the proposal breaks down under the

pretext that the horoscopes of the would-be bride and groom do not match. Sandhya is having an affair with Arun, who visits her where she is posted. He asks Sandhya to make up her mind for an early marriage. She needs more time to decide as her family depends on her salary. Their brief meeting leads to a scandal in the village for which the school's governing body forces Sandhya to resign. Her return journey to the railway station in a bullock cart- a lengthy journey- tends to signify two things: her silent revolt- a girl is treated not at par with her male counterpart and thrown into the dustbin by the male-dominated conservative society. It is her journey into the darkness, although she hopes to get a job in her village. The film truthfully depicts a contemporary reality, and the audience feels the pangs of the unsollicitous, tired afternoon, which is neither an autumn afternoon nor a spring sonata.

Manmohan Mohapatra's fourth film '*Nisidha Swapna*' (The Forbidden Dream), a winner of the National Award in 1987, depicts the story of a retired person, Sachibabu's family, in a village. He has two sons and two daughters. The elder daughter, Radha, is doing her M.A. in a nearby city, and the younger one, Neeta, is doing domestic chores. The family's primary concern is getting the elder daughter, Radha, married as soon as possible.

The tranquility in the family is disturbed when Radha's mother discovers a love letter that proves that Radha is having an affair with someone called Bimal, who is from outside their caste. The parents, deadly set against the unusual development, want Radha to end the seemingly scandalous relationship. The family is overshadowed by gloom and anxiety when the astrologer predicts that a mishap is going to fall on Radha very soon. When the Pandit is performing holy offerings to ward off the imminent mishap, Neeta's loud shriek drags the members of the family to Radha's room, where a makeshift rope is hung from the ceiling fan, indicating a suicide attempt by Radha. On the spur of the moment, she changed her mind and eloped with Bimal.

In the note she has left behind, she says death would defeat her purpose. She desired to live life how she wanted and thought it wise to run away with Bimal. The family is taken aback to see her statement

that they have seen the caste in Bimal and not the human being in him."

While the female protagonists in '*Seeta Raati*', '*Neeraba Jhada*' and '*Klanta Aparanha*' are meek and docile, unable to revolt openly against the social norms, the female protagonist in '*Nishidha Swapna*' gather courage to rebel against the false social values?

"*Nisidha Swapna*" tries to depict a human situation in the context of a particular cultural milieu. *The film patiently observes the characters in the milieu, trying to define their attitudes and motivations, hopes and disillusionment, and linking their behaviour to the social totality they are a part of.*

Manmohan's fifth film, '*Kichhi Smruti Kichhi Anubhuti*' (Some Memories Some Experiences), a national award winner, depicts the lonely life of a retired clerk in the village. His elder son is abroad but never comes to see his father. Younger son initially lived with him and had an affair with a village girl. He (the son) leaves his father and goes to the city to seek his fortune and brighter prospects. The daughter is having an affair with a person in the village, but the father does not agree to their marriage. His only friend, another retired person, passes away. His loneliness multiplies. He is having hallucinations, too. As his sons don't return to see him, he is haunted by their memories. Memories of his second son's childhood become acute. He appears and disappears in his imagination. Manmohan's depiction of the older man's psychology of misery, loneliness, and hallucination touches the realm of happening and not happening. His narrative is subtle, sublime, and never loud or dramatic. He creates cinema with a one-line story. He uses mostly long shots as if he is looking at characters objectively. That is how he creates cinematic objet d' art.

'*Trisandhya*' (Three Evenings) was made in 1986. In this film, Manmohan succeeds in creating a milieu in which he stops and three evenings merge into one. The cremation of Adikanda, the patriarch of a middle-class family, occurs in a traditional Odisha village. The deceased is survived by his wife, three sons, and two daughters. The real story begins when the members of the family gather in the ancestral

village house on the occasion of Adikanda's first death anniversary. There are face-to-face conversations and mild confrontations among them regarding the marriage of daughter Sandhya, financial contributions for the ceremony, disposal of a part of the village property, the future vocation of the younger son of the family, etc. The director reveals the middle-class psyche through discussions interspersed with tender and touching moments.

In this film, the director has created a story where there is none. Ciphers become noticeable characters. The director reveals the middle-class psyche through discussions interspersed with tender and touching moments. The film begins with Adikanda's death and ends with the birth of his grandson- the organic flow and continuity of life.



'Majhi Pahacha' (The Middle Step), Manmohan Mohapatra's seventh film, a 1987 national award winner, depicts the human situation in which the protagonist's idealism shatters into smithereens under the pressure of social circumstances. Arun, a clerk in a private firm and a budding poet, writes poems against social evils like the dowry system. His younger brother requires donations to join the engineering course. His retired father, Kailash Babu, cannot part with his only savings of Rs.15000 in the bank, which he has kept for his daughter Kuni's wedding. Arun cannot afford the donation money either. His girlfriend gets married to a well-to-do person. Finally, he accepts the marriage proposal and a dowry to fulfil the family's aspirations. He comes back home and burns his famous anti-dowry poem.

"Majhi Pahacha" gradually unfolds the hopes and despair of Arun, an aspiring poet who realises he cannot uphold his ideals in the face of rigorous

traditional and social forces. Director's portrayal of middle-class life is too realistic. Compromise is the formula through which the middle class drags on to survive. These harsh realities are devastatingly accurate.

"Andha Diganta" (The Blind Horizon), a 1989 national award winner the eighth film, directed by Manmohan Mohapatra, once again portrays village life in Orissa. Shankar is a labourer toiling the paddy fields of the Zamindar, Narayan Choudhury, and in the evening, participates in the village 'kirtan'. Suddenly, his wife, Sita, passes away because of a mysterious illness.

Shankar disappears from the village without telling anyone, goes to the city, and marries Radha, a prostitute. When Shankar returns to the village with his wife Radha and her son Ratan (from a previous marriage), the whole village revolts against him for fear of getting a bad name for the village. It was decided in the meeting called by the Zamindar that Shankar should treat the entire village to a feast. He complies with it by mortgaging his small patch of land to the Zamindar. Shankar's wife, Radha, repulses the Zamindar's lewd advances towards her as she is determined to remain loyal to her husband. Angered by the attitude of Radha and Shankar, Zamindar forces them to pay all his dues along with interest. They are forced by the situation Zamindar and his henchmen created to leave the village and work in the city to save enough to clear the debt. Nevertheless, they hope to return to the village one day.

This film gradually unfolds the trials and travails of Radha, with a disturbed past behind her, but she continues in her pursuit of a dignified living despite a hostile environment. In the fag end of the film, the departure of the family of Shankar strikes an optimistic note and underlines the indomitable human spirit, which lies deep down within both Shankar and Radha.

"Agni Veena", made in the 1990s, depicts the harsh reality of the peasant community. Village peasants are trafficked as contract labourers to faraway places where they have to work under inhuman conditions. When they flee from there and return to the village, they are terrorized by the

erstwhile Zamindar, now the labour contractor. Finally, they revolt against the ex-Zamindar, who opens fire, killing some of them. The immediate transition to Phula giving birth to Nata's child symbolises continuity of life and reassertion of hope.

The film depicting the uprising is a significant departure from his earlier films in which the villagers tolerate the diktats of the Zamindars and accept the fait accompli. Assertion of human rights – and fighting for it- indicates the gradual progressive transition in Manmohan Mohapatra's cinema.”

“*Bhinna Samaya*’ (Changing Times), a national award-winning film of 1992, tells the story of changing times in which the idealism of the protagonist, Arindam, undergoes cataclysmic change. As he cannot compromise with unscrupulous people, he has to resign from a job at a financial institution. With great difficulties when he sets up his polymer industry, he has to forego his idealism to climb the business and social ladder. It is, in a way, similar to the protagonist in his earlier film ‘*Majhi Pahacha*’. While the ‘*Majhi Pahacha*’ protagonist burns his idealist poem at the end, the protagonist in ‘*Bhinna Samaya*’, while speeding in a car to sign a huge construction contract in another state, stops at an accident site as his car breaks down. He sees the other vehicle, which met with an accident. As people talk about the rampaging speed with which the ill-fated vehicle was moving, Arindam asks himself, “Where am I going?” “How far can one go at this speed?” The answer could be “the other world” or “the futility of life even after the enormous success.

‘*Muhurta*’ (The Moment) in 2003- depicts the reassertion of old values by the protagonist Somu, who had given up the ideals and faith of his father. His father plays drums at the temple. Somu goes to the city, becomes a high official (IAS), and marries an upper-strata girl who doesn't want her father-in-law Raghu to play the drum at the temple, meaning a low social status. He agrees not to play it. But at the time of Puja, Raghu suddenly picks up the drum and plays it but falls. Son Somu instinctively picks up the drum and plays it successfully, much to the father's delight. It was Raghu's faith in the deity that was restored. For Somu, it is going back to his roots. Manmohan's films are subtle, devoid of melodrama,

serene, and have a cinematic objet d' art.” This was the only Film of Manmohan Mahapatra that was an adoption of the short story “Dholia’ authored by Eminent writer and journalist Barendra Krushna Dhal.



Manmohan's last directed film “*Bhija Matira Swarga*” is set against the backdrop of a remote village in Odisha; the film gradually unravels the hopes, despair, attitudes, and motivations of the characters, linking their behaviour to the social totality of which they are a part.

“*Bhija Matira Swarga*” is collage of three distinct narratives, each integrated with special emotional moments. Currently, in a village in Odisha, the elderly and ailing Raghu hopes that his son, daughter-in-law, and grandson, who live in Bengaluru, will come and stay with him in the village. This represents the first element of the film: hope. The widow Shakuntala dreams that her son Aru will find a job. This is the second element: dream. Aru's dream is to be with Smita after finding a job, which is also Smita's dream. This is also the third element of the film: dream. However, not everyone's dreams or hopes are fulfilled. Time passes as usual. The narrative of “*Bhijamaati ra Swarga*,” which may seem simple, is not so. The audience is drawn into the cinematic magic of the narrative. The symbolism used by the director to enhance this magic can further intensify the experience. For example, when Aru's dream is shattered, the director shows the crusher crushing stones at the place where Aru is temporarily employed. Similarly, Raghu's hope remains

unfulfilled until the end, as even after his death, his son cannot come to perform the last rites. Raghu's close friend performs the rites.

The strength of "*Bhijamaati ra Swarga*" lies in its dialogue. The characters deliver their lines in a very ordinary manner, akin to how people speak in everyday life. There is no melodrama or overacting. Emotions take precedence over dialogues at times, and in these instances, the performances of Gargi Mohanty as the female protagonist and Mihir Das as Raghu are very poignant. The screenplay flows smoothly and linearly. While there were opportunities to introduce tension and drama in various parts of the story, the director opted for a linear style. Events unfold naturally, leading up to an unexpected moment.

Some of Dilip Roy's steady shots balance out the emotional scenes, a technique not often seen in conventional Odia films. This film of Mohapatra does not have a slow pace, as some critics may suggest. Like his previous films, Mohapatra has not imposed a specific interpretation on "*Bhijamaati ra Swarga*;" he left it to the audience to interpret.

The film "*Bhija Matira Swarga*" patiently observes the characters, watching them go through intriguing moments, encountering them on their way

His style and philosophy of filmmaking

One of the prime tasks of a responsible filmmaker i.e. most trenchant analysis of contemporary societal dilemmas, has been nearly mastered by Manmohan Mahapatra, arguably one of the pioneers of purposive new wave cinema. Not he, but his meticulously crafted characters loom large in all his films. Not the characters' traits, qualifications, social class, showmanship, or reputation, but their mere existence is the ground that dominates the movie.

No wonder, then, that characters do not hover around the themes. Themes evolve by the characters. Like the essential rebel, Mahapatra has justifiably earned the acclaim of being one who has given dues to the roles people play in circumstances that are mostly not within their sphere of control.

Mahapatra's surrealistic touch is evident in all his movies. His desire to draw a line outside the boundary, contrary to conventional films based on

factional utopian themes, characterizes his genius. To quote the great storyteller Conan Doyle, 'It's quite elementary'. Is life not all about experimenting? Is life not about breaking the formulae? Blame it on as bland a factor as monotony or as creative a facet called rebelliousness. Mahapatra sticks to his guns with an honest conviction, i.e., he must not get allured into the commercial gimmicks and will not project events with no or most minor standard denominations and which are not reflective of a perception framed by self.



Most of his films are based on a thin storyline, comprising a series of moments which have a cumulative effect on the onlooker, where the characters, the situations, and the minor story elements all ensemble into an experience. It is observed that he deliberately underplays the dramatic points of the film, and the de-emphasis of drama is an integral part of his cinema. His films rarely use close-ups; mostly with mid-shots, long shots, and elliptical cutting, he creates an ambience with a distinct style.

Mahapatra's cinema can never be seen in isolation from reality, as a narrative happening in a vacuum, but is closely related to the time and place in which it is conceived. The changing social environment in each era has primarily influenced his filmmaking, and we can see his work contextualising the sociopolitical history of our state. His films have been consistently ahead of their time. His early work is relevant even today and will remain so for years to come.

Manmohan's cinema is primarily influenced by realism. It is not European realism but realism

adopted by Indian pioneers like Satyajit Ray and Ritwik Ghatak. His films have a firm base in reality and progress with a logical framework in the stories that comment on a sociopolitical scenario of the country and the condition the commoner has to live with. His films have a firm base in reality and progress with a logical framework in the stories that comment on a sociopolitical scenario of the country and the condition the commoner has to live with.

Of the 13 feature films that he made, 12 are in Odia and one in Hindi. He has set a rare record of winning eight National Awards for Odia cinema (best regional cinema): three consecutively in 1983, 1984, 1985, and again four times consecutively in 1987, 1988, 1989 and 1990. The latest of the series came in 1992.

He was conferred Odisha State's highest honour for contribution to cinema – the Jayadev Puraskar – while the Utkal University of Culture in

Odisha conferred on him an honorary doctorate in 2017. The government of India decorated him posthumously with the coveted Padma Shri in 2020 just after his passing away on 13 January 2020 in a hospital in Bhubaneswar at age 69 after battling prolonged kidney and heart ailments.

Manmohan Mahapatra has left his mark on Indian filmmaking. Unfortunately, he is not appreciated as much as he could have been. Although we remain one of the world's biggest film industries, most of our viewership is partial to a cinema posing as entertainment. The New Wave cinema, which works as an alternate stream, has limited viewership despite the significant work produced in it. One must appreciate the work of Manmohan Mahapatra and his contemporaries, who keep producing brilliant and original work despite adverse circumstances. One can only hope for some real change very soon.

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