

Article

Ashok Palit

Mrinal Sen, First Political Odia Cinema Director

India is a developing country, and because of its social diversity, it has always struggled with social problems and political extremes. In this context, the media in the country, especially cinema, is expected to portray a real picture rather than a dreamy and non-realistic one just for entertainment. Indian parallel cinema has attempted this in the past and has been successful too, up to an extent. The emergence of neo-realism or the new wave cinema in India started with Mrinal Sen's films. His films were very much inspired by real events and situations., Sen remains a regional filmmaker but talks about universal things. Sen's mastery of political films is explored in many ways than one. A person, who has seen the worst effects of poverty, unemployment, and struggle for survival would not make films that only entertain. He did succeed in communicating what he intended to. Mrinal Sen's socio-political cinema explains his internal unrest and also his understanding of politic

Flash Back

In 1960, the right of Kalandi Charan Panigrahi's "*Matira Manisha*" was sold to Khwaja Ahmad Abbas for 25 thousand rupees. But he was not making films. Author Kalandi Charan Panigrahi put a condition on Babulal Doshi that if Satyajit Ray directed "*Matira Manisha*," he might be able to bring back the rights from Khwaja Ahmad Abbas

The Producer agreed. Satyajit Ray's aunty Sukhlata married Dr. Jayant Rao in

Cuttack. Sukhlata also translated *Matira Manisha* into Bengali. In that thread, Satyajit Ray was contacted. Meanwhile, Khwaja Ahmad Abbas also returned the film.

Ray said: After a year and a half he can direct the "*Matira Manisha*", not now. It is better if the producer waits but then he stays in Odisha for six months and learns the traditions and customs of Odisha and then he is the direct "*Matira Manisha*". He needs a guide and a vehicle to teach him the Odia

language and take him around Odisha villages.

The Producer reckoned: that Satyajit Ray will be staying at the B. N. R .hotel of Puri. How much will the cost of six months in the hotel, the vehicle, and the guide? Therefore, he pointed out that it was not possible to wait so long. So, Satyajit Ray recommended the names of two Directors, Tapan Sinha and Mrinal Sen, could be taken. Tapan Sinha was contacted first, by then he was busy with the Bengali film 'Hate Bajare'. So, Mrinal Sen was contacted, and he agreed.

About the Author Kalindi Charan Panigrahi

Kalindi Charan Panigrahi (2 July 1901 – 15 May 1991) belongs to the post-Fakirmohan, post-Gopabandhu generation, appearing at a time when Odia writers were no longer crusading for racial, linguistic, or cultural identity and could explore new areas of experience with greater self-assurance. While still in his twenties, Kalindi Charan, Annada Shankar Ray, and a few other budding poets proclaimed the birth of a new literary movement, 'Sabuj Sahitya' (Green Literature). The 'greenery' that inspired their writing was a declaration of soft, youthful idealism and romanticism rather than the radicalism of contemporary writing. The Sabuj group drew inspiration from Tagore, Marx, and Gandhi. Like Tagore, Kalindi Charan tried his hand at multiple genres besides poetry—novels, short stories, drama, biography, and essays. His first novel, *Matira Manisha*, published in 1931, is considered a modern classic in the Odia language. Kalindi Charan Panigrahi published his fifth and last novel *Ajira Manisha* (Today's Man) in 1957.

The other three novels, apart from *Matira Manisha* (1931), are *Luhara Manisha* (1947), *Muktagadara Khyudha* (1933), and its sequel *Amara Chita* (1933). Interestingly, the overwhelming reception of his first novel *Matira Manisha* has almost completely overshadowed his other three novels whose studies have been confined to academia.



About the Novel

The plot revolves around the family of Shama Pradhan, a rural farmer, and his two sons, Baraju and Chakadi. At the time of his death, Shama Pradhan entrusts Baraju with the responsibility of looking after his younger son Chakadi. She entreats him to prevent the partition of land and the house between the two brothers. Baraju is a peace-loving person who commands respect from the villagers for

his idealistic way of life. Baraju's wife Harabou is also an ideal housewife who is very caring and affectionate towards Chakadi, his wife Netramani, and her two children. Chakadi, in contrast, is a carefree vagabond loafing around the village. His wife, Netramani, who is envious of Harabou, insists on partitioning the property.

A village tout, Hari Mishra, also tries to create discord between the two brothers. Swayed by the villainous designs of Netramani and Hari Mishra, Chakadi asks his elder brother to divide the property between them. Baraju is shocked, but in reverence to his father's advice and out of affection for Chakadi, tells him that he is free to own the entire property and that there is no need for partition. Baraju leaves the house with their wife Harabou and his two kids with no regrets or rancor. After Baraju's departure, Chakadi feels miserable and gets nostalgic about his brother, sister-in-law, and their two kids. He goes to Baraju and begs him to return home. But Baraju, who is committed to the spirit of sacrifice, non-attachment, and love, advises Chakadi to go back and take care of all that he has left behind.

The complex plot of *Matira Manisha* encompasses a wide range of contexts and themes such as Gandhian and Marxist ideologies, postwar social conditions, agrarian culture, rustic life, joint family system, and human relationships. It is a poignant story that upholds the human values of moral concern and sacrifice, delineates the landscape and traditions of a typical Orissan village, and presents life in its multiple dimensions of good and evil, love and hatred, joy and sorrow.

Director Mrinal Sen

Sen was undoubtedly an iconic director whose films evolved as he aged. Though he is considered a political filmmaker, he claimed to simply depict his surroundings. Later in life, Sen felt that each of his films was a dress rehearsal for a better film and believed in 'correcting (his) own conclusions'. He kept saying that his first film was not a good one and out of the 27 feature films he made, he thought that only 15 were worth digitalising for a retrospective at the prestigious Cannes Film Festival. Clearly, over the five decades of creativity, his Bhuvan (world) kept expanding from films such as *Bhuvan Shome* to his last feature film, *Amar Bhuvan* (My World, 2002).

However, unlike his compatriots, among them Satyajit Ray and Ritwik Ghatak, Sen refused to be bound to Kolkata and Bengal. The restless and adventurous spirit that he was, he ventured into making films not only in Hindi but also in Telugu and Odia. 'I have no problem moving out to Africa and shooting a film in Swahili because the language of poverty is universal,' he said.

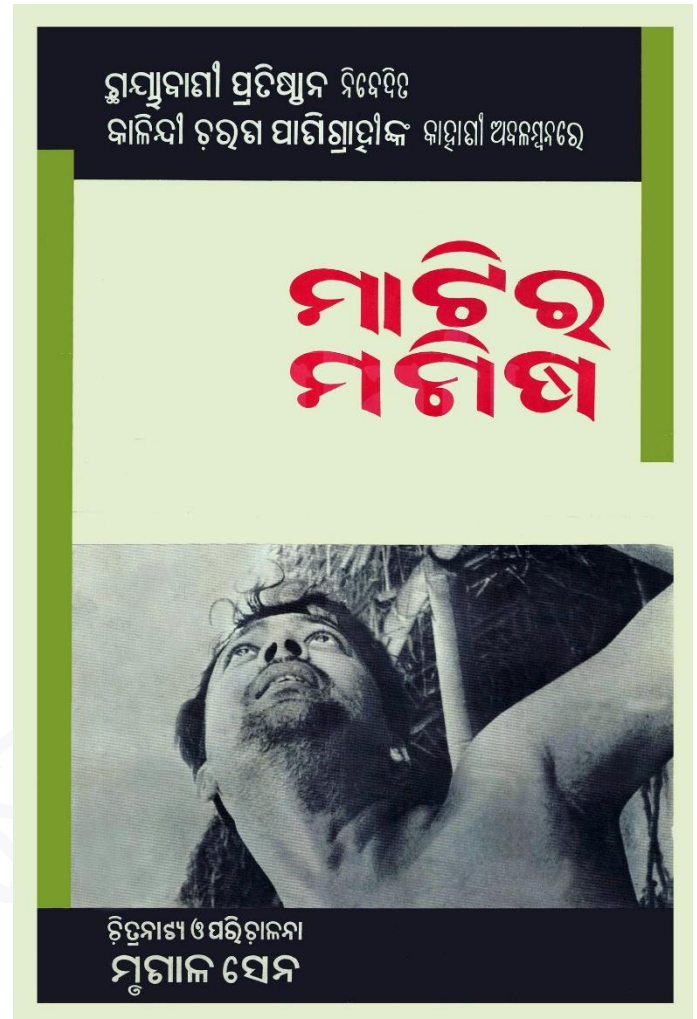
With his options fast running out, Sen grabbed the opportunity offered by a Gujarati businessman in Odisha, Babulal Doshi. Keen to produce an 'art' film, Doshi gave him two conditions: Sen had to make a film in Odia and it had to be an adaptation of K.C. Panigrahi's *Matira Manisha*, the novel that had fetched its writer the Sahitya Akademi Award.

Mrinal Sen himself tells the story of why he decided to direct Odia's film in an interview in his autobiography *Book Always Being Born*. Here we give excerpts :

"This documentary, *Moving Perspectives*, was yet to be completed when a man from Gujarat, domiciled in Orissa, came to me one day, ready with money and a story. My friend Kironmoy Raha, a swell official of the Government of India, acted as the liaison. Raha and the man from Gujarat wanted me to make a feature film based on a famous Oriya novel. I thought it was a delicious idea- 'delicious' indeed- for a man from Bengal to make a film in Oriya with money from one who came from Gujarat many years ago. I agreed. Setting aside the documentary for a year, I quickly made the film and named it after the award-winning novel, *Matra Manisha*. The documentary, on the other hand, was taken up a year later and completed in due course, and a shorter version was made from the long film by Films Division, the official film wing.

Now, to *Matira Manisha* (subtitled, 'Two Brothers'). A film capturing the rural scene in Orissa's inadequate accent on its socio-economic factors. A study in depth, in the eyes of a so-called outsider, me. The year was 1966, the locale was an interior village in an agricultural belt, the story dating back to the late '30s; and it all happened in a traditional joint family. After the death of the old patriarch, the father, the story revolved around two brothers and the rest, the elder brother having three children- two girls and a boy, and the younger with none till then. The void created by the death of the father had to be filled, and it was the elder son who became the patriarch, the head of the family - a good brother, a good husband, a good father. So far so good. But when I scanned the logic of events in the story, I discovered the rule of the patriarch hidden beneath the facade of a

happy home." (*Always Being Born: Mrinal Sen, A Memoir: Stellar Publishers Pvt Ltd., 2004*)



“*Matira Manisha*” Film

Matira Manisha (1966) contrasts traditional and modern values as exemplified by the different attitudes of the two brothers towards their inherited family land. The plot explores human relationships using a wide range of themes, including Gandhian and Marxist ideologies, postwar social conditions, agrarian culture, rustic life, and traditional family values.

The novel narrates the story of two brothers Baraju and Chhakadi — the former industrious and very much the archetypal elder brother, the latter more of a wanderer who does not want to work in the fields.

Egged on by his wife Netramani, Chhakadi demands a division of property only to have the elder brother relinquish his claims and hand it all to his younger brother. There is no doubt in the novel that Chhakadi and Netramani are the culprits breaking up the good old joint family. But in the hands of Sen, these characters get a new perspective

Sen's sympathies lie with them, and he stands by Netramani's desire to carve out an independent life and make her own choices. As for Chhakadi, Sen molds the character almost as his alter ego and makes him the vessel for the individual's rebellion against the establishment. In quintessential Sen manner, the ending does not spell out whether the two brothers reconcile. As he said, 'It does not matter to me, nor should it to anybody, whether the brothers reunite... I leave the two adults to themselves and move the camera away.' That he had dared to 'tamper' with the text of a classic earned him brickbats from numerous quarters, including the author who was upset with Sen. This would be a leitmotif in his adaptations – for him the original story was nothing more than a peg on which he hung his structure, driven by his sensibilities.

The battle dance at the beginning of the movie, for example, speaks in two different languages. On the one hand, the indigenous dance form highlights the courage and fighting spirit of the Odia paik-soldier, historically celebrated in Odisha's literary culture. On closer scrutiny, however, the dance appears mechanical, and the dancers dressed as soldiers seem to engage in a mechanical ritual that suggests continuity but is devoid of meaning and content. Spectators—men, women, and children—watching the dance appear frozen, devoid of

feeling. As Chhakadi leaves the fair, the image of a giant wheel moves in the backdrop and seems to dig into the train line. Chhakadi runs after the train and screams to the train that is neither seen nor heard. The train was once used as a symbol of colonial power and marked the rise of machine tools, exposing people to a non-agrarian economy. The train was also used extensively by the colonized subject to travel in pursuit of jobs and dreams, a subject that has been the staple of movies in India.

In this film, Baraju becomes the authority of the family in the absence of the older patriarch. He is determined to keep the family united in keeping with the promise he had made to his dying father and to maintain the family's reputation in the village. Chakadi, the younger brother is a fun-loving, carefree person. He has a poster of a woman in his room and always watches it with a smile on his face; the poster woman is the object of his fantasy. After he gets married, his wife posing next to the poster brings satisfaction to Chakadi's face. The focus of the camera shifts between the new bride and the poster woman. When Chakadi gets anklets for her wife, he tells her not to show others.

The camera focuses on the bare feet of the elder sister-in-law and then on the feet of the younger sister-in-law indicating the gaps—both material and temperamental—between the two. It is clear that Chakadi and his wife represent alien, selfish, and Western values—in terms of their sexuality, desires, and disregard for the norms of the joint family

Modes of modern transport such as the aeroplane or the train which are symbolic of modernity and technology recur throughout the film. Chakadi is the son of a peasant but

nurses the aspiration to go to the city and enjoy life. As he dreams, a train crosses the landscape at great speed foreboding a threat to the order of the village. The scene is reminiscent of the classic train scene from Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali* (1955). The flying airplanes over the village sky serve as a sign of change and arrival of the modernity which could pose a threat to rural relationships.



Here, it was a quiet humanist at work, strong without being strident in his resolve to try and understand changing times and evolving creatures, refusing to sit in judgment or come up with easy, predictable, formulaic solutions. Come to think of it, the subject of the possible withering away of that hallowed institution – the joint family – has rarely been

handled with greater maturity or more sensitivity in the Indian cinema(s).

The movie made more than a quarter century ago is in a style that is part-feature, part-documentary. The narrative underlined the disintegration of a farming family under the pressure of economic and social change combined with shifting personal needs and ambitions. “Withering away of that hallowed institution, the joint family has rarely been handled with greater maturity and sensitivity in the Indian cinemas.”

The tale of two feuding brothers, the elder wanting to stay together and the younger wanting a division of property is the storyline of “*Matira Manisha*”. The elder brother's anguish at this ultimately leads to a denouement where the brothers come to a profound realization.

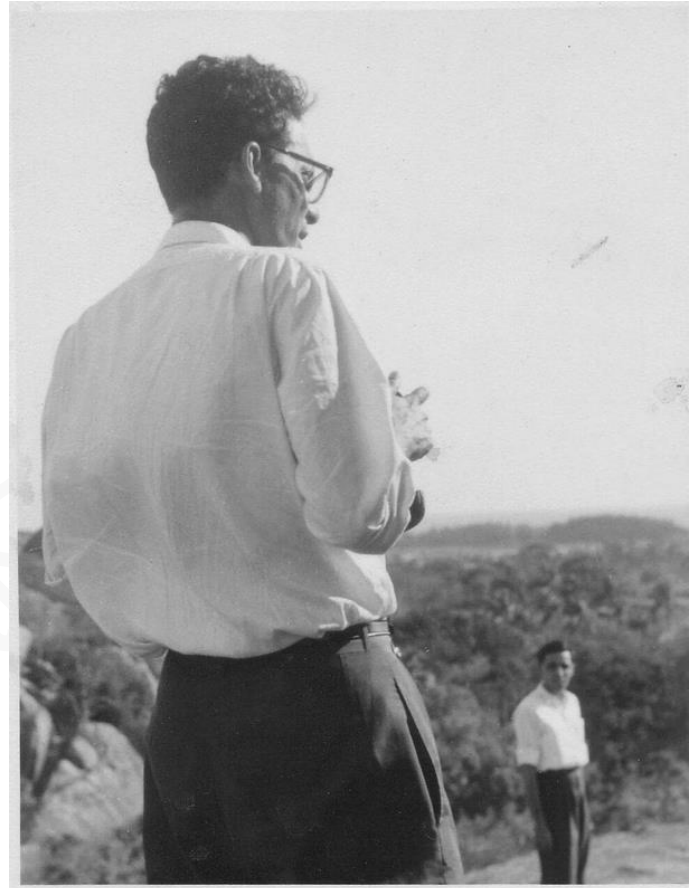
The film evoked a lot of controversies on many grounds, as it didn't stick to the original story. Although the book was published in 1932, the film introduced the Second World War into the script. As the World War progressed, the English assured the vulnerable village folks by the side of River Birupa, that they would be paid due price for their cultivated crop. An agent Hari Mishra makes hay convincing hapless Chakari, a farmer of the grains Chhakadi takes the bait, believes in the conspiracy theory of unscrupulous land-grabbing moneylender Mishra, and takes on his elder brother Baraju. Their father Sham Padhan used to stand for kinship, familial loyalty, and tradition and vehemently opposed division between brothers and partition in families. On his death, both the brothers had sworn never to sell their land. Chakari, a victim of Mishra's plot, and aiming to give the best of

both worlds to his wife Netramani, demands his share in the family land and a partition. Baraju turns violent at this sign of treachery, but subsides the anger within, relents, and leaves every property in favor of Chakari. Chakari is left alone, with a deep sense of regret which overwhelms him.

The film follows the brothers Baraju (Pujari) and Chakkadi (Nanda) from a peasant family in a village. Baraju is the archetypal elder brother of a joint Indian family who believes that the brothers should live together and the family property shouldn't be divided while Chhakadi demands his share of the property. Baraju refuses to divide the property, renounces all his claims by leaving everything to Chakkadi, and leaves the house with his wife and children. The rule of the patriarch, as represented by Baraju, and the manipulations of the local economy by the moneylender become the central concerns of the film. Notably, no conclusion is drawn and no judgment is offered in the film. '*Matira Manisha*' also became Sen's most autobiographical film, for which he drew heavily on his childhood and adolescent memory.

Sen was critiqued for changing the classic text and there was also widespread condemnation for the fertility rite dance and the airplane sequences in the film. Sen said about the ending, "To be frank, it does not matter to me, nor should it matter to anybody, whether the brothers reunite at the end or not...I leave the two adults to themselves and move the camera away from them." The matter reached a stage where parts of the film were reshot to show the ultimate reconciliation of the brothers. Sen said about the issue, "A director has every right to

change the original novel while penn[ing] the script because adoption of a novel to the film is a very difficult task...Our texts reach out to local audiences only when they are modified to make them relevant to the cultural and ideological concerns of the new audiences that were far removed from the writer's vision."



The theme, careful plotting, and realistic portrayal of human crisis in the face of economic misery are artfully dealt with to create a genius called "*Matira Manisha*". Careful and diligent editing makes it exceptional. But what left wanted was commercial success in the Odia film industry. Contrasted with maestro Satyajit Ray's 1955 release of "*Pathar Panchali*" which was a resounding success in Indian cinema history, "*Matira Manisha*" failed to cash in. This virtually compelled it for a second release with a little amendment. This time, the story at the end introduces the homecoming of

Baraju with family. This fortunately for the industry, met with success.

Stylistically, the film oscillated between documentary and fiction, while keeping the narrative intact. The emotion: the attachment to the land. Objectivity: the need of the hour. The effect: repentance. Sarat Pujari as the elder brother of Baraju has done justice to the role, almost reminiscent of Balraj Sahni's role in "*Do Beegha Zameen*". Pujari's expressions and acting abilities are a tribute to cinematic performances. Theatre artists Bhanumati as Harabou, Sujata as Netramani, and Prasant Nanda as Chhakadi have also been remarkable in their presence

"*Matira Manisha*" started with a preconceived notion of surrealism and liberation of the unconscious. The whole armory of sophisticated treatments was employed, as a result of which it turned somewhat mechanistic. Besides, the film contained all the pet nostrums of Mrinal Sen. For instance, he can always call on a train or a village fair to represent solitude and communication. "*Matira Manisha*" at times was so ridden with gimmicks that often it verged on affectation. Yet Its vastly cinematic idiom had never been made before in Odia and hence it secured Odia film recognition of maturity.

First Political film of Mrinal Sen

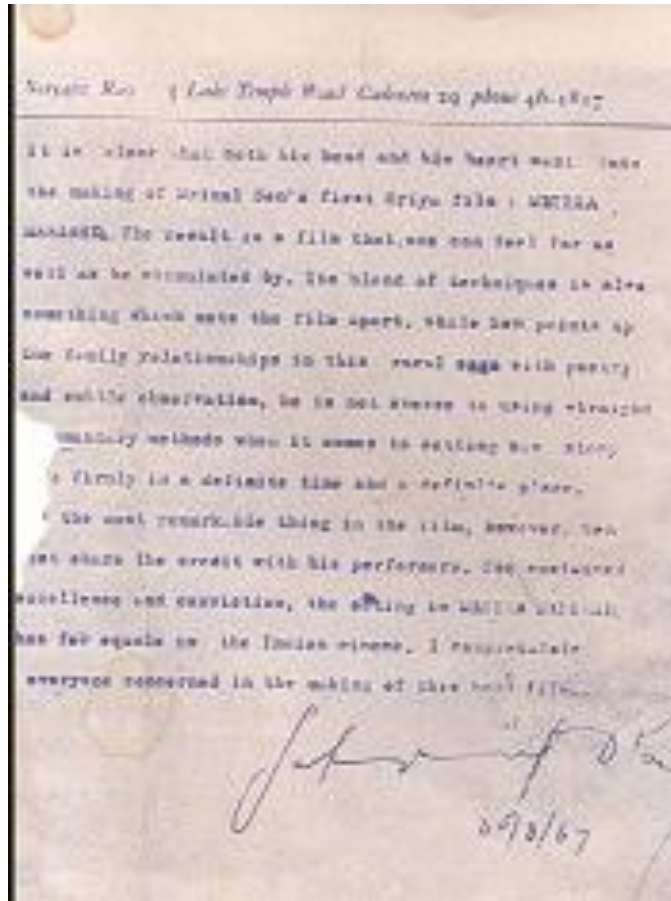
What eminent director Nirad Mahapatra (1947-2015) said about *Matira Manisha* about its place in the history of Odia cinema, opens up opportunities for the present-day cineaste to assess the extent of injustice done to it for many years after its making. Speaking in the documentary, *For Nirad, With Quietude* (2016), by Joshy Joseph, the late

director observed: "I do consider that Mrinal Babu's *Matira Manisha* gave Odia cinema a facelift. I mean it's a milestone in Odia cinema... But *Matira Manisha* was not liked in Odisha for a very different reason. I would say that *Matira Manisha* was his first political film in the sense that if you see the film vis-à-vis the novel where the entire sympathy of the writer was with the elder brother... the writer is trying to catch hold of the sentiments, of the traditions of the feudal system where the elder brother being the eldest in the family, gets the maximum property and has a say in everything... Mrinal Babu turned the story around, saying the younger brother also has a right, he has the right to his life, he has the right to do what he wants to do... if he wants to go to Calcutta and be an industrial laborer, so be it; he should be free to do it and he should have the right. So, that is why the Odisha people didn't like it, they refused to accept the deviation from the original novel. But if you look at it as a cinematic work, I think it is one of the most brilliant works he has done. I still consider *Matira Manisha* to be one of Mrinal Babu's best, finest films."

Satyajit Roy on 'MATIRA MANISHA' (Letter attached)

It is clear that both his head and heart went into the making of Mrinal Sen's first Oriya film "*Matira Manisha*". The result is a film that one can feel for as well as be stimulated by its blend of techniques is also something that sets the film apart, while Sen points up the family relationship in this rural saga with poetry and subtle observation, he is not averse to using straight documentary methods when it comes to setting his story firmly in a definite time and a definite place. It is the

most remarkable thing in the film, however Sen must share the credit with his performers. For sustained excellence and conviction, the acting in *Matira Manisha* has few equals in Indian cinema. I congratulate everyone concerned in the making of this bold film.



Prashant Nanda

Prashant Nanda who had essayed the role of Chhakadi in *Matira Manisha* said “I always wanted to work in socially relevant films and I got an opportunity to do so by God’s grace. In 1966 I acted as the main lead in Mrinal Sen’s *Matira Manisha*. That gave me the experience to understand how socially committed films are made. *Matira Manisha* was an eye opener. I tried to evaluate myself as an artiste and find out whether I was a puppet or my own master. Working with Mrinal Sen gave me the impetus to become a director. It is like a child who has all the respect for his parents but wants to be

recognized as an individual in his own right.”
(*Interview on Doordarshan*)

MRINAL SEN’S ODISHA AND ‘M’ CONNECTION

After *Matira Manisha* Ten years later he made another film titled *Mrigaya* in Hindi based on the Odia short story ‘Shikar’ by Bhagwati Charan Panigrahi who was the brother of *Matira Manisha* writer Kalandi Charan Panigrahi.

Mrigayaa (The Royal Hunt) was Sen’s first film made in color and deploys the lessons of his experiments with complex and stylistically diverse cinematic idioms. It also marked the debut of the lead actors Mithun Chakraborty and Mamata Shankar. ‘Mrigayaa’, with the reigning motif of hunting, revolves around the lives of tribals in a village in the 1930s, juxtaposed with the events of the Santhal rebellion of 1855-56.

Have you marked that there are far too many ‘M’s here? Let me introduce another ‘M’- Manmohan Mahapatra, who was indirectly responsible for these, Manmohan Mahapatra, himself a National award-winning filmmaker was close to Mrinal Sen. He suggested making a film based on the story Shikar. A believer in numerology he suggested changing the title to *Mrigaya*. It was Manmohan Mahapatra, who suggested Gouranga Chakravorty, his classmate at FTII change his name to ‘Mithun’. The heroine of the film was Mamata Shankar. All four ‘M’s made the film one of the most memorable films in this genre. The film received the National Award for Best Feature Film in 1976 and Chakraborty was awarded the National Award for Best Actor. It is also to be noted that Mrinal Sen first directed Odia film

Matira Manisha, which was also started with the alphabet M Mrinal Sen's energy and enthusiasm were reflected in the films that he made, not only for their variety of subjects but also the variety of languages — Bengali, Oriya, Telugu, and Hindi. They are an indication of his own restless, inquiring, and always youthful spirit. The quality changes from film to film — very reflective of his being! But many were outstanding and will leave a mark on the history of Indian cinema.



He made *Matira Manisha* (Two Brothers) in Odia because, he said, “it is challenging to work in a milieu and a language not your own; it forces you to extend yourself”. And extend himself he did, to make films in different languages and widely differing styles while *Matira Manisha*'s significant role was to give a boost to filmmaking in Odisha.

The film contrasts traditional and modern values as exemplified by the divergent attitudes of the two brothers to their

inherited land. Such divergence in attitudes is intensified during war years when native exploiters and controllers of the agrarian economy appear on the scene. Interestingly, no conclusion is drawn and no judgment is offered in the film. The spectator is asked to watch and, in the process, to get involved, to question.

Mrinal stayed ahead of his contemporaries by unique handling of *avant-garde* subjects. He'd digested concepts like existentialism, surrealism, and Marxism. He'd blend in the nuances of German expressionism, French Nouvelle Vague, and Italian neorealism. He had no use for a linear unfolding. He'd give chronology a go-by as he transgressed barriers of time and space, mixed past and present, and shuttled back and forth in a stream-of-consciousness manner, to recreate the past for the present. Much like his scripts, real men and women became protagonists in fictitious storylines even as fantasy melted into reality. Stylised shots, freeze frames, montage-intercuts-fragmented narratives became his autograph. If this led many to deride him as ‘poor man's Godard’, it also ended up creating conventions. The open ending, for one. Mrinal wouldn't provide a finite conclusion like his peers, instead, he'd leave the door ajar for the viewer to walk into the plot and come to his conclusions as shown in *Matira Manisha*

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