Article

Riddhadev Bandyopadhyay

Social Realism and Aesthetic Formalism in Mrinal Sen's *Calcutta 71*

Abstract

In the landscape of Indian Cinema, there has historically been a stark divide, characterised by the excesses of melodrama or the austerity of realism. This binary was disrupted during the late 1960s with the advent of the Indian New Wave, influenced by movements like the French New Wave or Third Cinema. Here, a group of Indian filmmakers emerged with their unique vision of cinema, contrary to the predominant style and aesthetic sensibilities, adopting a different formalistic approach and playfulness with film form. Mrinal Sen became a central figure of this Indian New Wave, with *Bhuvan Shome* (1969) considered one of the frontrunners that initiated this era. This paper will move forward in time to explore the second film of Mrinal Sen's Calcutta Trilogy, *Calcutta 71* (1972), to examine how Sen showcases social realism with respect to aesthetic formalism. The paper will argue how Sen introduces a new aesthetic sensibility contrary to the prevailing aesthetic regime for depicting the social reality of that time. As an anthology film, *Calcutta 71* (1972) covers a range of themes from high unemployment, economic and cultural divides, exploitation of the working class, to other social evils that plagued Bengal during that era. The paper will discuss both the formal and content aspects, examining social realism from that perspective and how Sen's meticulous

attention to form and composition offers a unique experience of Calcutta, capturing the essence of the turmoil faced during that time. This paper will shed light on Sen's experimentation with the film form, from the shift of realism into a more surrealist or avant-garde space, both visually and aurally, to the formal attempt of breaking the fourth wall, addressing the viewers directly, erasing the illusory quality of cinema, and moving towards a more participatory space, positioning *Calcutta 71* (1972) as a significant intervention in politically engaged Indian cinema.

Keywords: Mrinal Sen; Indian New Wave; Social Realism; Aesthetic Formalism; Political Cinema; Calcutta Trilogy

Introduction

Social realism can be viewed as a movement emerging in various forms of artistic works such as literature, art, and film, with the aim of depicting the everyday lives of ordinary people or the working class. There is a high amount of focus being given to various social issues, struggles, and injustices. It emphasises providing a truthful representation of reality, particularly highlighting the plight of the underprivileged, deprived marginalised sections of society, such as those affected by poverty, class disparity, labour exploitation, and political oppression (Hayward, 2013). Although it may sound similar to realism, it differs on various grounds, as realism, as a broader artistic movement, seeks to represent reality faithfully but may not necessarily shed light explicitly on social issues or the struggles of common people or the working class. The aim of realism is that of accuracy and truthfulness in its portrayal of everyday life. Social realism, on the other hand, specifically emphasises social and political commentary, often advocating for social change and reform (Hayward, 2013). Aesthetic formalism can be looked at as an approach to art and literature that focuses on the formal qualities of a work, be it the structure, style, or aesthetic elements, over its narrative content or underlying meaning. (Greenberg, 1988). This paper argues that *Calcutta 71* (1972) represents a decisive moment in which social realism is reconfigured through radical aesthetic formalism in Indian political cinema, marking a significant shift in the cinematic articulation of socio-political critique in the works of Mrinal Sen.

Introduction to Mrinal Sen's Cinema

The 1960s have always remained one of the most exciting periods if viewed through the lens of the art of filmmaking. This is due to the emergence of the French New Wave which explicitly came out with the use of the various apparatus of filmmaking, and giving cinema a new language altogether. With this emergence, its ripples can be seen all over the globe. The French New Wave remained quite an urban movement, especially in an economically privileged country like France. Hence, further credit should also be lent to the Latin American countries for the upsurge of a new style of cinema that can fall under the umbrella of Third Cinema. (Bordwell et al., 2010) Here, Indian cinema can draw parallels as both places faced similar problems such as the ill effects of prolonged colonisation. So, with these movements creating space for itself

in the global sphere of Cinema, its impact was evident and could also be seen in the landscape of Indian Cinema. This led to the uprising of the Indian New Wave of filmmakers who tried to do something different with the film medium by experimenting with the film form in their own unique way, which was not previously seen in the Indian context of filmmaking. As previously, if looked at from a broader perspective, one can see that the Indian cinema space was majorly dominated by films that can be characterised either with the excess of melodrama or the austerity of realism. Here, these Indian New Wave filmmakers marked a remarkable shift by finding a middle ground between these binaries and going for a new approach to filmmaking and the use of the film form. Here, Mrinal Sen became one the key figures with his 1969 film, *Bhuvan Shome* which is often considered to be one of the films that started this Indian New Wave. Interestingly, Sen also became one of those filmmakers who completely changed their style, as he previously made films following the predominant style and form of the aesthetic conventions of the times. Breaking away from various norms and the rigidity of filmmaking, he began experimenting with the form itself. (Roy, 2023) This will be reflected in his works starting from *Bhuvan Shome* (1969), and leading to his depiction and vision of Kolkata in his quintessential *Calcutta Trilogy* – *Interview* (1971), *Calcutta 71* (1972) & *Padatik* (1973). Here Sen has used the style and the form while reflecting upon the socio-political reality of the times making it stand out among the multitude of films from the cinematic history of India.

In the 1950s Bengali cinematic space, the emergence of a different kind of cinema, along with the predominant mainstream form of melodrama came up. These films had their roots in realism, influenced mainly by the Italian Neo-realist films of filmmakers such as Vittorio De Sica or Roberto Rossellini. This was also reflected in Mrinal Sen's previous films, which were more rooted in the neo-realist approach of filmmaking. Then too, Mrinal Sen consistently demonstrated a keen eye for depicting various societal aspects through his lens of social realism. This can be seen in films such as *Neel Akasher Neechey* (1959), which revolved around an immigrant Chinese hawker, *Baishey Shravana* (1960), taking place in the 1930s Bengal and depicting societal issues such as poverty, famine, or *Akash Kusum* (1965), taking place in a middle-class milieu. So even in his earlier works, which he later denounced, there was this sharp focus given on the working class and its interaction in this capitalist or dog-eat-dog society. These films dealt with themes of greed, corruption, ambition, and exploitation that are facets of a capitalistic society. However, with *Bhuvan Shome* (1969), Mrinal Sen's films underwent a significant formal. Furthermore, the actual on-ground scenario of Bengal itself was going through major turmoil due to the various political clashes upsurging due to the rising facets of exploitation and inequality. He began to utilise the tool of filmmaking not only as a mere storytelling device but also as a political tool, in order to carry forward these themes of social reality. Thus, it gave rise to a rather radical and more experimental way, with influences ranging from the French New Wave, Marxist dialectics, and also the Epic Theatre or

Dialectical Theatre of Bertolt Brecht. This shift aimed to make the viewers an active part of the film rather than a mere passive observer. At the same time, this shift did not affect his commitment to the roots of depicting the socio-political reality of the times hence playing a vital role in the depiction of social realism throughout his filmography. (Bhattacharya, 2014; Gopalan, 2009; Greenberg, 1988; Gupta, 1976; Rathore, 2023; Roy, 2023).

Anthology Structure and the City as Social Text

In comparison to the other two films of the *Calcutta Trilogy*, Mrinal Sen's *Calcutta 71* (1972) takes a different route and chronicles Bengal through the lens of a collection of stories told in an anthological format and reflecting upon the times and life in Bengal starting from 1933 and ending at 1971 and through this reflects upon the various socio-political themes that even not only exist today but are of utmost relevance.

Although the city of Calcutta remained the same, the portrayal through the cinematic medium finds a new voice in Mrinal Sen's *Calcutta 71* (1972), which depicts the city through his vision of filmmaking and the aesthetical approach taken to do so. The film can be divided into five segments. Before the prologue, there is a montage that gives out an essence of Kolkata, bringing out the contrasting landscape of the divided world living among the cityscape. Sen uses various shots, along with still photographs, to create a montage that contrasts imageries from the luxurious building of the elites to the dilapidated shanties of the deprived, presenting a mosaic of social realities, giving an idea of the city's complex socio-economic dynamics and the huge disparity within the city. This montage leads to the Prologue, which is a continuation of the first film of Sen's *Calcutta Trilogy*, *Interview* (1971), and follows the character of Ranjit Mallick, portraying the aftermath of Interview and acting as a bridge between the films. Through this segment, the social reality of the high state of unemployment among the youth is brought to the fore as to how it has led to one such youth being victimised and brought into the vicinity of conviction in the court of law. Here the social realism aspect is given a very different light with respect to how Sen uses the mise-en-scene, to depict a generally seen courtroom drama. The court itself looks very artificial and has a surrealist approach to it, further heightened by the constant derailment to a different space and time altogether. Here, the shift even takes place in a much more dreamlike situation, which is laced with irony and satire as it depicts a situation where all the ruling capitalist are seen fighting for their rights. This is depicted in a very sarcastic manner, and Sen not only experiments with the form from a visual aspect but also with how he uses sound.

The sound part becomes more prominent in the segment dealing with the intellectual elite and the cultural divide and alienation it faces from the actual real-life

hardships. It showcases how these educated elites use the tools of knowledge or the so-called attainment of a larger repository of information and convert it into a kind of social ladder, that gives one a sense of respectability among these peer groups itself. This segment uses the then-popular rock and roll music and intercuts between this and a party of the intellectual elites. The juxtaposition of intellectual introspection with the harsh realities of urban life serves to highlight the stark cultural and economic divides that define Calcutta society. Formally, Sen cuts rapidly between shots of the party and the socio-economic reality of the times, using both texts and visuals. This montage constantly acts out its narrative even without the use of any textual dialogue. The visuals and sounds become enough of a tool to reflect upon the themes and make the viewers much more observant and emotive not on an emotional but on a thought-provoking level.

Class, Gender, and Exploitation: Narratives of Marginalisation

In comparison, the first vignette of the film depicts the reality of the conditions of a huge section of society living in the slums, deprived of the very basic means of life. For this segment, the form takes a lesser radical approach rather, Sen uses a much more traditional approach reminiscent of Italian neo- realist films or films influenced by them. Through the use of mise-en-scene, Sen depicts the cramped living conditions of the slum, lacking basic amenities, even without a proper roof to shield one from the rain. Here, Sen often uses very tight close-ups of the characters, emphasizing the emotions not only through naturalistic performances but also through sharp editing, heightening the emotion and evoking a sense of desperation. Through this Sen comments on the lives of the urban poor who are just left to live amongst the sidelines of the city, further depicting the unfortunate existence and the constant widening gap between the privileged and underprivileged.

1943 marks a very important year from a global perspective due to World War II, but it is even more relevant in Bengal's history as the state and its people were forcefully pushed to face the adversity of a man-made famine, killing millions of people. The second segment of the film takes place in this time period and reflects upon women and the conditions they were made to face due to the constant deprivation. It represents a middle-class household through the lens of its women. Here, the household comprises a mother and her two daughters, who, due to the external circumstances, are forced into a life of prostitution. Mrinal Sen provides an empathetic lens and sheds light on the experiences of marginalised women and the systematic exploitation faced by them. It also offers a critique of the patriarchal norm and how sex worker and their work is viewed by the so-called respectable groups of society. It deals with the social hypocrisies that turn a blind eye to all these hardships and goes a step ahead to judge people who are forced into prostitution, which is eventually a creation of this social exploitation.

The third segment focuses on how a rural boy, in order to sustain his family, left education and now smuggles rice to the city. This vignette of the film depicts how teenagers are forced to leave their education and are forced to take a life of crime, where

crime itself is a creation by the bourgeoise through the exploiting structure of the society, running throughout the ages. Here, the boys embark on a train to take the rice to the city; the train showcases a plethora of characters reflective of the various types of people living in the society. Here, Sen dwells upon the attitude of these so-called 'bhodroloks' and how they treat these children. As the boys start making fun of one of the hotshots in the train compartment, they are trashed in revenge by the rich hotshot, we see the various reactions of the fellow passengers, whose silence and cheerleading nature spoke volumes about their attitudes. But an act of revolt is shown by Mrinal Sen through his film, when, at the end, the boy pushes the man off the train, which somewhat acts like a cathartic revenge, but this minute revolt is not enough from the overall aspect as they are once again back to the life of the societal exploitation. The protagonist's act of pushing the exploitative figure off the train symbolises a fleeting moment of defiance against entrenched power dynamics. However, the subsequent return to a life of societal exploitation highlights the resilience of oppressive forces and the limitations of individual resistance within larger systemic frameworks.

Formal Disruptions: Sound, Editing, and Spectatorial Address

Although from the story aspect, these are issues that have also been shown in other films, and the social realism that has been brought out previously has seen such portrayals, the main difference or the uniqueness lies in its approach to how the film form has been used by Mrinal Sen in *Calcutta 71* (1972). Mrinal Sen chose a rather unique approach to filmmaking that produced certain drifts from the aesthetic regime of that time. His films can't be merely bracketed both in the prism of realism which can be seen all over the globe in various types of cinemas, or the depiction of Calcutta prior to the 1970s, and also the excess of the mainstream melodrama, seen popular Indian cinema. Sen frees his film form from the confines of realism but it would be simplistic to confine his films in that zone. Rather iteration of realism, which as a global form, finds itself cropping up in Sen's *Calcutta 71* (1972). The film filters social reality through the prism of cinema but contradicts or clashes the narrative with the formal aspects, making the film have a formally distinct and striking approach. The film sees a constant back- and-forth of ideas and concepts that constantly challenge the viewers to be more participatory in nature and the meanings coming up due to this clashing of ideas. This was carried out by Sen's experimentation with the film form, from the editing, sound design, or staging, to the other aspects of mise-en-scene managing the film to constantly make its presence scream out. Rather than having a smooth flow of storytelling in which one can lose oneself, the film through its use of various experimental approaches such as the rapid cutting, using still real-life photographs, breaking the fourth wall and directly addressing the audience, intercutting visuals with texts, contrasting visuals and an unique soundscape, the film does not let one settle, rather constantly challenging the viewers to actively take part in the process and take action, rather than just enjoying the film. Between every segment, Sen predominantly uses the technique of a

voiceover of the characters and repeating the texts *'Poverty, Misery and Deaths…'*, talking about the history of violence, deprivation, and exploitation. Sen also cuts to a different space or time without any use of the traditional techniques such as a dissolve, rather it is a sharp cut, sometimes even going into a very surrealist space, both to depict the backstories of various characters and also to reflect upon a satire or irony of the society.

Furthermore, the climactic moments of *Calcutta 71* (1972) offer a nuanced perspective that intertwines social realism with aesthetic formalism, reflecting Mrinal Sen's unique approach to filmmaking. From a social realist standpoint, the ending encapsulates the harsh realities of societal exploitation and the perpetual struggle faced by marginalised individuals, and it chooses to fight back by keeping the then Naxal movement in the backdrop and represents how the repressive state apparatus was being deployed and used against this dissent. It underscores the cyclical nature of oppression, where despite moments of rebellion or catharsis, the underlying structures of exploitation remain largely unchanged. Yet, Sen chooses to end the film with the text translating to *'hope'*, acting out as a glimmer of the historical fight and struggles of the working class and the marginalised that a day will come when the power dynamics will shift from the bourgeoisie to the proletariat.

On the other hand, the ending also showcases Sen's aesthetic formalism, characterised by his innovative use of film form to challenge conventional narrative structures. Through techniques such as rapid cutting, surreal imagery, and unconventional sound design, Sen plays with the traditional storytelling norms and invites viewers to engage critically with the film's themes and underlying messages. From the sharp cuts to the surreal elements, Sen disrupts the linearity of the storytelling, reflecting upon the fragmented nature of social reality and inviting viewers to question established norms and power structures. Breaking the traditional structure of filmmaking is an act of rebellion and something that shakes up the predominant power structure. Overall, the ending of *Calcutta 71* (1972) offers a complex synthesis of social realism and aesthetic formalism, illustrating Sen's ability to merge socio-political critique with cinematic experimentation. It serves as a poignant commentary on the enduring struggles of marginalised communities while challenging viewers to rethink their perceptions of both society and cinema.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Mrinal Sen's *Calcutta 71* (1972) holds a mirror to the society, reflecting not only upon the time it was made but also an account of the history of exploitation that the human society has inflicted on the larger section of its populace. Through a social realist lens, Sen depicts various spheres of society and how it has faced years of deprivation, humiliation, and exploitation, from the working class to the women, to those

who are forced to opt for illegal means to sustain the basic necessities of life, and also the hypocritical elites who are busy living inside a vacuum of their own creation. Sen not only challenges the norms of society from a narrative approach but also breaks down the traditional style of form, predominant in the case of filmmaking. Formally, the film depicted Bengal in a very different way, which switches rapidly between time and space, moving images to still photographs and also merging film footage with real-life ones, blurring the line between the film and reality. *Calcutta 71* (1972) further stands as a testament to the transformative power of cinema, seamlessly blending social realism with aesthetic formalism, and not shying away from providing a thought-provoking commentary on the socio-political landscape of Bengal and inviting the viewers to critically engage with the film. In essence, *Calcutta 71* (1972) transcends the boundaries of traditional cinema and offers a profound commentary on the human condition and the enduring struggles of marginalised communities, exposing the societal hypocrisies and challenging one to reevaluate their perceptions of both society and cinema, inviting them to become active participants in the process of social change. While looking at the film from the prism of present times, amidst the rising inequality, exploitation, greed, poverty, hunger, and discrimination, not only in Bengal but globally as a whole, the relevance of Sen's work on *Calcutta 71* (1972), seems to be felt even more than ever.

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Riddhadev Bandyopadhyay holds an M.Sc. in Media Science and is UGC NET qualified in Journalism and Mass Communication.