

Article
Siladitya Sen

The First Political Filmmaker in Indian Cinema



Mrinal Sen

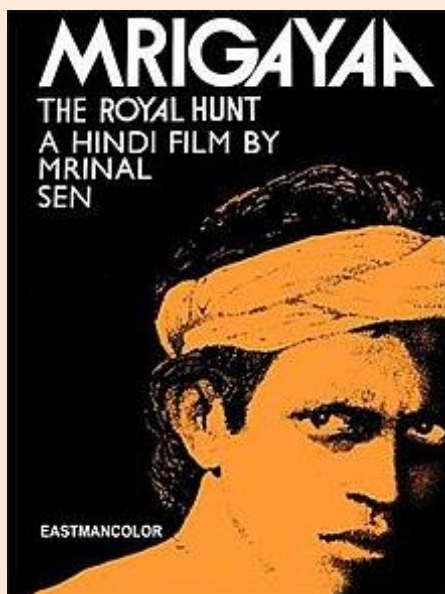
Mrinal Sen has always said, “We are destined to ride on crises. We mustn’t fear them.” Hence, from *Baishe Sraban* (1960) onwards, almost all his films have portrayed the tumultuous Kolkata of the mid or late ‘60s or the ‘70s and its social and political unrest. In black- n’-white movies such as *Akashkusum* (1965), *Interview* (1971), *Kolkata 71* (1972), *Padatik* (1973) and *Chorus* (1974), he had woven stories of inane middle-class dreams and the shattering thereof. Because, conflict-ridden, rough, self-contradictory, and ungainly lives of the Bengali middle class used to find place in his movies, a large proportion of viewers felt uncomfortable.

These films also captured the strengths and weaknesses of the left movement from the time of Naxalite insurgency to the Emergency period. They captured impossible poverty and terrible exploitation.

State terror in the guise of democracy, and the role of administration and the enforcers and custodians of law all came up for questioning in almost all his films of this period. In that sense, Mrinal Sen is the first political filmmaker in Indian cinema.

Behind this political consciousness was his early life in Faridpur in the then East Bengal, now Bangladesh. Father was a lawyer who was close to the extremist group in the Indian National Congress, led by Bepin Chandra Pal. In 1923, the year in which Mrinal Sen was born, his father spoke at the ryots' conference, where he respectfully referred to the Bolshevik Revolution. He fought the legal battle for revolutionaries sentenced to death. His mother, in her turn, sung in the inaugural sessions of nationalist gatherings and was acquainted with Bepin Chandra Pal and Subhas Chandra Bose. Mrinal Sen grew up in this atmosphere.

Once, when touring cinema came to Faridpur, the little Mrinal, less than ten, rocked with laughter as he watched Chaplin's *The Kid* (1921). Once this initiation was over, Chaplin was to remain with him all through his life. Later, in the 1940s, when he was in Kolkata for his studies and was also finding a little time for politics, the country was going through traumas and upheavals—famine, naval revolt, Azad Hind week, P&T strike, workers strikes, partition, riots, bloodshed. Sen writes, “The famine of 1943, that was right in front of



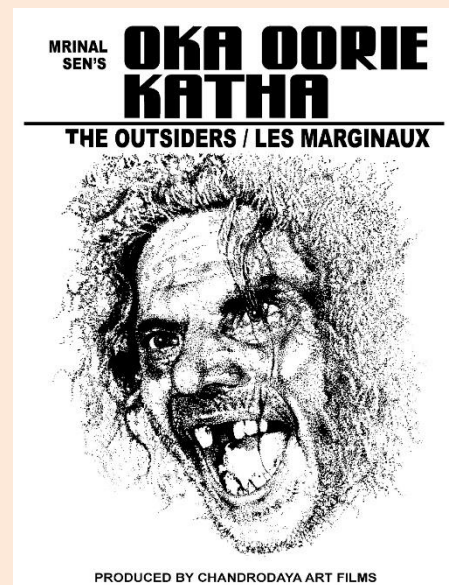
us. The city did not belong to the farmers; yet it was their corpses that lay on the streets. What unfeeling callousness on the city roads! Again, one was compelled to remember Chaplin—cruel times and unfeeling societies concealed in the folds of comedy.”

In Kolkata's Imperial Library, now the National Library, he read, amidst other books, Rudolf Arnheim's *Film* and Vladimir Nilsen's *Cinema as a Graphic Art*. Before these readings he had not

realized how powerful a medium the cinema was! He read through Theodore Huff's *Charlie Chaplin* almost in one go.

Before entering the world of cinema, the young Mrinal Sen's usual haunt was Hembabu's tea shop near Kalighat—the *Paradise Café*. There, the *adda* with friends touched on so many things, including cinema...Eisenstein, Orson Welles, Rosalini, De Sica, Neo Realism and Chaplin.

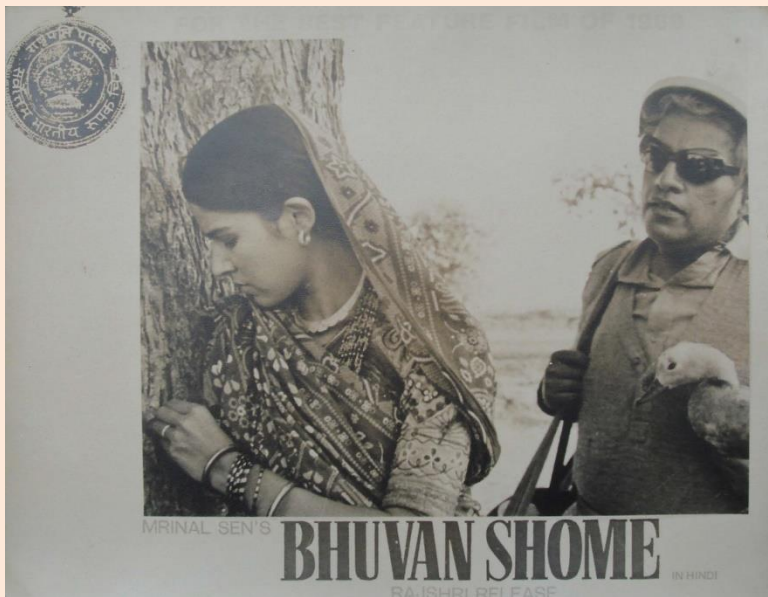
In his various films, Mrinal Sen has reconstructed memories. He did not become a 'traditionalist' perhaps because he did not want to tell tales in the usual manner. It is not for mere aesthetic experimentation, but to talk about new ideas and new subjects, that he has continued to rework forms and techniques. Besides, it is such compulsions that have repeatedly transformed the grammar of art forms; why then should the same not be true in the case of cinema; why would cinema not have its own dynamics of development—all his life Mrinal Sen has sought the answer to this question through his films.



From the end of 1970s, or perhaps from the early '80s, up to the early years of the twenty first century, the kind of cinema that Sen got busy with not only rendered naked middle class Bengali life, but also middle class Indian life. No defence seemed possible any longer—in almost all his films he seemed to drag the characters in and make them stand before the mirror. *Oka Uri Kathhaa* (1977), *Ekdin Pratidin* (1979), *Akaler Sandhane* (1980), *Kharij* (1982), *Khandahar* (1983), *Genesis* (1986), *Mahaprithibi* (1991), *Antareen* (1993), *Amar Bhuban* (2002)—in films such as these he started subjecting everyone, from the middle class to marginal persons from the lower strata, even himself, to critical questioning. How far are art workers being able to be true to reality, or at least trying, or perhaps, while struggling up the staircase of reality, sliding down into the maze of

wishful thinking—these are the questions to which Sen seemed to seek answers in his films, relentlessly!

Nor have been there any less discussion or debate about Mrinal Babu's constant reworking of form in his films. However, this keen re-examination of form was never a mere game for Mrinal Babu. The need to dissect the misguided milieu, the need to portray a penetrating anatomization of persons and society, has driven him to resort to his



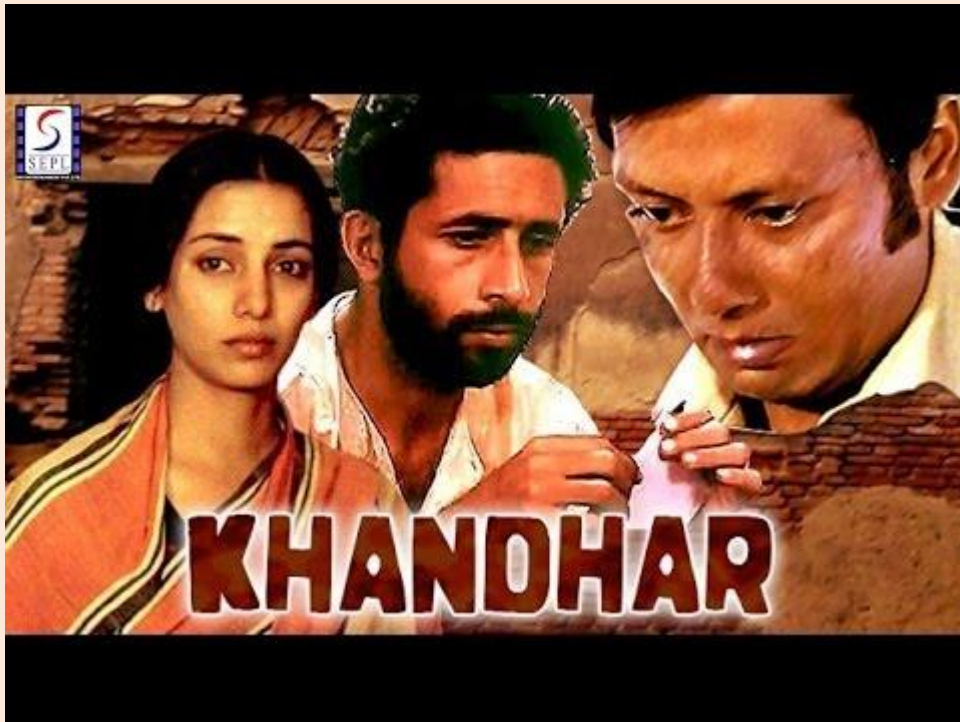
explorations of form. This began decisively in 1969, with *Bhuvan Shome* (1969).

Bhuvan Shome was not only Mrinal Sen's first Hindi film. It was also a “new wave” in Hindi cinema. The film overturned the conceiving and making of films in the world of

Hindi movies. In contrast to linear storytelling, it presented an extraordinary example of allowing each character to manifest as a separate person. Mrinal Babu also demonstrated how a great film could be made on a shoestring budget. It was a new moment in the history of the public producer organization FFC (today's NFDC)—the film inspired in the organization courage to fund a new genre of movies.

In his life in art spanning so many decades, Mrinal Babu has made films in various Indian languages. Whenever talking about his films, he speaks the language of unabashed internationalism. “Why do you make films in so many languages, people ask. I say, I make films on poverty. I will have no problems with going to Africa and making a film in Swahili—so long as I can capture the physical peculiarities, which are forever there on the surface”, he says.

It is in independent India that Mrinal Sen has made so many films—spanning several decades and into the new century. Yet, he was born in an un-free country and has lived his life with and awareness that he



was born burdened with a century and half of colonization. Whenever he felt *out of joint with the world*—that was the moment when the seed of a film germinated in his mind, and, overcoming the contrived commitment to beauty of form, started treading the arduous path to truth.

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