

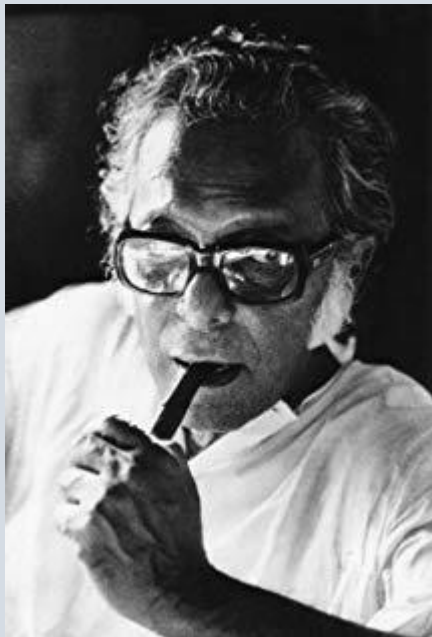
Article

John W Hood

**Of Handkerchiefs, Pipes and Some Memorable Films:
Remembering Mrinal Sen***Mrinal Sen*

Some thirty or so years ago I had just submitted my PhD thesis to the University of Melbourne and resigned from what was then my job. It was May in Melbourne, with winter fast approaching, and I planned to spend the rest of the year in Calcutta (as it still was) but had no idea of what I was going to do there. A Bengali friend had come to dinner, but she was bereft of ideas too; however, later that evening we turned on the TV to watch a documentary by the German filmmaker, Reinhard Hauff, *Ten Days in Calcutta*, on the eminent Bengali director, Mrinal Sen. We were both greatly taken by Hauff's film, and my friend, who then suggested I write a book on the films of Mrinal Sen, convinced immediately.

My doctoral work had been on Bengali historiography, specifically the scholarship of Prof. Niharranjan Ray; however, I did not see the leap from that to film criticism as being especially daunting. I would be working with texts and evidence and trying to argue conclusions; it was the material that would be vastly different and, to me, immensely more interesting. However, acquiring the material would not be at all easy. In those days the luxury of ordering online a DVD of virtually any film I wanted had not yet been imagined. There were, indeed, video-cassettes, but they were hardly a commercial concern, and so I was able to purchase very few films. Luck came in the form of a new friend, (the now late) Somnath Zutshi whom I met at Chitrabani, a film enthusiast who had a substantial collection of video-cassettes he had recorded from TV in Calcutta and in London, including quite a number of films by Mrinal Sen. With all the energy one seemed to have thirty years ago, I got started. A little later I took up working with a computer, and I became greatly perturbed by the spell check relentlessly insisting that I replace 'Mrinal' with 'Urinal'. I would come to see this somewhat discomfiting hurdle as an early warning that technology and I were never to be close friends.



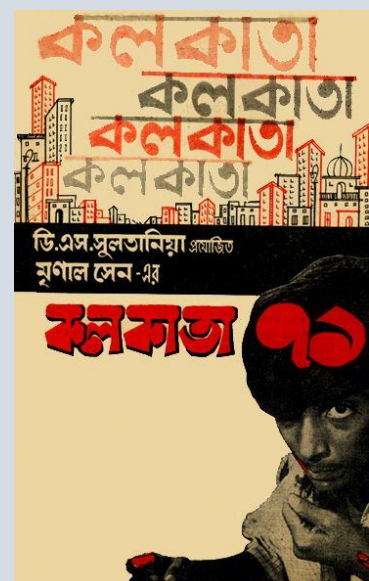
Getting to meet Mrinal Sen himself was not easy. Without mobile phones and SMS, one had to find a landline phone to make simple arrangements. As Mrinal himself was initially fussy about making appointments, I was glad for couple of mutual friends to do the work for me and, after some time, I had an appointment with the Great Man. On my way to the meeting I had trouble finding his house and was a few minutes late. I was shown into a room with a number of people in it; Mrinal gestured to me to sit down and went on talking with the others. I was not introduced to anyone. Then he chided me for being late (the irony of such a rebuke coming from a Bengali was not lost on me.) I started to apologise but he went back to his other conversation. Eventually the others left and Mrinal turned to me and started to point out how disgusted he was when sitting next to an Englishman at dinner and the Englishman took out a handkerchief and blew his nose into it. Having come to meet a filmmaker and talk about a proposed book on films, I was not prepared for Englishmen and mucus and the like, and started to feel somewhat squeamish. Then he repeated the diatribe. Now I had learnt two things about the nature of conversation with Mrinal Sen: he could easily make a mystery out of relevance, and repetition of anecdotes never seemed to bother him. Some time later I learned a third. He told me that his doctor had ordered him to give up cigarettes, and he had replaced them with a

pipe. Of course, lighting a pipe demands a degree of concentrated application, holding the flame over the tobacco in the bowl and drawing on it patiently until it is alight. It was immediately plain to me that Mrinal would never suffer from complications arising from pipe-smoking - he could never stop talking long enough to get it lit.

Over the subsequent months we met a number of times and talked about cinema, politics, his philosophy of life and his outlook on India. Curiously he would talk very little about his own films. There came a time when I felt that Mrinal was as tight with his ideas as a miser with his money. He would let me know only what he wanted me to know. I could respect that, however, for if I were the writer of the book, it was I who must come up with the ideas. While it might have seemed that he was not being helpful (as distinct from being unhelpful), he was actually allowing me freedom to develop my own thinking after feeding me the 'party line' on his films - and that with amazing brevity, albeit repeated many times. Nevertheless, I did find it disconcerting at times to suggest ideas and not have them elicit a response. I once asked him about his first film, *Ratbhor*. To this day I have never met anyone who has seen it. I doubt that even Mrinal ever saw it - or, perhaps he alone saw it and destroyed it before anyone else could see it. But to raise it in conversation was to prompt a vague response that suggested that you might have been talking in another language.

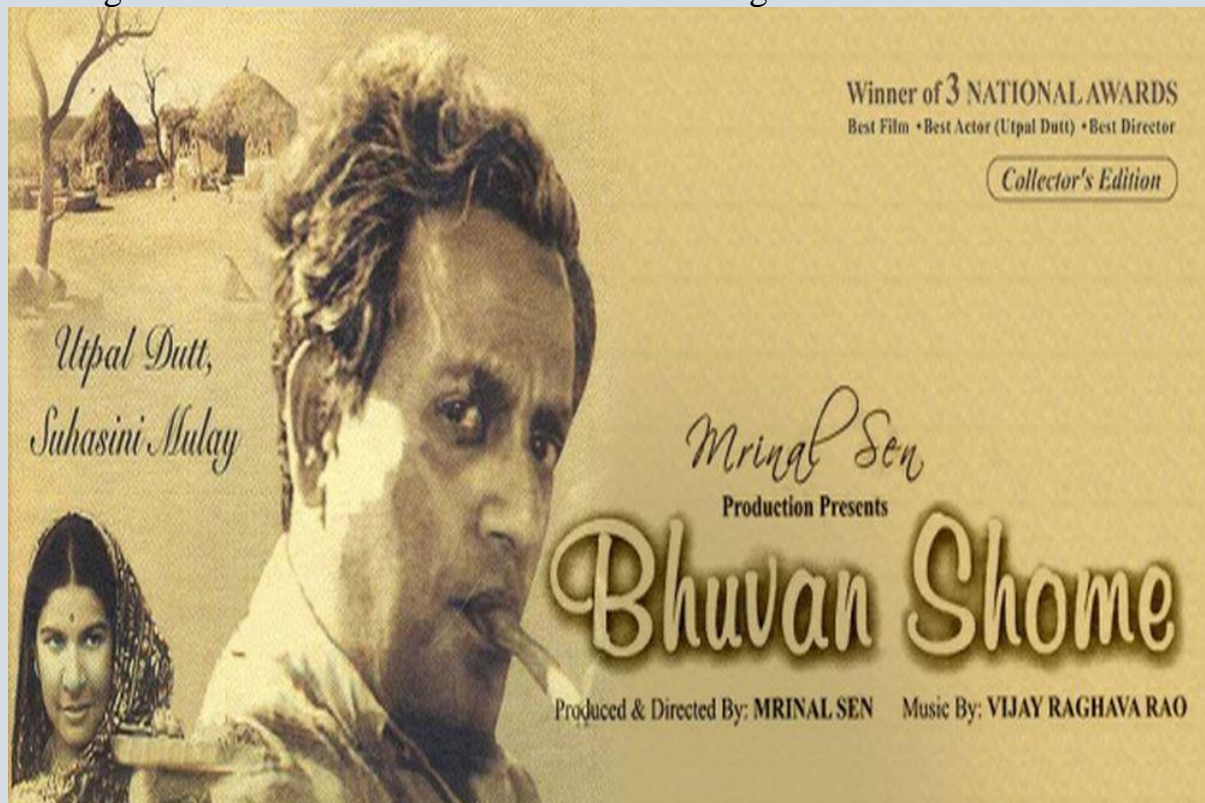
In time we fell out. I remember him calling me one Sunday afternoon to express his dismay and anger at having overheard me tell Chidananda Dasgupta that I liked his film, *Amodini*. I tried to explain that subjective likes and dislikes were not the same as critical argument, but that made him only angrier. In fact, there are some of Mrinal Sen's films that I liked very fondly but which would not bear up under critical comment. *Nil Akasher Niche* and *Akash Kusum* are endearing for their human warmth yet have their technical defects, and for all its loveliness and rich pathos, *Baishe Sraavan* would still not rate with what Satyajit Ray was putting out in the sixties. As Chidananda-babu himself gently pointed out to me once, I found it too easy to like Mrinal's films, so making it difficult for me to be creatively critical of them. It was a valuable lesson and I remain grateful to him for teaching it to me.

Calcutta '71 had a profound and ongoing effect on me. I grappled intellectually for a long time with the tripartite form of the film, while always submitting to the power of its content. For many years all my understanding of the Bengal Famine had been through cinema - Sen's *Calcutta '71* and *Akaler Sandhane*,



Ray's *Ashani Sanket* and Nabendu Chatterji's *Shilpi*. Then, in 2010, I read Madhusree Mukherjee's remarkable work, *Churchill's Secret War*. I watched *Calcutta '71* again; now, in a deep and broad context, its effect on me was even more disturbing. In form and style, *Padatik* and *Interview* are more orthodox, but neither has offered me the emotional potency of *Calcutta '71*.

I always admired Mrinal's character or nerve or, perhaps, plain audacity in trying something new. The tripartite form of *Calcutta '71* is an example, but the most unforgettable instance was *Bhuvan Shome*, in form, style and manner like nothing he had done before or would ever do again. Most of his films are in



Bhuvan Shome

Bengali, but then he made *Matira Manisha* in Oriya and *Oka Uri Katha* in Telugu. The man dismissed by many for being predictably agit-prop made *Mrigaya*, a film inspired by the Santal Rebellion, and *Mahaprithivi*, a philosophical reassessment arising out of the decline of Communism in Europe. On the day I saw *Antareen* at Nandan a section of the audience were rather unkind, unable to see, I thought, that a creditable film had been made on what was basically a very uncinematic subject - a series of phone calls. And for whatever might be its few shortcomings, *Genesis* serves well to underline its maker's originality, as does the beautiful *Khandahar*.

Ek Din Pratidin, which Sen made in 1979, did forcefully what so many Indian films no longer do; it turned a mirror on Indian society - or, specifically, the Calcutta middle class - and exposed it for its smugness and its hypocritical

protectiveness of women. A young woman's failure to return home from work at the usual time sends her family and their neighbours into an ecstasy of panic, gossip and righteous prognostication, not for anything that the girl has done but because of their stultifying values relating to respectability and their notions of propriety. The truly powerful statement that the film makes is that the reason for the girl's very late return is nobody's business but hers. However, that a woman had or has or might or should have a right to power over herself was, in 1979 and, indeed, for many forty years later, a notion bordering on the revolutionary.

Three years later Sen made *Kharij*, which in my opinion is his best film and his most forensic attack on bourgeois self-importance. The fragmentary nature of Calcuttan society and the morality of its class structure, unquestioned by so many, are challenged in this remarkably restrained film. The

work offers an extremely cogent juxtaposition - though,

significantly, by no means an engagement: on the one hand we have the young yuppie couple, significant for nothing other than their acquisitiveness and their self-interested heartlessness, accepting of their apparent entitlement to respect and privilege; on the other hand there is the humble yet strikingly dignified father of the dead boy, who has inherited from generations of similarly humble forebears an acceptance of his submissive place in a world seemingly made for others. *Kharij* is a very moving film and, nearly forty years on, still confronting.

Mrinal Sen's lesser films, mostly from the sixties, no longer shine in public awareness; with the notable exception of *Calcutta '71* the so-called agit-prop films have lost the urgency of the turbulent times in which they were made and now seem relatively tame; and Mr Bhuvan Shome, along with his alter ego, the immortal Utpal Dutt, will be eternally treasured. For me, a few films from the late seventies onward, which blatantly mirrored aspects of a blemished society, will make Mrinal Senan undeniably significant filmmaker.



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