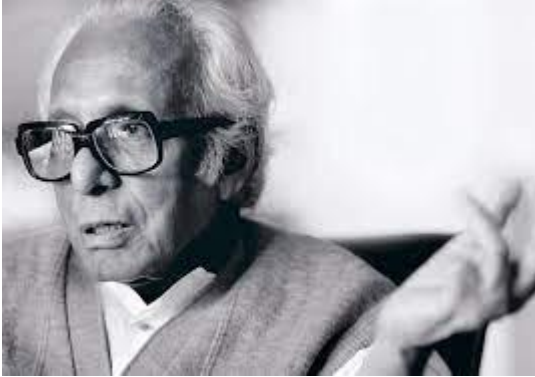


## Last of the Legends: Mrinal Sen

Suhrid Sankar Chattopadhyay



*(This tribute to Mrinal Sen was published in 'Frontline' magazine on 17 January 2019.)*

For Mrinal Sen, the switch from a regular nine-to-five existence to the rocky path leading to immortality in the world of cinema happened in the unlikeliest of places—in front of a full-length mirror in a tiny hotel room in Jhansi. Working as a medical representative in Kanpur for a pharmaceutical firm, he had a moment of epiphany one fine day when he was on tour. Years later, recalling that moment when he stared deep into the eyes of the man in the mirror and told him what he truly felt, Sen wrote: “I remember the talk I had with him. I said, hugely intrigued: ‘There you are, Mr Mrinal Sen, one who read a lot on cinema, wrote substantially on its aesthetics... Now, here you are Mr Sen, a *dawai-wallah* [medicine seller] who once wanted to be a film-maker!’...I cried. Cried like a child. All alone in a hotel room in Jhansi! After three days, I sent a long telegram to the management in Bombay and resigned.”

Thus began the career of one of the most fascinating, trail-blazing film-makers of Indian cinema history, though for Mrinal Sen film-making could hardly be considered a career; it was more like an all-consuming passion that was an end in itself. Deeply political, triumphantly iconoclastic, stubbornly unapologetic, radical, uncompromising and totally fearless, he charted out his own course, often stumbling, sometimes crashing in failure, but forever rising phoenix-like to stun the audience with another masterpiece.

In a career spanning six decades, with such classics as *Baishey Shravana* (The Wedding Day), *Bhuvan Shome* (Mr Shome), *Interview*, *Calcutta 71*, *Padatik* (Urban Guerilla), *Chorus*, *Mrigaya* (The Royal Hunt), *Ekdin Pratidin* (A Day Like Any Other), *Aakaler Sandhane* (In Search of Famine), and *Khandhar* (The Ruins), he shattered old traditions and dogmas and introduced a new wave of film-making in

India. On December 30, 2018, the man who along with Satyajit Ray and Ritwik Ghatak formed the great triumvirate of Indian cinema on the global stage breathed his last. He was 95.

Interestingly, unlike his intellectual sparring partner and friend, the great Satyajit Ray, whose very first film, *Pather Panchali*, won him immediate international recognition, Sen's first venture was a disaster. *Raat Bhore* (The Dawn) was released in 1955, the same year as *Pather Panchali*, but even a star cast including the legendary Uttam Kumar, Chhabi Biswas, Chhaya Devi and Sabitri Chatterjee could not rescue the film. Sen himself called it the biggest of all disasters and, years later, wrote: "Having made such a lousy film, I reckoned I had humiliated myself." Down, but never out, he bounced back three years later with *Neel Akasher Neechey* (Under the Blue Sky), a sad-sweet story of an impoverished Chinese immigrant living in Kolkata (then Calcutta) during the last days of British rule in India. Although Jawaharlal Nehru apparently enjoyed the film, it was nevertheless banned for a few months during the escalation of tension between India and China. The film was well-received by the public, but Sen's own attitude towards it remained tepid. It was with *Baishey Shravana* (1960) that Mrinal Sen the director came into his own. It depicted the tragedy of a middle-aged, once-affluent man and his teenage bride unfolding under the looming spectre of the terrible famine of 1943. The film, which was screened in international film festivals, introduced a new force in parallel cinema to the global stage. Although life was a struggle for Sen even after its success, the films kept coming throughout the 1960s, the most notable among them being *Akash Kusum* (Up in the Clouds, 1965), *Matira Manisha* (Man of the Soil, 1966) and, arguably, his most popular masterpiece *Bhuvan Shome* (1969).

*Bhuvan Shome*, a lyrical and profound Hindi movie depicting the transformation of a severe, unbending dyed-in-the-wool civil servant into a more humane and receptive individual, is universally considered a milestone in Indian cinema that paved the way for the Indian New Wave. "I think Mrinal Sen was hugely important in the way *Bhuvan Shome* ushered in a new wave of film-making in India. Of course, prior to that there were some exceptional films, but *Bhuvan Shome* introduced a set of new possibilities in terms of narrative, characterisation, shot-taking, editing and sound engineering. This was also a shift from his own style and experimentations which preceded it," Madhuja Mukherjee, film-maker and head of the Department of Film Studies, Jadavpur University, told *Frontline*.

The 1970s saw one of the most radical, political and creative periods in Sen's film-making career. It was in this period that his unique style of making movies became more defined and was stretched to the limits of conventionality. "Sen's cinematic style is marked by his consistent engagement with the various aspects of urbanity—specifically in the context of a tumultuous Calcutta—his way of taking his camera to the streets, which was possible primarily because of two reasons, the advent of the Arriflex camera in India and the dexterous handling of the equipment by his cinematographer K.K. Mahajan, and his interest in a discursive mode of film-making that resists the temptations offered by the classical narrative," said Parichay Patra, film scholar and Assistant Professor, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, BITS Pilani, Goa campus.

### **Mrinal Sen's El Dorado**

Sen loved Calcutta with all its complexities and contradictions and saw in it, as he himself loved to say, his own contradictions and complexities. "I was not born here, but true, I was made here," he said. The city, he said, "acts as much like a stimulant as an irritant". He and his cameramen would often be present at scenes of social and political upheavals and record the events, to "characterise the period effectively", as he put it.

"For reasons of my own, I call my city my El Dorado," he wrote in his autobiography, *Always Being Born*. In the four films he made on Kolkata almost back to back— *Interview* (1970), *Calcutta 71* (1972), *Padatik* (1973) and *Chorus* (1974)—Sen scaled new heights in experimentation and at the same time fearlessly made some of his most powerful political statements inspired by his lifelong passion for Marxist thought and ideology.

"Those four films have been studied at length for their political intensity," Madhuja Mukherjee said. "But this discourse was possible through a cinematic style that clearly appears like a process... A film that really haunts me is *Chorus*. A truly experimental film in the way Mrinal Sen channelises sound, bodily movement, gesture, voice." Sen was an artist of his own age. The reality and harshness around him were the topics of his poetry. "I try to understand my own period," he once said, "I try to put it across." The common people were his muse, and their travails, triumphs and tragedies, his inspiration. But there was also humour and a wonderful sense of the bizarre, like the scene in the bus in *Interview*, in which one of the passengers looks at the camera and says: "What is this? Do you call this cinema? It is my story; it is your story."

Against the backdrop of bigger tragedies and issues, there were always the little problems and the insignificant troubles, enormous and seemingly insurmountable and constantly plaguing the little man. He understood these problems to their last minute detail, just as he understood the greater tragedy, under the shadow of which all of the common man's life was being played out. Like his hero Charlie Chaplin, he saw the humour in their frustrations and their tiny disasters that seem to them so overwhelming as they occur, and they are overwhelming, and he understood that.

For example, *Interview* delineates a young man's adventures and impediments on the day of his interview for a job, which promises to change his impoverished life forever. The protagonist's trials and disasters, however much realistic, still border on the edge of farce and are played out under the shadow of larger issues relating to class, colonial hangover and unemployment. From amidst the general absurdity that is presented, the rebel is born.

As far as his art was concerned, Sen was always the rebel. He was forever lashing out at accepted norms and traditions and breaking rules and pushing boundaries. He once said in an interview that the challenge was to do your own kind of film. "Even when I made films that became very popular, I did not think of the people, I thought of myself. I thought this is a very interesting idea, let me go through it. Let us break new ground. This is very important. This is a big challenge—working into an alien area," he said.

It was this indomitable spirit and courage of conviction, this uncontrollable compulsion to express himself with an honesty that was stripped of all pretensions and self-glorification, that won him the respect and admiration not only of his peers but also his legion of unwavering admirers. One may not agree with his views, or even like many of his films, but one cannot remain indifferent to him. He would challenge his viewers to come out of their comfort zones, provoke a reaction from them, force them to see what they would rather avert their eyes from. It is impossible to bracket Sen into any category or even label him a "Bengali" film-maker.

His canvas was vast and his subjects varied, and he made films in Odia (*Matira Manisha*), Hindi (*Bhuvan Shome*, *Ek Adhuri Kahani*, *Mrigaya*, *Khandhar*, *Genesis*, and *Ek Din Achanak*), and Telugu (*Oka Oorie Katha*).

"Whether Mrinal Sen was a great film-maker or not is for others to judge, but I will say that he was certainly different from others and tried to create his own style of film-making. One important thing that should be learnt from him is that he never compromised. He never abandoned his Leftist ideology. He never sold himself for

small gains and always made films according to his own beliefs. This attitude is very rare in this day and age,” internationally acclaimed film-maker Buddhadeb Dasgupta told *Frontline*.

Dasgupta said that although he was never personally influenced by Sen’s works, he nevertheless loved quite a few of his films. “*Baishey Shravana* , *Matira Manisha* , *Oka Oorie Katha* , *Ekdin Pratidin* and *Bhuvan Shome* are great films. One notable aspect about Mrinal Sen is that he continued experimenting with techniques and ideas. Sometimes he failed miserably, but that never stopped him from going on,” he said.

Even after the success of *Bhuvan Shome*, things were not easy for Sen as he refused to fall into the trap of making money-raking formula films. “I made a film which accidentally became an artistic success and a money-spinner. When I made it, I was convinced that the film would not run for more than a day. Three Bombay directors came to meet me the same day and wanted me to do the same kind of film,” he said. He had to wait 10 years to make *Bhuvan Shome* as no one was willing to produce it. “Finally, I applied to the Film Finance Corporation, asked for Rs.1,50,000 and made the film in 1969,” Sen later wrote.

After the contemporary urban milieu of the four Kolkata films, Sen’s next masterpiece, *Mrigaya* (1975), was played out in a tribal setting in British India. It was a masterful exploration of human relationships, of fragile innocence in an unforgiving world governed by laws that contradict each other—a world where one murder is rewarded and another is punished with death. This was Mithun Chakraborty’s debut film, for which he received the National Award for Best Actor. Sen also won his third National Award for Best Feature Film. He would win one more in the same category in 1980 for *Aakaler Sandhane*.

Twenty years after making *Baishey Shravana* , Sen revisited the theme of famine, but this time in a radically different manner. *Aakaler Sandhane* is essentially the story of a film crew that comes to a village in 1980, led by a passionate young director, to make a film on the famine of 1943. It is a film being made within a film. It is also a terrifying study of the difference between reality and intellectual conception.

“When surreptitiously, stealthily, the past walks into the present, and you have to look into it, you get scared. You run away from the reality. That was exactly what my plan was in *Aakaler Sandhane*,” Sen said about the film. The film also won the Silver Bear Special Jury Prize at the 31st Berlin International Film Festival.

Sen followed it up with several more classics in the 1980s, such as *Kharij* (The Case is Closed, 1982), *Khandhar* (1983) and *Ek Din Achanak* (1989). Even though he would make only three more films—*Mahaprithibi* (World Within, World Without, 1991), *Antareen* (The Confined, 1993) and *Aamar Bhuvan* (This My Land, 2002)—the master never lost his touch. *Antareen* won the National Award for Best Feature Film in Bengali, while *Aamar Bhuvan* won Sen the Best Director Award at the Cairo International Film Festival.

Old age did little to diminish Sen's zest and passion. In 2012, in a public function on the occasion of his 90th birthday, he said: "I'm not old enough to stop making films. Every day I feel like making a film. Ideas pop into my head." He pointed out with his trademark humour that if the Portuguese director Manoel de Oliveira could, so could he. (Manoel de Oliveira was making films until 2015, the year he died at the age of 106.) This was 10 years after the completion of *Aamar Bhuvan*. Unfortunately for millions of cinema buffs the world over, Sen never got down to converting those ideas into films.

## Early life

Born in Faridpur (now in Bangladesh), Sen had rebellion in his blood. His father, Dines Chandra Sen, a leading lawyer in the district and a close associate of Lala Lajpat Rai, Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Bipin Chandra Pal, used to lend legal support to militant freedom fighters and was once even disbarred for his open support for the nationalist cause. Young Mrinal was used to seeing some of the most important nationalist leaders in his house. Years later, he recalled a childhood memory of him suffering terribly from a toothache at a time when Subhas Chandra Bose was deep in consultation with his father in the next room. It was at Bose's suggestion that the young Mrinal was given a medicine that gave him immediate relief. "I felt terribly proud that Subhas Chandra Bose was my first dentist," he said.

Right from the start, young Mrinal displayed a streak of rebelliousness that he never lost all his life; rather, it seemed to grow with age and later found expression through his art. While still in primary school, he and a group of school friends courted trouble by shouting "Bande Mataram" at the police. They were sent to lock-up. Young Mrinal received a tight slap from his father for his antics. Years later, he found himself once again in police custody for his activism, while he was in college in Kolkata and drawn to the Leftist political movement. Once again his father came to arrange his release, but this time he gave his son a pat on the back. "I realised I had come of age," Mrinal Sen later quipped.

Though closely associated with the Left cultural movement and the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), Sen had no interest in cinema until he chanced upon Rudolf Arnheim's book *Film* in 1943. From that point cinema became his passion, his obsession. He also began to write on cinema for various publications, including the cultural magazine of the Communist Party of India. He also wrote a book on the life and art of his hero, Charlie Chaplin, in 1951. However, making a film was not yet a realistic possibility.

In 1953, he married Geeta, who would go on to deliver powerful performances in eight of his films; in 1954, his only child, Kunal, was born. To make ends meet, he tried his hand at regular jobs, but cinema was too powerful an attraction for him to reject. To him, cinema was the ultimate vehicle for self-expression; it was through his films that he articulated some of his most powerful statements on life, art, ideology and humanity. He was a loveable rebel who never sought commercial success, remained undeterred by harsh criticism, and treated both success and failure with a shrug and a smile. For all the national and international awards he won, including the prestigious Dadasaheb Phalke Award in 2005, for all the honours bestowed upon him by his own country and by other nations, Sen maintained a healthy disdain for fame and glory. He lived modestly, answered the phone and the doorbell himself, welcomed everybody into his house, and gave as much time to a common person who sought his appointment as he would to an international celebrity.

As in life, in his style of working, too, Sen was unorthodox and open-minded. The celebrated cinematographer Avik Mukhopadhyay, who worked with Sen in *Aamar Bhuvan*, remembers how the great director invited suggestions from him in his own inimitable way. "He told me: I am an old man, I will welcome your suggestions. I told him that even though this film is a classical story, we can think of treating it like a Rembrandt. He immediately liked the suggestion and said it was a good idea. His attitude was never like 'I am the boss'. He believed in collaboration," Mukhopadhyay told Frontline . Impulsive and fun-loving right until the end, Sen was one who drank life to the lees and sought maximum happiness from the most insignificant of things. While shooting at a riverbank for his last film, the old maestro suddenly discovered a bicycle and promptly got on it and began to pedal about the place. An alarmed Mukhopadhyay tried to talk him out of it by pointing out his age (Sen was approaching 80 then), only to be reassured by the indomitable director that "no one forgets how to ride a bicycle, no matter how old"! The legendary thespian Rudrapasad Sengupta remembers him as not just a film-maker. "Mrinal was a complete human being. He would walk in protest rallies, participate in debates; he

would argue and quarrel fiercely with a person and then go out and enjoy a cup of tea with him. He now belongs to history,” he told *Frontline*.

What also made Sen such a fascinating and endearing individual were the contradictions he displayed in his personality and actions openly and without any embarrassment. He was an iconoclast who attacked traditional institutions and long-held beliefs, yet resented and opposed the renaming of Calcutta to Kolkata. He was one of the biggest names in parallel cinema both in India and the world, yet he mainly chose to work with little-known artistes, often picking them from the stage. He was an unwavering follower of Marxist ideology right until the end but never became a member of any party.

When the political upheaval of Nandigram and Singur divided Kolkata’s intellectual circle sharply down the middle, both sides took out rallies and Sen lent his presence to both. He embraced these contradictions—in fact, he wore them like a badge of honour.

### **Relationship with Ray**

Sen’s relationship with Satyajit Ray is an integral chapter in the history of both the masters. It would perhaps not be wrong to term the relationship as one of friendly animosity. The historic war of words through letters to the editor in *The Statesman* following the release of Sen’s *Akash Kusum* (1965) is now a part of film lore and a masterclass on film theory, ideas and criticism by two of the greatest directors of Indian cinema. The intellectual battle raged on for over two months on the newspaper’s pages, with hundreds of readers joining in with letters of their own. “Finally, it was nobody’s gain, nobody’s loss,” said Sen. When *The Statesman* finally closed the debate with a formal announcement, Ray apparently told Sen when he met him on a social occasion: “What a pity it came to an end!... I could have written many more letters.” To which Sen cheerfully replied: “I would have replied to all your letters.”

However fiercely they have may have opposed each other over ideas and theories on cinema, the deep respect each had for the other’s genius could not be denied. They kept in touch with each other and each delighted in the other’s words of approval. In his autobiography, Sen recalled a long private conversation that he had with Ray a year before the latter’s death: “I had a quiet session with him, a long one—he and I, none else. At a certain point of time I asked him, ‘Don’t you feel lonely at times?’ He said, ‘Terribly’.”



Sen's appeal transcended the world of cinema. Not only was he one of the most important icons of West Bengal's cultural history, he had, in fact, become a symbol of his beloved city of Kolkata itself. As he himself put it: "The truth is that I am so much a part of its [the city's] anatomy."

He hated pomp and fanfare and had left specific instructions that after his death his body should not be kept for public display nor should it be draped with banners or garlanded and wreathed. Yet, on January 1, as his mortal remains were taken to the crematorium, hundreds joined him on his final journey. Alongside tearful celebrities from the world of cinema, theatre, fine arts and literature, there was the nameless, faceless mass of common people that Sen so loved and upheld in his movies. He understood them better than anyone else, and they knew it; dry-eyed and silent, they had come to say goodbye to one who always belonged to them alone.