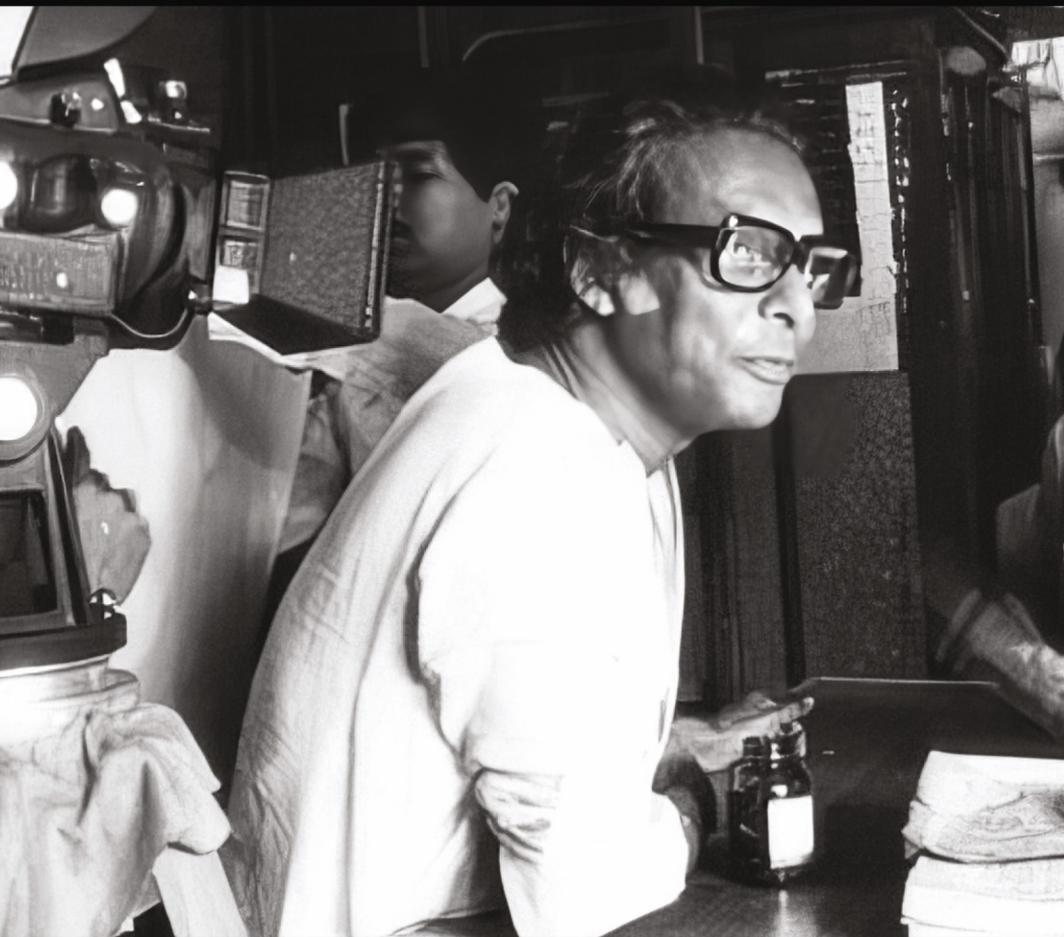


The Cinema of
Mrinal Sen

A Quest for the Unresolved



Edited by

Amitava Nag

Antara Nanda Mondal

The Cinema of Mrinal Sen
A Quest for the Unresolved

A Centenary Tribute

In Collaboration With
Silhouette Magazine

Edited by
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BLUE PENCIL

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Introduction

In the context of Indian cinema Mrinal Sen is probably the most unique instance where a filmmaker shrugged off the uncertain, groping trends of his early work to a more assured signature in his later films. This in no way tries to underscore the fact that within this sweep as well, Sen changed the philosophical fulcrum of his films multiple times.

From his contemporary films in the early 1960s till his epoch-making *Bhuvan Shome* (made in 1969 which ushered in the Indian New Wave), from his angst-ridden films on his El-dorado Calcutta to the more subtle trajectory in the films of the eighties, Sen constantly surged to find new meanings, new ways, new paths to his cinematic truth. His films, apart from a handful, were never popular in the Box-Office but that didn't make him cautious about experimenting with ideas and forms. He made films in Hindi and other Indian languages, apart from his native Bengali, much to the dismay of many of his compatriots who could, at their very best, merely think of casting actors with a vernacular different from

Bengali in their Bengali films.

In being more open to other racial identities, in terms of locale, setting and language, Sen could achieve greater success in terms of recognition and acclaim, at many times from international forums as well. The Silver Bear at Berlin for *Aakaler Sandhane* in 1980 and the Cannes Jury award for *Kharij* a couple of years later mark the point. Notwithstanding the awards Sen's films continued to intrigue the audience to look beyond the obvious, to think deeper.

More importantly, through out his career, Mrinal Sen seldom looked for content endings and faithful completions. His quest had always been towards the unresolved conclusions, the tentative culminations which is why his films continue to intrigue us even now.

14 May 2023 marked his birth centenary, undoubtedly Indian cinema's most consistently polemical filmmaker. To pay homage, 'Silhouette' film magazine carried several articles for the four weeks starting with his birthday. The articles, critiques and reviews, covered different aspects of his cinematic career and urged the reader to probe further to re-visit his cinema and to reexamine the political intellect of its auteur.

The idea of bringing out a series of commemorative collections on auteurs of Indian cinema had been with us for some time. This is our first attempt to physicalise such a notion in print. For this volume we not only selected from the articles that were published during the centenary celebration but also from our archives on Sen's cinema.

As always we took care that the text is not obscure and doesn't intend to hide behind academic jargons, distanced from the real world which Sen's cinema represented. Yet, we hope it will sufficiently satiate the thirst of the serious reader of cinema.

We are thankful to Kunal Sen, Shoma A Chatterji and Subha Das Mollick for providing us with photographs

of Sen and stills from his films that we have used here. We are thankful to Vidhyarthy Chatterjee for providing us with an important essay by Mrinal Sen and also to Girish Kasaravalli, noted filmmaker, for allowing us to carry his personal account of Mrinal Sen's films.

We hope this book will be an important addition, in English, to the canon of writings on Indian cinema and also the cinema of Mrinal Sen.

Amitava Nag

Antara Nanda Mondal

Editors, 'Silhouette'

January, 2024.

CRITIQUE

Moviemaking in Calcutta

Mrinal Sen



To make a film, whether on the surface of the earth or under the sea, you need a camera and a sound recorder and also the necessary gadgets and, maybe, more of these, depending, of course, on your understanding of the medium and on their availability and your requirement. You also need raw film to record the visuals and to capture the aural, the words and the incidentals. And, then, with a heart to feel and a brain to operate and organise, you use these materials to produce what the Americans and the fashionables in India call a “movie”.

I am not an archivist; that is not my business. I shall, therefore, make no attempt to find out who was the first to collect all the available materials as well as the heart and the brain to make the first movie in Calcutta. But as a Calcuttan, I shall no doubt have an enormous sense of pride if someone can prove beyond debate that Hiralal Sen of North Calcutta had made his feature-length movie before the world could come to know of Edwin Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* in 1904. As claimed by certain people, this and another one-hour-long movie by Hiralal Sen were full of innovations such as close-ups, panning, tilts, etcetera. There are many other stories about Hiralal Sen, the most sensational being that his lifetime's work was burnt two days before his death in 1917. All these, if true, would certainly make the history of moviemaking in Calcutta much more exciting than it is now. But there are historians who hold different opinions and who have more reliable materials to prove that the first movie in India was made in 1912 by Dadasaheb Phalke of Poona.

In the beginning, there was the camera with no adequate arrangement for proper lensing; there was raw film not sensitive enough; there were laboratories to process the film, editing table to cut the pieces and rejoin, and technical know-how to apply. The result was just an assemblage of moving pictures coherent enough to record an event or, at most, a story. It was all crude, never going beyond its physical perception, marked by total absence of characterization and atmosphere.

The early stuff, because of the novelty, became immediately saleable; the early audiences were the least demanding. Gradually, with sure success on the commercial front, the employer-appointed technician became more certain than ever about the use of tools and, in the process, began to introduce "stiffer" variety in the story material.

From independent scene to picturisation of dance, from dance to mythology, from mythology to the Alibaba

variety, then to farce, from farce to Bankim Chatterjee and even to Saratchandra: that was generally the march of events during the “silent period of Calcutta moviemaking”.

With more cogent stories to tell now, even though the characters portrayed were more or less linear, the need for controlled operation of the tools and the players became more evident.

This, eventually, led to more activities inside the studios and less outside. As a result, there came more gadgets to Calcutta studios. The gadgets having definite properties, moviemakers making use of them invested their work with additional properties broadly on the technical plane. But, to be objective, not much of substance was achieved during the “silent” period. The basic reason for such poor performance was the absence of a reasonable awareness both on the social and artistic planes.

Sound came, as it did elsewhere.

With sound, movies became more life-like, more exciting, more saleable. And now, with the benefit of the spoken word and the incidentals and also having the musical score to create the atmosphere, a number of sporadic and independent attempts were made here and there, in which one could detect some promise, technical as well as aesthetic. But the promise did not last long; and in a total sense there was very little improvement in the standard.

Movies mostly remained “talking pictures”.

Small bits of competence in the works of some individuals could, by no means, alter the general picture of moviemaking in Calcutta. But, as usual, movies made in those days continued to be increasingly popular and went on collecting fat revenue.

With these enormous successes at the box office, the pre-War moviemakers found themselves in a position of absolute security. As a result, they remained generally indifferent to the needs and possibilities of this art form.

Economic success resulted in complacency, and it was perhaps due to such complacency that moviemakers of those days could afford to stay away from the “contagion” of other arts, particularly the contemporary Bengali literature which had made a tremendous advance in the ‘thirties.

The moviemakers of the ‘thirties thus lost a golden opportunity. They failed to realise that all arts, if they are to grow from strength to strength, need to be continually cross-fertilised.

It was a shame that in the ‘thirties, in spite of an intensely invigorating climate on the literary front, Calcutta moviewallahs lived comfortably in isolation.

Then came the War, which made a severe impact on the people. Things moved fast, sometimes too fast for one to comprehend them. And the mind, in the midst of such confusion, moved faster. The impact was violent. It became difficult for the artist to escape the reality around him. At the end of the War, some of the movies started becoming noticeably different, both in Calcutta and in Bombay. Several moviemakers, during that period of transition, derived a lot of inspiration from other arts, drama in particular, and almost inevitably, a definite trend in Calcutta began to take shape. What followed was not without an element of uncertainty. Activities were very often uneven, and the trend-in-the-making got very much diffused when, at last, moved by the terrible misery of the East Bengal refugees crowding the streets of Calcutta in successive waves, a man called Nemai Ghose came out into the open with his camera and with almost nothing else besides.

Ghose, an active participant in the Indian People’s Theatre Movement sponsored by the Communist Party of India, collected meagre funds, and a group of non-professional players (all refugees). The most remarkable of them was an old woman picked up from the depths of suffering, who had just arrived from East Bengal. With

these “human” materials and very little money, Ghose left the glamour world of the Calcutta moviemakers and made his own movie. He named it *Chhinnamool*. True, it was not artistic enough, but it was no doubt very timely for more than one reason. Watching this movie one could detect a certain courage, a certain conviction and a certain austerity, the like of which had not been seen before.

Although a box-office failure, one could read on the faces of a minority metropolitan audience the reverence of a new experience.

In 1952, the First International Film Festival was held in Calcutta, Bombay and Madras. As far as Calcutta was concerned, the festival had an unusually remarkable role to play, that of stirring the imagination of Calcuttans. To give an idea of the impact of the festival, I quote from my own diary. It was a Friday. That was the time when I had nothing to do with moviemaking except nurturing an impossible hope, that sometime in the near future, I would get into the movies. At that time I was a medical representative, my job being to detail the company's products to doctors. The writing on the diary was as follows:

Friday 10 am to 12 noon: Visiting 4 doctors.
(My daily quota, however, was visiting 8 doctors.)

Friday, 3 pm: At Purna Theatre
Open City, Rome by Roberto Rossellini.

Friday, 6 pm: At Menoka Theatre
Jour de Fete by Jacques Tati.

Friday, 9 pm: At Lighthouse
Miracle in Milan by Vittorio de Sica.

That was the time I had. That was the time my friends

had. That was the time film enthusiasts had. They got busy, running frantically like me from one theatre to another, religiously watching the wonder that was post-War world cinema. Calcuttans, thus, became very active, they became more demanding; and soon the “contagion” spread. So intense was the experience that it took no time to partially invade the film studios, corrupting, so to say, the young technicians. And, at last, in 1955, after years of stress and strain, the greatest event in the history of Indian cinema took place: the making of *Pather Panchali*. With absolutely no experience in moviemaking, Satyajit Ray collected a group of young men to work as technicians and, like Nemaï Ghose, selected a group of non-professionals and also one professional actor. And then walked straight into an unknown and uncertain world, defying everything that was prescribed for the moviemakers of the Calcutta studios.

The result was stupendous. It gave him an assured place among the world’s living best.

It was, in fact, the same landscape that Ray filmed, the same old locomotive running across the distant horizon that he put in a sequence, the same old pond with stagnant water that appeared so many hundreds of times in Calcutta movies. All these and many other typical village scenes not unknown to our audiences were recorded on the same type of celluloid by the same camera with no extra gadgets; but everything in *Pather Panchali*, the visuals and aural, assumed an entirely different dimension. And that was great!

What, in essence, caused this difference? The movie materials being the same, the heart and the brain at work made all the difference. With the growth of science and technology in our country and a growing sense of sophistication redefining our social values, there was indeed a vacuum. To fill this vacuum, there was the need for a man like Satyajit Ray.

Pather Panchali set the ball rolling; a case for a lasting

trend was sharply defined and the ethics of moviemaking most eloquently brought in.

Years that followed saw happenings in Calcutta, things that contributed significantly to the art of the movie.

Trends took definite shape; styles to communicate ideas came up on the screen, and with the growth of trends and styles, cropped up problems of diverse nature. The years to follow were indeed quite eventful when the medium was handled in different manners, problems dealt with differently. A movement, so to say, became very much apparent during the post-*Pather Panchali* period with Ray and a few others giving an animated account of themselves.

The movie scene in Calcutta since *Pather Panchali* has taken an altogether different turn. Talking about the film society movement, the societies are almost always found in a festive mood, screening world movies of outstanding merit and also those suffering from mediocrity, studying movies in their minutest details and being religiously analytical of every bit of detail done on celluloid. Over-enthusiasm does at times become tiresome, but a continuously growing sense of awareness is inescapable.

With this growing consciousness, mostly outside and partly inside the studios, the future, at least on the surface, appears to be quite encouraging. But, to take a practical view of things, the present state of affairs is pretty uncertain. To do the minimum good to the investor who always wants maximum returns at the box-office, a large audience is required, larger than what our film societies can mobilise. And the fact remains that the majority of people continue to patronise, as before, anything that is nearer gross stuff.

So, here is one problem which, as in other countries, worries the thinking moviemaker in India. A constant sense of insecurity arising out of fear, fear of a possible financial crash, is liable to cool down the enthusiasm of even the most honest artist.

And this is exactly what is happening to Calcutta's moviemakers more of cautiousness, more of re-thinking, more of checking and double-checking and much less of courage and conviction. The spirit of challenge is now seen evaporating.

There are growing instances of conformity to set rules rather than of furthering the cause of non-conformism. The trend that appeared in the mid-'fifties and continued for a considerable period thereafter, is now in the process of disintegration. Moviemaking in Calcutta is now tending to go the Establishment way.

Whether in art, business or politics, the Establishment, to ensure its existence and growth, sets certain rules and uses its own machinery to tell others that the rules must be strictly observed. The Establishment in the movie business is no exception.

It has set norms for the story, prescribed rules for the application of movie materials, of techniques, and has the last word on audience reaction. It has been trying to convince others, if not itself, that moviemaking is solely its monopoly and not the outsider's business.

But history decrees that "outsiders" make aggressive infiltrations at all levels of social movements. This is precisely the essence of history. The history of Calcutta moviemaking cannot be different.

To hasten such invasions from "outside" which, in the process, revolutionize the inside structure of all social scenes, there are catalytic agents operating from all directions. A film festival, from what we saw in 1952, is one such effective catalyst.

And as I look back I only wish that Nemai Ghose had made his *Chhinnamool* not before but after the International Film Festival in 1952.

(Courtesy Department of Information & Public Relations, Government of West Bengal, circa 1975.)

The Man and His Films

Some Impressions

Girish Kasaravalli



It does not speak too well of the system that many Indian film-lovers, like yours truly for instance, have not been able to see Mrinal Sen's films as often as they would have loved to. The tragedy of Indian film-viewing is that we are more than familiar with the works of European masters, but not with the creations of our own masters.

I must confess at the very beginning that I have seen very few Mrinal Sen films; and most of them, just once. So, what follows is more in the nature of random impressions. Truth to tell, I am more familiar with the films of Satyajit Ray or Ritwik Ghatak, with whom Mrinal Sen forms the 'trimurti' of modern Indian cinema.

I have not seen any of Sen's pre-*Bhuvan Shome* films, although I have heard and read praises of more than one film made in that period. Similarly, I have not had the opportunity of watching any film made by him after *Khandhar* (*Aamaar Bhuvan* is an exception).

Someone once remarked at a private gathering in Bangalore that Sen is more successful as a compassionate father than as an angry rebel. There are many people I know who prefer the director's 'father series' (*Ekdin Pratidin*, *Kharij*, *Khandhar*, *Ekdin Achanak*) to his 'rebel series' (*Padatik*, *Calcutta '71*, *Chorus*, *Mrigayaa*, *Parashuram*). From what I have seen of each genre, I find the impression quite valid, if one were to consider only the end-product as material for discussion.

The trilogy of *Ekdin Pratidin*, *Kharij* and *Khandhar* brought out a very sensitive, contemplative Sen who looks at his subject and characters as a 'critical insider'. (The reputed Kannada litterateur Dr UR Ananthamurthy popularised the term 'critical insider' in the Kannada art and culture scene. Dr Ananthamurthy applied this term to those works where the creator takes an attitude to society which is similar to that of Gandhi who, as opposed to Marx, approached the unjust system like the mother approaches an erring son. The artist creator who follows this approach, looks at his subject with eyes uplifted by passion but uplifted even more with unbiased insight.) In the trilogy, Sen uses this approach.

In these films, Sen doesn't laugh at the hypocrisies of the middle-class or ridicule them. Rather, he tries to analyse them with a tinge of *vishaad* (sadness, often born of mature introspection). The director's introspective

analysis of characters has the curious, welcome effect of the viewer turning introspective as well. There are many passages in these films — replete with tragic undercurrents, which cause our accusing fingers to be pointed at not just the characters concerned, but our own selves as well.

The best of Satyajit Ray reminds one of a well-written novel characterised by dexterous layering, intense structuring, wide canvas, and the possibility of multiple interpretations. On the other hand, Sen's films of the trilogy period are like well-written short stories. They are defined by their austere simplicity, which is direct yet ambiguous. Usually, they hover around one incident which is, however, left open enough to outgrow the plot.

Chekov says that a good short story does not show you the moon, but shows the reflection of the moon in a small pool of water. What you see is an image of the moon, but the image is so intense that you experience the original.

Mrinal Sen's oeuvre can be divided into three parts – (1) Up to *Bhuvan Shome*; (2) *Bhuvan Shome* onwards; and (3) *Ekdin Pratidin* onwards. What I have written so far pertains to the early films of the third phase. This phase in Sen's career/filmography attracts me the most. I really feel sorry that not much has been written about this period. (However, my favourite Sen film is *Aakaler Sandhane* which, although I have seen just once, still pervades my memory.) Although I agree with the statement mentioned earlier, that Sen is at his best in the films included in the third phase, the contribution of the films in the second phase to Indian cinema is far from being negligible.

If you keep Ray at the centre of things with his realist humanist position, you will find that few have emulated his path. Well-known younger filmmakers like Adoor Gopalakrishnan, G Aravindan or Buddhadeb Dasgupta have swung away from Ray in varying degrees.

Unlike Ray, these filmmakers do not embellish their images and narration with details and ‘touches’ reminiscent of classic Hollywood films of the ’40s or French cinema of the ’30s-’40s represented by Renoir and others. They would rather use stylized expressions, often bordering on the minimalistic or even the surrealist. Their images and modes of narration are carefully constructed. The use of spatial and temporal elements do not stem from the analytical-dramatic potential of the plot. Like in a poem, here the director wants the spectator to enter the plot through ‘codified’ images.

If the younger directors swung away from Ray in one direction, Mrinal Sen swung away from his older contemporary in another direction.

Sen’s images are fresh and unmonitored, which give an immediacy to the narration. Thus, he is probably the first Indian filmmaker to work in the ‘verite’ style. This style has given Indian cinema a necessary shot in the arm. The plot, the construction, the images (captured by K K Mahajan) gave a different experience to the Indian audience which has traditionally been fed with well-moulded plots and dramatic presentation. It is unfortunate that no other Indian filmmaker apart from John Abraham in *Amma Ariyan* followed this style.

The truth is that Mrinal Sen’s films, from *Bhuvan Shome* to *Ekdin Pratidin*, gave a new direction to Indian cinema.

Mrinal Sen’s ability to elicit drama out of nothing is admirable. Let me cite an instance. In *Ekdin Pratidin* someone brings some bad news to the mother, played by Gita Sen. She turns around and exclaims “*Ki!*” (“What!”) Then there is a small movement of the camera with shrill music accompanying it. The impact it creates is very cinematic. One comes across many such beautiful moments in his films. You can’t explain from where Sen creates tension/drama. One has

to see his films to experience this invisible quality. Here I am also reminded of the director's cutting in *Aakaler Sandhane* which can be excellent material for film students and filmmakers to understand the effective use of elliptical cutting.

Sometimes I have the feeling that I know and understand Mrinal-da, the human being, more than the works of Mrinal Sen, the artist. His friendly attitude to those around him can work like a revitalising tonic. No one can deny, not even his worst detractors, how actively he encourages the young and the upcoming. That is because he is forever youthful at heart; youthful, energetic, and remarkably quick on the uptake.

I still remember my first meeting with Mrinal-da. He had come down to Bangalore in 1977 to inaugurate a film festival called Nostalgia, organised by Suchitra Film Society.

I had just completed *Ghatashraddha*.

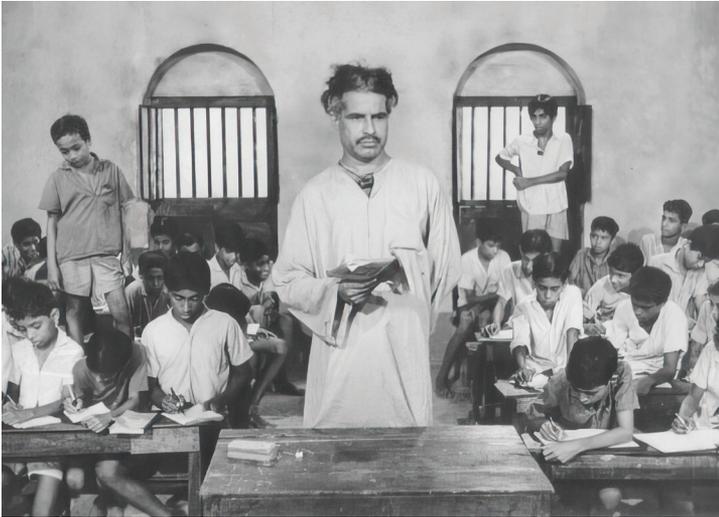
A few filmmakers had seen the film and liked it. They told Mrinal-da about it. Since he had a tight programme during the day, he sent word to me whether it would be possible to arrange for a screening at 1 am — at 1 in the night! I arranged for the screening and waited at the entrance to the studio to receive him. He came at 1 am and saw the film which got over at 3.30 am. We came out and we talked about the film till 4.30 am.

Later, he wrote an article in 'The Illustrated Weekly of India' praising the film. I know of other instances where young filmmakers have received similar encouragement from Mrinal-da.

(This exclusive essay was first published in 'Mrinal Sen 80: A Motif supplement', October 2003)

A Lustrum in the Life of Mrinal Sen

Amitava Nag



It was a Monday on 1 July 1968. The Park Street Post Office, Calcutta, was teeming with activities, business as usual. The time was precisely 9 in the morning. A car pulled up. And before one could pronounce three ‘Mississippi’s a daring robbery had taken place. There were absolutely no doubts that the robbers were well-informed, and the loot amounted to close to four lakh

rupees. Over the next nine months there were three more cases, now in banks both private and public. Police went berserk, no one could be traced for sure although the indications were rife that the robberies were masterminded by Ananta Singh, one of the principals accused of the Chittagong Armoury Raid of 1930. Singh turned a communist when he was serving imprisonment but soon became disillusioned by the different factions of the erstwhile communist party. Interestingly, copies of the manifesto of the Revolutionary Communist Council of India (RCCI), an extreme revolutionary group instituted by Singh earlier in the decade, were found at the sites of each of these robberies. Since a year back the Naxalbari movement in the northern part of West Bengal had already started spreading fire across the state and further. Calcutta was soon caught up in the vortex of rebellion.

Mrinal Sen was forty-five years old, in 1968. Within a span of five years, from the 1966 till 1970, he went from being a talented filmmaker to one of India's finest. Intriguingly, how, in the course of a lustrum, did he go from directing a sparkingly poised *Akash Kusum* in 1965 to making the brilliantly inventive and extraordinarily nuanced *Bhuvan Shome* and onto the politically riveting *Calcutta Trilogy* of the early '70s?

It is hence a necessity to try understanding how Sen's work emerged as a function of his times. To acknowledge and appreciate the emergence we need to recount the social and political history of Bengal as well as India at that juncture of antiquity. It was a time when India as a nation was going through adjustments and alignments. Indira Gandhi became the first woman Prime Minister of India in 1966 and in the very next Dr Zakir Hussain, the first Muslim President of the nation. The mistrust for Congress which ruled the country for two decades was rampant, not only in terms of the revolutionary movements but also in the Legislative Assembly election of West Bengal in 1967 when the first non-Congress

government, the United Front, came to power.

But the seeds were sowed much earlier. It was 1959, twelve years after India's much-coveted Independence. A near-famine situation arose in Bengal due to a crop failure and an inappropriate public distribution system. Shadows of 1942-43 loomed over the Bengali diaspora as peasants and farmers of the villages once again started making inroads to the city.

Sen had already made *Baishey Sravana* in 1960 about the effect of famine on the intimate spaces of unfortunate lives. The film was based on the annihilation of 1942-43, but there again, as he was making this film, his first significant one, another famine started showing its ugly teeth. It was only the worst of times. People were out on the streets marching against the government in demand of food in plenty, at affordable prices. In the opening scene of Satyajit Ray's *Apur Sansar* made in the same year we could hear such a protest on the streets as Apu shuts himself from the external realities to dive into the inner depths of existence. The government could somewhat control the situation in 1959, but the crisis was actually far from being over. Seven years hence, Bengal was out on the streets once more on the issue of food. By then the Communist Party of India had disintegrated and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) aka CPI (M) had already been formed in 1964. The emergence of a young CPI(M) added sharp teeth and nails to the movement this time. It was then, in 1966, that students at colleges and universities mostly in and around the prestigious College Street jumped onto the bandwagon along with an active participation of the youth of the refugee colonies of South Calcutta. It was no wonder that Bengal needed a change, a change of old-aged ideas, a change from elderly leadership, a change from relying on hegemony to rushing headlong.

Every crisis in the history of mankind had churned out unfamiliar terms, innovative words, new vocabulary to

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