

MRINAL Sen, one of the major film directors of Bengal and a forerunner of New Cinema in India, has bagged several international awards. His Akaler Sandhaney (In search of famine) bagged the Silver Bear at Berlin (1981) and also the national awards for the best feature film, best direction, best screen play, and best editing. His films Matira Manisha (1966) in Oriya Bhuvan Shome (1969) and Mrigaya (1976) in Hindi, Oka Oori Katha (1977) in Telugu made him cross the boundaries of his native state and talk in the language of other Indian states.

The celluloid world of Mrinal Sen is close to life but at the same time, his movies make a clean break with the realist tradition and narrative structure. As a master craftsman, he not only portrays social conflicts but also, individual traumas effectively and puts across his socio-economic-political messages with a reasonable level of success.

Here are excerpts from a lively interview with him.

What made you start filmmaking and continue the same?

Well....my entry into cinema was very accidental. When I was a student I was not a habitual film goer. I used to read a lot. Though I was a student of physics, I used to read a lot of literature philosophy, sociology, politics and poetry. A jack of all trades but master of none. (Laughter). Then one day I just ran into an interesting book on cinema by a German author whom I like very much. Since then I am watching films. I started reading books on cinema.

What I found in films was nothing to do with what I read in the books on the art of cinema. So I developed a hatred for films made in India, and love for the cinema which I read in books. These things were put together. Subsequently I joined the film society movement. Then I started taking movies. Now I have been growing; I have been leaping; I have been sitting idle; I have been walking forward, backward, this way and that way. Even now I feel I am learning.

What have you to say about the present day commercial cinema of Bengal? How do they look in comparison to the movies produced in other states?

I tell you... It is true that the New Cinema emerged in Calcutta. Then it did spread all over the country. Now we find serious film makers in Bombay, in the south. Not much in Tamil Nadu, sorry to say this. But in Kerala. Previously in Karnataka, very good movies were made. Adoor Gopalakrishnan, for instance is one of the finest film makers of India. And so also is Aravindan. I need not

one goes off the beaten track. In Bengal you see many of the movies are very popular for very wrong reasons.

Are they so glamorous like our Tamil movies?

They are trying to be glamorous. But they do not have enough money to make them glamorous. The Tamil and Telugu movies are very glossy, very glamorous. Bengal with its meagre money cannot produce them. So most of the Bengali movies are bad. There are few film makers who are quite good. For that matter I tell you most of the Indian films are terribly bad.

Whenever I tell my friends and relatives, "let us go to 'Pathar Panjali' or 'Interview', they say, "Oh, for an art movie? It is slow moving so boring." What is your comment?

What I say is, what is true of a poet, — Since you are a poet, I tell you — is true of a film maker. Will poets go by other men's words? You go by your own conscience.

Unlike poetry, a lot of money is involved in film-making and because cinema is part of the mass media, what use is screening art films at empty theatres?

I really feel bad when my movies fail. I feel very bad. I have collapsed very many times in my life. Still we go on making it. The best way to serve your medium is to serve your conscience. That is what I feel. You serve your own conscience. You will learn in that process. You are taking it to people. They react to it in divergent ways. You are also correcting yourself accordingly. A great Bengali philosopher has said, "you need to correct your own conclusions". You keep on correcting your own self. Not that you are going by what others say. You are trying to think about yourself. You argue with your people. You argue with yourself. No word is the last word. When your reader rejects your poetry, he is not your last one. What I am today is the logical extension of what I was in the past.

You have been stamped as an exponent of political cinema. In your early days of cinema, did you ever resolve to give political cinema?

I don't really understand. At a certain point of time I felt that I should reflect the time in which I live. Here, everything and any thing with social implications in a larger context is taken to be political. In the relationship between man and woman, if it is placed in a social perspective it becomes political. A political movie to my understanding, need not have a political situation. I am not talking politics or party programmes. So that way, when I made Bhuvan Shome in 1969, I came back to Calcutta. I found a lot of unrest; lot of

in which I have made certain statements very very openly.

Even in your movie 'Interview' you have given loud messages at the tail end?

Yes. Yes. You're right. I was not ashamed of being called a pamphleteer. People call me pamphleteer. I was a pamphleteer. Well, it was. As long as it keeps me emotionally active I am not ashamed of remaining so. It was made at a time when no left party meetings were allowed. That was the time I made the film. That was around 1971. It was very blatant in a way.

Very didactic in a way. People liked it because they were not allowed to talk against authority.

Has it done well in box office?

They came to the theatre just like they come to public meetings. Because Calcutta, without a meeting, at least once in a while is a hamlet without a prince. (Laughs). So it was not the film alone that made it possible. Film plus time. When the opposition party came to power they became a bit self-indulgent. So that was the time I thought it would be good to get into myself. Because I am a part of the society, when I talk about myself, I talk about the whole of the society. So that was how I started questioning myself.

Do you believe that by making movies one can change the society?

Well...Cinema is no magic. Cinema, I tell you, is not different from poetry or other arts. You spend more on a cinema than you spend on making a painting or publishing a book of poetry. The importance of any art does not depend on the volume of money you employ. You can only make the people see it. But when they come out they get disturbed or affected by cinema. The point is to disturb the audience. The point is to raise a debate. It is not necessary that I should agree with your poetry. But if it gives enough food for me to debate, that is enough. That way a film can create the right atmosphere where you can think in the right way.

'Parallel cinema' is said to be recently on the decadence even in Hindi. The 'Middle Cinema' wave has also subsided. Why?

This is one thing which I do not agree with you at all. I don't like this thing called 'Middle Cinema', having a little bit of formula stuff. This type of irritating cocktail is atrocious. I don't like it at all. Though I like my cinemas to be seen by many, I consider this bad. In a way I am also in a commercial set-up. I make films for the minority spectators. I don't care for larger spectators. That is the way of life. But we have to bring out a sort of business mechanism also. So when I find more people to see my films it becomes a



fool. I know that my films do not fetch that. So I don't chase such a crowd. But at the same time I take care that my money is coming back to me with some profit. I will see that I am allowed to make films. Am I clear? That way this is a continuous battle.

Since cinema is a mass medium is it right to remain satisfied with a minority audience?

When people say cinema is a mass medium I feel a bit uncomfortable why, you know? If you are a painter most of your paintings are abstract and you will get very few viewers to appreciate. In the same manner as a poet you know that people should have certain knowledge of poetry to understand and appreciate a poet. Even if I am not able to draw a straight line, I need have an understanding of painting. Without going to a painting school, I have to train myself to appreciate painting. To be a good reader you have to fulfil certain conditions. First, you should know the alphabets. But if you want to read for instance Bharathi and to talk about the words in that, in addition to the knowledge of alphabets you need to organise your mind to appreciate a work of art. Same way, just a pair of eyes to see, a pair of ears to hear will certainly

aspect. So by simply buying a ticket and going inside the theatre and watching a film and giving a verdict on it is not enough. You must know how to see a film. When people say film is a mass medium and it should reach larger audience, in reality it is not like that. I must have an understanding of whom I am talking to right now, for the moment. I cannot say the same things to the person who is serving the breakfast here.

Such being the case how do you manage with constraints in communication when you work in other languages like Hindi, Oriya or Telugu?

Very difficult. But I have to manage. I wanted to do a film on poverty and exploitation. The culture of poverty and exploitation would be the same all over the world. The story of poverty is going to be the same all over the world. So the story was based in U.P. When I wrote the story I thought of a Bengal village. I wanted to market the entire thing in Telangana. I wrote it in my language and got it translated by a playwright in Hyderabad. Then I have to depend a lot on actors. But when I make a film in my language, Bengali, I know its nuances, which is very important. But for

The interaction between the actor and me, interaction between one character and the other ... I foresee a kind of chemistry operates and you will never know what happens.

When your movies are screened abroad, do you think they are received in the same, right perspective in which you portrayed it? Once Satyajit Ray wrote that songs in Indian films were mistaken by a western critic for a Brechtian technique.

Over-reading is really a very difficult problem. Sometimes they find something in my films which I never thought of. (Laughs) I know, I know for instance a section of critics are all praise for Guru Dutt. No doubt he is a good film maker. But I don't consider him the way the French people do. It varies from person to person. Some people think I don't know how to make a film. Some people like my film. Take Adoor. Some like his films. Some don't. So there are people who see things wrongly even in your home land. There are people who think songs are Brechtian technique (Laughs). Once a Frenchman, a camera man and a director came to Calcutta. In a documentary on Calcutta, when a lot of people are bathing in Ganga, he said, "Ha, they are taking a holy bath". I told him not to say so. Ninety per cent of the people who take bath here don't have water in their taps. They have no bathrooms. So they have to take bath in the open. They can piss safely when they are inside the water. There are some people who take bath religiously. So this sort of easy conclusions are there. That is also here.

Have you seen any Tamil film here at Madras? If yes, what is your opinion?

Yes, I have seen some. But I don't remember. Honestly I am not much impressed. I have never been much impressed by Tamil movies except one in which, I saw ... that was made in black and white in which Kamalahasan played a photographer. In fact, I am very fond of the performance of Kamalahasan. I like him. He is a great actor. As a matter of fact, I wanted to have for my recent film Charuhasan to cast him in the father role. Then I realised that his Hindi is not as good as others'. I depend very much on the nuances of the language which an actor can bring out. I was watching the Vasan's film Chandralekha, on T.V. I was deeply impressed by the technical finesse of the film, which is also very much important for a movie.

When you say you produce your movies for minority spectators, how do you manage to make them viable?

If you can capture the minority pockets all around the country that itself will be sizeable. Even outside the country there

making is not as expensive as big magnates think. So on one hand you have to find how you can make low budget films and on the other you should see that they are also technically excellent. Content must be very rich. What is true of me in India is true of any director of any value. I have read somewhere that you are very fast in making a film. Is it so?

Yes, For instance I have started my latest film in Hindi, around September. Now I am doing my editing at Madras. Normally for camera work I take three to four weeks. I shoot at a stretch. All the actors will be there. We will work 14 hours a day. We started this film on Sept. 4 and completed shooting on Sept. 30. I have my own unit. So there is no problem.

Could you please tell us something about the movie you are at present working on?

This is a Hindi movie. Sriram

Lagoo. Shabana Azmi, and Aparna Sen are all acting. It is about a man who is a very good academician. After his retirement, one day it was raining heavily. He was watching the water as if he has never seen rain before. In the evening he tells his wife that he is going out and he will be back soon. But he does not come back. The days roll into weeks. Weeks into months. Months into years. Now his wife and children talk about it in introspection. So there is a continuous dialogue between the past and the present. That way they try to understand the side of the man, the lost man in the context of the present situation. The tragedy of the life is that one lives his life only once. If you can start your life afresh, you can avoid the mistakes you have committed in your life. But this is not a flash back.

INDRAN