

Contribution of Mrinal Sen in Indian Socio - Political Cinema; A Study of Sen's Major Socio- Political Films

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Abstract

Film is a device that gives platform for reflecting contemporary social issues and it also works as watchdog for political system. Indian cinema has been, since long, a strong medium to portray and comment on social issues of its respective times. Although politics and social issues go hand in hand, Indian Cinema has been, though not as a rule, seen to ignore the politics largely. History of Indian politics has always been dramatic in nature and it seems to be following the same path in present too. In spite of this, there's a strong disconnect between the filmmakers and the continuously ongoing political drama. Mrinal Sen was one filmmaker among very few others, who has fearlessly addressed social issues and their entanglement with the contemporary politics. This paper, mainly, will study the socio-political approach of Mrinal Sen's filmmaking with some of his films like Calcutta Trilogy (1970 to 1973), Chorus (1974), Ek Din Pratidin (1979) and their relation with contemporary socio-political situations in Bengal. This study will not be limited for his subjects but it will go in deep for his characterization and situations chosen to comment on contemporary socio political issues. It also explains the connections of Mrinal Sen's social and political ideologies with his cinema. Indian Cinema has seen a number of renowned filmmakers who have addressed social issues in their films under the tag of 'art cinema' but they rarely seem to make any comment on the political aspect. Mrinal Sen stands out in the league of his contemporaries as far as his approach towards the concept and style of film making is concerned and therefore, it becomes important to study his contribution to what we can call-'Indian socio-political cinema'.

Keywords: Indian Socio - Political Cinema, Mrinal Sen, Indian Cinema etc.

Introduction

Human being can be considered as a definite connecting link between cinema, society and politics. Cinema is an art, which reflects human being and his life in the contemporary society; it is recreation of reality or an absolutely new creation of imagination. Evidently, cinema has its roots in the events or situations happening in reality. Politics is one of the important foundations of this society and hence it is inseparable from cinema. When such kind of a cinema, having stories about social issues and their political facets that may be shown in realistic or imaginary manner, is called socio political cinema. Globally, this genre of socio-political has been used as a device for educating, communicating and informing people about realities. Across the globe, cinema has been a means to social reforms, Russian new wave, Italian neo realism, and French New Wave are some of the examples.

In India, such revolutions have not seen to be headed by cinema but it has definitely played a role in giving voices to people who can't speak. If we look at the history of Indian cinema, after independence, many directors

took this opportunity to communicate with people about real and hard facts about India. All these films are termed as 'Indian Art / Parallel Cinema', which started around 1953 with 'Do Bigha Zamin'. Filmmakers like Bimal Roy, Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak, Mrinal Sen, Mani Kaul, Adoor Gopalkrishnan, Shyam Benegal, and others did not make films just to establish cinema as business but cinema as a medium to communicate.

Instead of talking about film stars who joined politics and vice versa, this paper will try to search the films that had contemporary social and political relevance. Unfortunately, this type of filmmaking was not given a stage in mainstream cinema, eventually; all the major socio-political films were made in regional languages. Owing to the fact that West Bengal had a lot of happenings on its political stage, the contemporary Bengali films took the lead in this type of filmmaking. These political and social upheavals were taken up by some of the filmmakers like Satyajit ray, Ritwik Ghatak and Mrinal Sen as the subjects of their films. This paper, among the three filmmakers mentioned above, will mainly highlight the works of Minal Sen. Sen was

completely different in his style of filmmaking. He was a director with different sensibilities, which generated realism in fiction and reduced the distance between actor and viewer. It is important to observe the contemporary situations, which Sen used beautifully to comment on its dark side and its political reasoning.

Indian socio-political film scenario and Mrinal Sen's contribution

Indian society is made up of different religions, casts and social classes. These differences also generate huge amount of social and political issues. Therefore, politics cannot be considered as a separate field or section in Indian society. There are different categories of socio-political cinema as per its structure and way of presentation. Some films use politics as the subject and for some the subtext is political, or is derived from political ideologies. The last decade of Indian cinema was altogether different from the earlier one. After liberalization of Indian economy and effects of globalization, the Indian social structure and behavior had changed completely. These changes could be seen in cinema too. Films like *Satyagrah*, *Aarakshan*, *Gangajal*, *Apaharan* had political characters, which were either corrupt or had mafia connections. Prakash Jha is one of new directors who made films on contemporary social issues with its political aspect. Characters in his films were overtly political and his film depicted the limits of social stagnancy against exploitation. Films like *Sarkar*, *Satya* portrayed the mafia connections of the politics and exposed the dark side of Indian politics, especially in metro cities like Mumbai. Films like *Maqbool*, *Omkara* and *Gangs of Wasseypur* uncovered the fact that this type of mafia culture did not only exist in metros; but also was deeply rooted in all the parts of our country.

Earlier, Gulzar's films like *Andhi*, *Hu Tu Tu* and *Machis* did choose contemporary socio-political subjects. Filmmakers like Ghatak and MS Sathu tried to explore the political backgrounds of Indo-Pak partition. Films like *Gandhi*, *Sardar Patel* and Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar portrayed the historical-political events. Many regional filmmakers attempted to comment on the social issues and their political facets, like Jabbar Patel with *Samna*, *Sinhasan* in Marathi and also some of the South Indian directors and Bengali artists.

India has, by long and by no means, remote history of feudal, imperialist and capitalist exploitation of the weak many and by the strong few. Despite every good intention corruption, collusion, self-aggrandizement and nepotism are still the part of system¹ (John W. Hood, 1993, p.20). This situation was there in all the parts of country but Bengal was in a bigger mess. After independence, communist ideology was taking over the minds to protest against government, especially in West Bengal. This gave rise to naxalite movement in naxalbari region of Bengal. All these situations brought the artists of Bengal together to start a cinematic movement to express their anger

against the contemporary situation. With these complications, Satyajit Ray started his film *Pratidwandi* which was based on naxalite movement. Immediately after some days Mrinal Sen also started his film *Interview*, which was based on the issue of unemployment. The style of Sen's filmmaking was very much influenced by communist ideology. This was a very dynamic period for the film industry when Sen started his trilogy, which was openly supporting communism.

Mrinal Sen largely followed a pattern, not cinematic but ideological, of getting characters influenced by the director's ideology and asking questions that represent the questions raised by the contemporary society. This made him different from Ray and Ghatak. Ray's political films were limited to the cinematic experience to a great extent and he chose to refrain from making any political comment as a director. Whereas, Mrinal Sen, to quote Derek Malcolm, "traced the social and political ferment of India with greater audacity than any other Indian director." He showed unrest, Naxalite movement in his city and throughout India. He mirrored class conflict as much as middle-class angst. He sang of tribal exploitation and global collapse of the Communist dream. Yet, Sen established the fact that an iconoclast needs to demolish only the illogical, not every value that's prevalent.² (Ratnottama Sengupta, 2013) When we look into the history of Indian Cinema, certainly there are number of directors who have made their mark and presented Indian Cinema across the globe. It was Mrinal Sen, who was probably the first filmmaker to break the image of Indian Cinema.

Shyam Benegal, veteran director of Indian cinema said, "Mrinal's form was never static, he didn't follow conventions and he took risks and created his own, making restlessness his metier." Girish Kasarwalli, a graduate from FTII and one of the leading South Indian directors said, "*Ek din Pratidin*, *Khandahar* and *Kharij* started questioning middle-class morality, attitude and values. We, from this class, started looking at ourselves a new". Mrinal Sen had inspired many film makers with his subjects and style, a young director like Nandita Das also admits that her film *Firaaq* has Mrinal Sen's influence.³ (Priyanka Dasgupta, 2012)

Mrinal Sen's socio-political cinema

If we discuss about the Mrinal Sen's filmography, we can certainly comment on his transitions as a filmmaker. Cinema of Mrinal Sen was always socially relevant but his style of making and analyzing concepts changes with time. Till 'Bhuvan Shome', Sen was commenting on social issues, but never did so on political issues. Mrinal Sen's Cinema is clearly divided in three phases in his filmmaking life, each change occurring after an intense phase of deep introspection. Each of these transformations involved distinct changes in the areas of film content, narrative patterns, and filmmaking techniques of his cinema. After 1970, in his second phase of film making, his characters

are no more individuals; they are representatives of their class. This necessitated a shift from delving deeper into individual psychology to that of exploring class conflict, the classes themselves being products of history and antagonistic to each other. His characters now become 'types' and his films more overt. Without a doubt, this was the most intense phase of political filmmaking of his life.⁴ (Tuggingonmoust Aches, nd)

Calcutta Trilogy

A number of socio-political factors were affecting the films coming out of Bengal during this time. Towards the end of the colonial period, Bengal had progressively lost prominence in national politics. The glory days of the cultural 'renaissance' of the early nineteenth century were over and a gradual but steady phase of disillusionment was beginning to set in. Moreover, factors like the refugee crisis and the debilitating man-made Bengal famine of 1943 made matters worse. People started migrating to the cities in search of jobs and Calcutta became the place, which held the promise of a new life. Artworks of the period began to focus upon the cityscape as a space of disillusionment, growing unemployment, crushed ideals and unfulfilled dreams. The radical youth politics of the '60s also found expression in this works.⁵ (Sucheta Chakraborty, 2013) In the starting of 70s' under the leadership of Charu Mujumdar, different parts of society started a war against the government, which was called peoples' war. All these people were supporting Communist Party of India (Marxist Leninist) and wanted to change the political scenario of state, which was dominated by Indian national Congress (I) since years. This war started tremendous unrest in Calcutta and a series of killings followed. This overall unrest triggered Sen to comment on these situations through the medium of communication he had—the cinema.

"It was early 1970s that the very air in Calcutta seemed to crackle with anger. That was period when I made three films in three successive years – interview, Calcutta 71 and padatik. They were justifiably, angry and restless.... and in varying degrees, both passionate and blatant. That was when my team and I could not escape the pressure of our times. That was when we affirmed our condition to rebellion. All this perhaps reads like a pamphlet but that was our reality"

- Mrinal Sen.⁶ (Mrinal Sen, 2002, p. 100)

Film 'Interview' (1971)

This was the first film of Calcutta trilogy made by Mrinal Sen based on the issue of unemployment. It was one of the first attempts to make a comment on post-colonial political psychology of the country. As far as the style of filmmaking is concerned, it was for the first time ever that a combination of newsreel and fiction was used in a film.

The reason why we call these films political is that his characters were not individuals but they represented a

larger section of the society. Ranjit Mallik, the protagonist of this film represented the middle class youth having responsibility of his family. He had sweet dreams to settle with his fiancé Bulbul and live a happy married life. This film showed a real struggle of this protagonist for getting a better job and it also highlighted the real facts about people's mindsets, who were controllers or bosses of these middle class people.

In the late sixties, Calcutta, all British remnants from the city architecture and sculpture are vanishing or vandalized, people were getting more British than ever, in their fashion and tastes. Macaulay's prophecy finally came to fruition. 'A class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect' came to rule over the city. Englishmen left, but their legacy stayed on.⁷ (Mrinal Sen's Interview revisited, 2007). This dilemma of Indian society had always been an issue for new generations who wanted to search its own ways. There is a situation in the film in which protagonist, Ranjit talks to his girlfriend about the condition of dress code for interview. Ranjit doesn't follow the dress code and appears for the interview in a traditional Bengali attire, as a result of which, he gets rejected. Beginning the personal protest like this, the protagonist throws a stone at the glass showcase to destroy the mannequin in the end. This action of throwing stone was a symbol of physical protest against the situation. In the last part of *Interview* after breaking of this glass Sen attached the news reel of Vietnam War and Negro movement in America.⁸ (Dipankar Mukhopadhyay, 2009, p. 92)

Interview was appreciated in its subject as well as its style. For this subject, Mrinal Sen never used a poetic form of presentation like Ray or Ghatak used in their films. In any Indian cinema before this, protagonist had never talked to the audience directly. For the first time ever, this Brektian theory of breaking the wall and talking to the audience directly, was used by Sen. This made it more real breaking audiences' imagination. K. K. Mahajan used handheld camera for making shaky images, which symbolized Ranjit's struggle.

Film Calcutta 71 (1971)

This film is one of the most important films of Sen's filmmaking career. This film can be called a peak point in his second phase of filmmaking, where he showed the anger in tremendous ruthless way. *Calcutta 71* was a sequel of *Interview*, but it was way too different from *Interview* in many ways. Sen, in one of his interviews, argues that one should know how and why the anger reached that stage. The anger and turbulence that gripped the city had a history, it just did not happen one fine morning. Hence, Mrinal Sen decided to go back decade by decade, to find out the roots of anger.⁹ (Dipankar Mukhopadhyay, 2009, p. 98)

This film was divided in 5 parts—it starts with a narrator and a starting montage. Then there were 3 different stories from notable Bengali writers, which were

placed in decade of 1933, 1943 and 1953. Sen, different from his earlier films, used the voice of a young man, who is speaking about poverty, exploitation and death without any reference of time. Sen used this device to cut the subject from time frame and made it universal. He again used the montage in the beginning, which was in the form of newsreel that gives a feeling of nonfiction to the film. Sen's protagonist, though wasn't a specific character, was a 20 year old guy whose death is announcer on radio news. The last frame of *Interview* of breaking the glass became the starting point of this film. The first story of this film was about a rainy night and a poor family's struggle to save itself. In this part Sen showed a facet of poverty and helplessness. The Nilmani (father of the family) throws the dog out with in anger and frustration. Finally this family moves to another shelter as a refugee, where Nilmani sees that dog already taken a place but now Nilmani has to adjust without any option. In this story, Sen portrayed the brutality and dehumanization and the struggle of survival. Mrinal Sen's approach to poverty is at first a human and a moral one, organically extending to one of outrage; sympathy evolves logically in to class alliance, and in this sense the film becomes political one.¹⁰ (John Hood, 1993, p. 21)

Second story also depicted poverty but it focused on the degradation of value system as a result of poverty. In this story Sen used a character, living in Delhi, separated from Bengal since years. The protagonist comes to know the misery of life in Bengal when he visits his relatives back home. During this visit, he comes to know that the women in the house had to turn to prostitution for survival. He realises the brutal fact that poverty makes human dehumanize and helpless. To survive in such a situation, human being has no option but to lose his/her values.

The third story of *Calcutta 71* is of a smuggler boy, Gaurang, 15 years old, who runs his family. Contrary to first two characters, which surrender to the situation, Gaurang, in this story, when brutally bitten up by a healthy passenger, does not accept the fact and takes revenge in the end.

After this story, Sen takes us in 1971 at a rich party, where an intoxicated political leader delivering a lecture on the effects of poverty to his sycophants while attending a high society party, is also the most jarring and disruptive segment of the film. The sequence is extremely fragmented and disruptive – the speech of the politician, which is almost a monologue, is juxtaposed with collages of still photographs of emaciated victims of hunger, newsreel shots of aggressive street demonstrations and consequent police repression, documentary footage of Vietnam War and other revolutionary movements, political graffiti proclaiming the politics of annihilation and even a shot from the iconic mannequin breaking sequence from *Interview*! The collage of diverse materials is an effort to force the viewer to identify the history of India as proclaimed by the title-card which links-up the 4 stories – "the history of poverty, the history of

deprivation and the history of exploitation."¹¹ (*Calcutta 71*, nd) The film ends when the 20 year old guy, who was killed by police while protesting, is shown with blood on face. Mrinal Sen arranges this complete sequence like a theater, where that protagonist directly talks with audience and we can see his only face on black background. Here Sen again starts his nonfiction style for showing protest, killings and photos of poverty in between the monologue of his main protagonist.

Sen, in the end, through the words of this 20 year old guy, appeals to the audience to take part in the protest against poverty. In *Calcutta 71*, Sen deliberately makes a political statement. Through an analysis of poverty over decades, he reaches a stage where he can identify the enemy and mobilize all his forces against those instruments of torture and oppression.¹² (Dipankar Mukhopadhyay, 2009, p. 103)

Film Padatik (1973)

The last part of *Calcutta* trilogy is named *Padatik* (Urban Guerrilla), which was released in year 1973. Mrinal Sen made this film to introspect the political situations in Bengal and their effects on the society. In *Padatik*, Sen's protagonist asks some questions to the leadership and also to himself to find what went wrong about the movement. The Communist Party, in those days, was breaking due to differences in ideologies and the situation became chaotic, which insisted to rethink on the ideological grounds. In this film, protagonist is a young political activist of party who escapes from police and hides in the apartment of a lady who is divorcee. Sumit, the protagonist's introspection is the main crux of the film.

Mrinal Sen says, "PADATIK has something to do with the contemporary political scene. To my mind, I tried to analyze the political situation the way I felt it would be done. It could have been clearer but I felt that even this should be done. We had arrived at a point when the Left movement was lying low and the leftist parties were in disarray, losing perspective, and isolated, at a time when there was a need for unceasing self-criticism. That is why the protagonist in PADATIK has unshaken faith in the party, even though he has suffered reverses due to faulty direction. Yet he does question the leadership bitterly and uncompromisingly. It is detrimental, ruinous, and suicidal not to discuss these issues at all when you know there is something wrong somewhere, maybe in the cadres, maybe in the leadership, maybe somewhere else."

- Mrinal Sen¹³ (Mrinal Sen, 2002, p. 181)

Padatik also deals with the internal relationship and politics in those relations. Sumit is detached from his family and old father who is ex freedom fighter. Shilpi and her ex husband and their boy is another relationship with a different aspect of politics in it. And platonic relationship between Shilpi and Sumit, which does not have any politics as such, but this relationship, is a result

of external political situations. Sen also touched upon another aspect— isolation of a young political worker from society and his day-to-day life in that isolation. There was a similarity in Ray's *Pratidwandi* and Sen's *Padatik*, as both used funerals in symbolic way. Sen used it to reunite Sumit and his father where father suggests him to fight forever and wishes him luck.

Interview ends with a call for total change, *Calcutta 71* asks the audience to get provoked and react, and *Padatik* urges mobilization of progressive forces. For a question asked about these solutions Sen replies, "It is not a responsibility of the artist to reach a definite conclusion... my job is to analyze the reality and put it in a proper perspective...." ¹⁴ (Dipankar Mukhopadhyay, 2009, p. 110)

Some other important Socio Political films of Mrinal Sen

After Calcutta trilogy once again Mrinal Sen changed his way of conceptualizing the subject and even his presentation style. All the films of Mrinal Sen have something related to society, so while studying socio-political film scenario it is important to look at some of his films excluding Calcutta trilogy. After *Padatik* he made a social satire called *Chorus*, and then a series of introspection has started with *Ek Din Pratidin*. The films included in this topic are not about politics or even it is not depicting any contemporary political situations (like Calcutta trilogy), but all these films are socially connected and somewhere in the background Sen touches the political aspect of it.

Film Chorus (1975)

Interesting and evident fact about chorus is – one can identify what is being spoken; but we get a united sound making it unidentifiable. This film was based on true events, which happened in Sen's life. He made this political satire out of these events. The theme of unemployment was a common thread between *Interview* and *Chorus*. However, Sen treated this film differently. Actual group of unemployed people was used in *Chorus*, which was represented by Ranjit Mullic in *Interview*. This film was shot in a way that subject and its characters are timeless. It is evident from the government job advertisements that we see even today, that more than required people apply for the jobs, meaning, that the government has failed to provide basic requirements to upcoming generation.

In *Chorus*, there are three main dimensions — Mandal Chacha is the one who exploits the poor with muscle power, money power and he has dreams of joining politics. Mr. Mukherji is an employee of same company but he is on strike since six months and Utpal Dutt's character is an officer who recruits new candidates. All the unemployed crowd and worker on strike come together to fight against company forming a Chorus.

Film Ek Din Pratidin (1979)

In the year of 1979 CPI (Communist Party of India) was established and settled in West Bengal, there were no situations of protest. On this backdrop, although Sen was not dissatisfied with the overall surrounding conditions, he wasn't either getting the answers to questions he has asked in *Padatik*. Sen's uneasiness is clear from one of the dialogues about finding the real enemies and difference between friends and foes. In another dialogue, he used Elio Vittorini's saying — "The problem with fanatics among the members of Communist Party is that they feel they have pocketed the truth; but the point is not to pocket the truth but to chase the truth."

"That's also when I thought instead of pointing my finger at the enemy outside, I should point my finger at the enemy inside me. That's when I began making film about my own community and that is when I started doing film like *Ek Din Pratidin*."

- Mrinal Sen¹⁵ (Mrinal Sen, 2002, p. 62)

To search enemy within himself, Sen used the plot where a young woman, who is the only earning member in the family, doesn't come home after work. This situation slowly changes its course from worry to social morality and different aspects of their interpersonal relationships. This film was not overtly political like his earlier films, but he commented on interpersonal relations and shortcomings in our social structure. Another issue he touched upon was the patriarchy and the gender inequality. Sen used close shots, grills and bars of the window to show the restrictions and social implications. He even developed characters, which represented different age groups and their frames of morality.

Politics was a part of Sen's life. Even a non-political film like *Genesis* portrayed interpersonal relationships and he linked it to the Marxist ideology. He used the basic Marxist theory of 'thesis, antithesis, synthesis' in the film.

Sen, in one of his interviews once said, "I believe that you don't have to take up political scenes in order to make a political film. You don't have to have a political activist as a protagonist to make a political film. You can't escape politics; it is all around you. That is why it cannot easily be defined. It all depends on your sensibility as a viewer and my sensibility as a filmmaker" ¹⁶ (Cine Tracks a film journal, 1981, p. 27)

Conclusion

India is a developing country and because of its social diversities, the country has always been struggling with social problems and political extremes. On this background, the media in the country, especially cinema, is expected to portray a real picture rather than a portraying dreamy and non-realistic picture just for the sake of entertainment. Indian parallel cinema has attempted this in the past and has been successful too,

up to an extent. The emergence of the neo realism or the new wave cinema in India started with Mrinal Sen's films. His films were very much inspired from real events and situations. After studying his films, another thing that comes to surface is about his love towards the city of Calcutta. As a result, Sen remains a regional filmmaker but talks about things, which are universal.

Sen's mastery over the political films is explored in many ways than one. A person, who had seen worst effects of poverty, unemployment, struggle for survival would not make films that only entertain. He did succeed in communicating what he intended to. Mrinal Sen's socio-political cinema explains his internal unrest and also his understanding towards politics.

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