Film Analysis and History II

Realism and Parallel cinema in India

New Wave Indian cinema from the 1960s onwards attempted to make films as an alternative to mainstream commercial films produced in Bombay.

Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak, Bimal Roy, Mrinal Sen, Mani Kaul, Kumar Shahani Saeed Mirza, Adoor Gopalakrishnan, G. Aravindan etc.

Roots of Indian Parallel cinema

- Italian Neo-Realism
- French New Wave





The Neo-realist Aesthetic

Andre Bazin writes that like the novel, the realist aesthetic is implicit in the narrative technique in which "a film is always presented as a succession of fragments of imaged reality on a rectangular surface…the ordering in time of fragments of reality."

The camera is mobile, yet it must remain still. Travelling and panning shots in Italian neo-realist films don't have the same God-like perspective as seen in Hollywood films which use camera cranes (over the top/ drone like shots)… "Everything is shot from eye-level or from a concrete point of view"…rooftops/ windows, street level etc.

Italian camera retains something of a "human quality" like the newsreel camera…

Lighting plays a minor expressive role as a lot of the scenes are shot on-location with natural light unlike studio films from German expressionist tradition or chiaroscuro techniques used in American films like *Citizen Kane*.

Paisan (Roberto Rossellini, 1946)

Satyajit Ray *Our Films, Their Films* (1976)

"Within three days of arriving in London I saw *Bicycle Thieves*. I knew immediately that if I ever made *Pather Panchali* – and the idea had been at the back of my mind for some time – I would make it in the same way, using natural locations and unknown actors."



Critique of Indian way of filmmaking, especially the "glossy" commercial cinema that is deeply invested in melodrama. He writes, "What the Indian cinema needs today is not more gloss, but more imagination, more integrity and a more intelligent appreciation of the limitations of the medium."

"What our cinema needs above everything else is a style, an idiom, a sort of iconography of cinema, which would be uniquely and recognizably Indian."

Indian films are too inspired by Hollywood mode of representation and reproduce themes that are incongruent and create dissonance. While dissonance when produced consciously can be part of the cinematic style, however in this case it is jarring.

For Ray, "The raw material of the cinema is life itself" and the truly Indian film should look for its "material in the more basic aspects of Indian life, where habit and speech, dress and manners, background and foreground, blend into a harmonious whole."

Uday Shankar's *Kalpana* as "enlightened approach" to filmmaking practice.

Some quotes from Ray about the "socially conscious film maker"

"For the truly serious, socially conscious film maker, there can be no prolonged withdrawl into fantasy. He must face the challenge of contemporary reality, examine the facts, probe them, sift them and select from them the material to be transformed into the stuff of cinema."

"…the usual credentials for a director making a film for the first time would be either to have served a longish term as a first assistant to a director, or to have been a cameraman, or, at least, a writer of film scripts. I had been none of these things. What I did have was long years of looking at films—firstly, in my school days, as a film fan, and later as a serious student of the cinema, reading about techniques and taking heiroglyphic notes in the darkness of an auditorium. These notes concerned cutting methods of various directors—mostly American—such as Ford, Capra, Huston, Wyler and Wilder."

Nayak / The Hero (1966)

- The story revolves around a matinee idol on a 24-hour train journey from Kolkata to Delhi to receive a national award. However, he ends up revealing his mistakes, insecurities and regrets to a young journalist, who realises that behind all his arrogant facade lies a deeply troubled man as his life's story is gradually revealed through seven flashbacks and two dreams.
- The film starring Uttam Kumar in main protagonist and Sharmila Tagore played second lead.



Ritwik Ghatak
Cinema and I
(1987)

"I am only groping. Groping to find the most proper expression for the theme at hand. Sometimes I may have connected, sometimes gone wide off the mark. I have tried to experiment with forms of story, treatment, styles of taking images etc. Each one of my films is quite different from the others, though I fear my personality and inclinations are in all of them. From the compositional point of view, all the films have divergent balancing principles thought to be inherent in the theme. In the soundtracks, including the music. I have tried to weave different patterns."

Film as collective art.

It is an art that has multiple forms, genres and styles.

He writes, "That is why all the forms, from utter naturalism to extreme expressionism, seem to me to be totally valid—if your thesis and temperament demand it."

Need for "committed cinema"

Writes in defense of Melodrama.

Traces the problems with Bengali cinema and its reliance on literature from the past.

Critique of Indian cinema and its industrial mode, star system, black money, faulty finance and exhibition networks.

Mediations on use of colour, sound and music in cinema.

Experimentation and the Subjective Camera

Ritwik Ghatak and the epic melodrama

The epic form allows Ghatak to shift his attention from the individual level to the collective, thereby subverting the kind of realism that had come to crystallize around the individual as the psychological and moral center of the narrative.

Following Eisenstein's writings from the 1930s celebrating cinema as a medium that encompasses other aesthetic forms, Ghatak conceived of film as an omnibus art form: he drew upon sources as disparate as classical drama and music, folk theater and music, tribal dance, Buddhist sculpture, the Vedas and the Upanishads, popular music, mythology.

meaning is generated from the collision between elements, and not from their union.

Mrinal Sen

- Several of Sen's films of the 1960s, such as Akash Kusum (Up in the Clouds, 1965), revealed his desire to break free from the conventions of commercial films.
- Regarded by many as Sen's greatest film, Bhuvan Shome (Mr. Shome, 1969) starred renowned Indian actor Utpal Dutt as a lonely bureaucrat who encounters the wife of a ticket collector accused of taking bribes. The film's use of improvisation and sardonic humour and its naturalistic depiction of rural India established it as a landmark of Indian cinema.

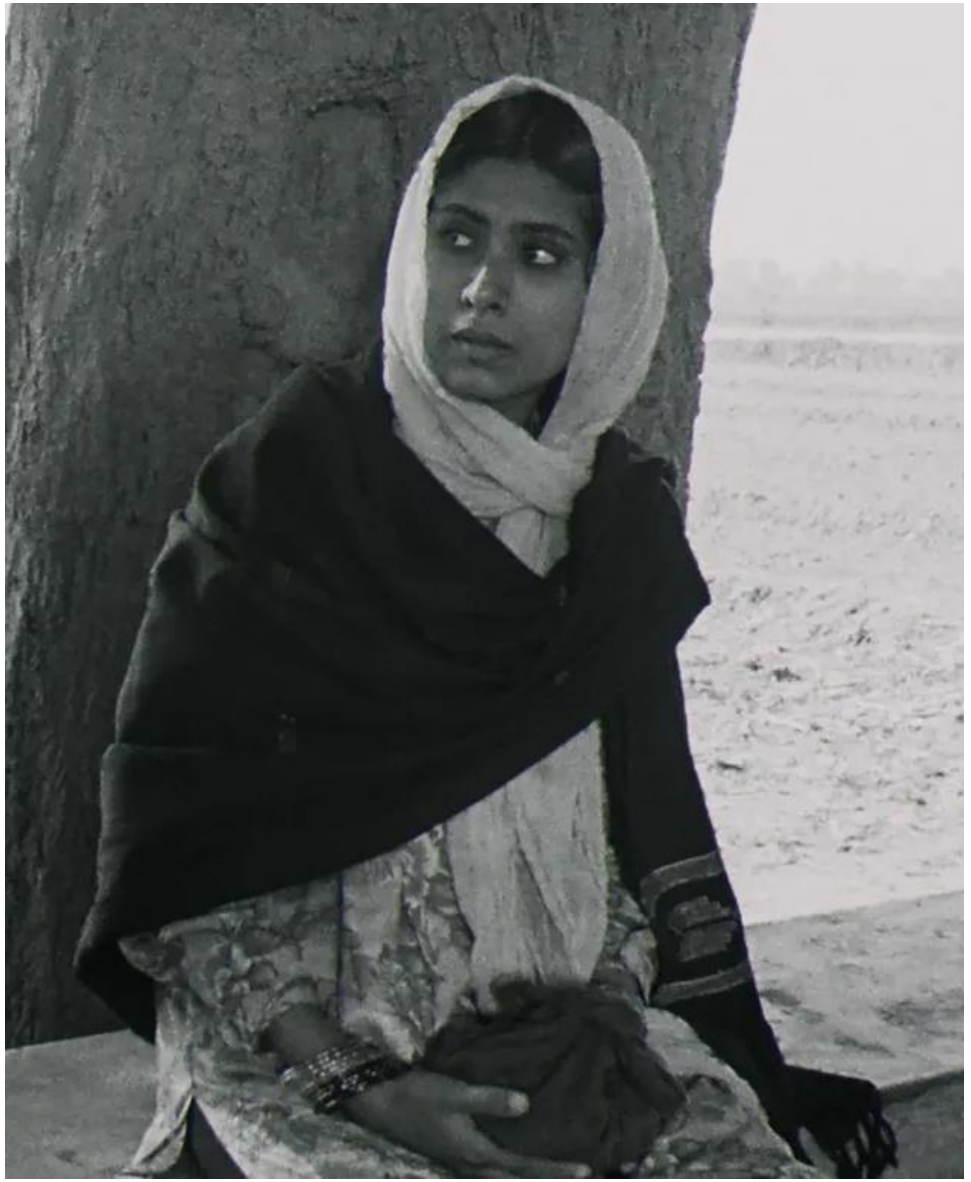


- In his Calcutta trilogy—Interview (1971), Calcutta 71 (1972), and Padatik (The Guerrilla Fighter, 1973)—Sen explored the civil unrest in contemporary Calcutta through stylistic experiments and fragmented narratives.
- Middle-class morality is examined in two of Sen's most-praised films, Ek Din Pratidin (And Quiet Rolls the Dawn, 1979), which portrays a family in despair over a missing daughter, and Kharij (The Case Is Closed, 1982), concerning a family whose servant has died from carbon monoxide poisoning in their home. Kharij won the Special Jury Prize at the Cannes international film festival in 1983.
- Akaler Sandhane (In Search of Famine, 1980), the story of a film crew documenting the 1943 Bengal famine, won the Silver Bear (Special Jury Prize) at the Berlin International Film Festival in 1981.



Mani Kaul

- He graduated from the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII) where he was a student of Ritwik Ghatak and later became a teacher.
- Starting his career with Uski Roti (1969), which won him the Filmfare Critics Award for Best Movie, he went on to win four of them in all.
- Uski Roti marked a drastic departure from earlier Indian cinema technique, form and narrative. It was one of the early formal experimental films in Indian cinema.
- He won the National Film Award for Best Direction in 1974 for Duvidha and later the National Film Award for his documentary film Siddheshwari in 1989.



Kumar Shahani

- Shahni studied at the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII) in Pune when Kaul also studied there. They were acclaimed director Ritwik Ghatak's favourite students. Shahani went to France later and assisted Robert Bresson on his 1969 film, 'Une Femme Douce' [A Gentle Woman]. He considers Ghatak and Bresson his teachers.
- Shahani's first feature film, 'Maya Darpan' [Mirror of Illusions], released in 1972, is a classic of parallel cinema. Based on the story by writer Nirmal Verma. His films are celebrated worldwide for their formal experimentation.
- The film is set in a provincial town in Northern India, at a time following the nation's independence in 1947 when India was yet to be completely integrated as a political entity and when Nehruvian socialism was about to take on the existing feudal hierarchy.
- Taran (Aditi) is the daughter of a wealthy landlord (Anil Pandya) and lives with her father and her widowed aunt (Kanta Vyas) in their ancestral mansion (which goes on to represent the whole of upper class in the film). The town is witnessing protests by newly formed labour unions which are partly being politically educated by the local railroad engineer (Iqbalnath Kaul), who seems to have an unspoken romantic relationship with Taran. Taran's unseen brother, who had, to the chagrin of their father, renounced his class privileges and gone off to an Assamese tea estate, asks Taran to join him. Stuck in a stifling patriarchal order, with pressure to marry an upper-class groom mounting, Taran decides to talk to her father about her plans.
- Shahani also directed the notable films 'Tarang', 'Khayal Gatha' 'Kasba', and 'Char Adhyay'.

