

'Strengthening democratic norms and culture is of vital importance'

Prof Syed Manzoorul Islam, retired professor of Dhaka University, who currently teaches at ULAB, shares his impressions about the election with The Daily Star's Aasha Mehreen Amin.

How did you find the general atmosphere on Election Day? How would you respond to the allegations by the opposition parties and reports of violence?

I went to vote on Sunday at around 11:30. The environment appeared to be peaceful. People stood in queues to cast their votes. There was a touch of festivity in the air. Quite a large number of Awami League (AL) supporters were milling around, helping voters find their serial numbers. But the Oikyafront/BNP supporters were conspicuous by their absence. What was more surprising was that most of the polling booths did not have polling agents from the Oikyafront. I was told that they hadn't turned up, but media reports also indicated that many agents weren't allowed to enter the booths. No election however can be truly fair and complete without the participation of the polling agents from the contending parties. There have been contradictory explanations as to why the Oikyafront agents were absent: AL maintained that they didn't turn up because they wanted to make this election questionable, while BNP complained that they were intimidated and kept away from the polling centres. There have been allegations that many of them had been picked up from their homes by law enforcing agents. If there is truth in the allegations, the Election Commission (EC) should make a thorough investigation, if at least for the sake of transparency and accountability.

There has been violence in many constituencies resulting in casualties from both sides. AL appears to have taken the brunt of these casualties—14 or so of their supporters died during the last three weeks, but some BNP supporters also were killed and many were injured. I do not however see these deaths as mere matters of statistics. To me, the deaths and injuries indicate a frustrating development in our political culture. It seems that we haven't learnt in all these years how to conduct elections without casualties and violence. This also shows that we have not really been able to pick up some of the basic norms of democratic culture, without which no democracy can function to the satisfaction of the people. If the culture of respecting each other's views and each other's private spaces is not established, we will see a recurrence of these tragic events in the future.

Media reports have shown some other irregularities. Some centres had run out of ballot papers before the end of the voting period. In at least two centres in Dhaka, polling officials went on long lunch breaks. In many centres voters with known affiliation to BNP were chased away. The EC told us that

these were isolated incidents which in no way reflect the general trend which was peaceful and fair. Once again though, we should not consign these incidents to a statistical or semi-statistical category ("isolated") and look the other way. These irregularities, perpetuated over many elections (national, municipal, local) have, unfortunately, become integral to our electoral process. But these should be addressed with all seriousness. The EC should concentrate its attention and energies to eliminating these irregularities, isolated or not, from the forthcoming elections.

So I was not one hundred percent happy with Election 2018. The gaps between my expectation and ground reality were sometimes disturbing. I am never happy seeing any of our rights, including the right to vote freely, being denied. Many voters stayed away in areas where violence took place. Many others also didn't turn up because by 12 noon many contestants they had planned to vote for had announced their withdrawal from the race. Like all other rights, the right to vote is also inviolable and should be respected by all the parties involved in an election.

So who should take the responsibility for these irregularities?

I believe that both the sides should take the responsibility for the irregularities, although the onus lies more on the party in power since this is for the first time since the restoration of democracy that elections were held under a political government. The EC had maintained that the field was level for all the parties. In reality though it was more level for AL. The sitting ministers and MPs got more mileage in their campaign than the opposition candidates; some of the candidates disregarded the

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code of conduct set up by the EC. Not all AL candidates conducted their campaign with the level of transparency maintained by Mashrafe Bin Mortuza (Narail 2). AL also dominated the campaign scene as only its posters and banners were visible.

BNP and Oikyafront also failed to come up with a vigorous campaign. I was surprised to see their candidates so subdued and low-keyed. A party that claims at least 30-35 per cent popular support failed to show its strength in terms of conducting a competitive campaign and putting polling agents in all the booths. If they knew that the polling agents would be picked up by the police or prevented from entering polling centres, why didn't the party keep a second and a third line of party workers ready? The party that enforced a three-month-long blockade after the election of 2014, appeared this time to have run out of steam. It lacked leadership and organisational strength. There have been rifts within its lead-



Prof Syed Manzoorul Islam

ership which did not go well with the voters. When the party decided to get under the umbrella of Oikyafront under the leadership of Dr Kamal Hossain, it seemed to have finally found a way out. But very quickly it resorted to playing the old card. BNP's alliance with Jamaat-e-Islami not only unsettled Oikyafront's plan (and took away much of its credibility), it also disillusioned the young voters, most of whom abandoned it. BNP's choice of candidates was also questionable in some constituencies. Its campaign lacked coordination. This became apparent when only three hours into the voting, many of its candidates withdrew from the race while its secretary general was telling the media that the withdrawals were individual decisions. It was simply a message to the followers of the party

that the election was all but over.

What about the EC's role? It has been criticised for not ensuring the basic requirements for a level playing field.

The Election Commission has not been able to work as a unified team, as a well-oiled machine. From the very beginning, it could not ensure a level playing field for all the candidates. During the election campaign, it was more critical of BNP in matters of code of conduct violation than AL. But the way it conducted the logistical and technical aspects of the election is worthy of praise.

The difference in votes of the contesting parties has been unprecedented. Why do you think the votes for the opposition especially the BNP candidates were so starkly low compared to other elections?

I would have expected the vote gaps between the winners and the top losers to be somewhere between 10 to 30 percent. But in many constituencies these were almost 60 to 70 percent. BNP maintains that ballot boxes were stuffed the night before, although it hasn't yet provided any evidence in support of the allegation. To me however, the two most important factors that denied BNP its votes were its lacklustre campaign, and abandoning the race less than half way through. Usually, women voters in rural areas go to vote after everyone in the family have had lunch. Some students of mine who are now teaching in colleges across the country told me that after 2 pm, the presence of women in the voting centres was negligible. Many others didn't turn up for fear of violence. Intimidation by AL workers was also reported in a few areas, but the presence of the military kept it to low levels.

What are your expectations from the newly formed government?

So overall, it was an election which had both positive and negative sides. One positive outcome of the election has been the participation of young voters in large numbers who, if the social communication sites are to be trusted, are ready to take ownership of the process in the future. Many young candidates have passed the election. If they are given leadership roles, the country will certainly be able to accelerate its pace of progress.

The government should take the opposition in the parliament—whatever its size—into confidence and work together for the country. The party in power should not indulge in the politics of retribution. The government should realise that development is not enough, that strengthening democratic norms and culture is

of vital importance for good governance.

Now that the government has been emboldened by a huge support, it should trim down its cabinet. The cabinet should be small and effective. Instead of being top-heavy, the government should widen its base. The fruits of development should reach everyone in an equitable manner. Income and class inequalities are on the rise. The government should make serious attempts to bring them down. AL in its election manifesto has promised to show zero tolerance to corruption. This should now be a political belief of the government. It cannot eliminate corruption until it takes into confidence all the parties addressing the issues in their different capacities, such as the TIB. There should not be unnecessary burdens or barriers placed on TIB as the organisation is working with the same aim as the government.

One other thing the government should do is revisit the Digital Security Act, and make the changes it has promised. It can enact a separate law to fight the misuse of social media sites, if necessary. But to restrict investigative journalism will not contribute to the elimination of corruption. Freedom of expression should be respected and protected. People should have the freedom of dissent. That's the spirit of democracy. I hope the government takes it as a top priority. If it does so, then it will create a culture of tolerance and mutual respect which is very important for democracy to thrive.

I would suggest that the government comes up with a 100-day plan, highlighting exactly which parts of the manifesto it is going to start working on. The 100-day plan should also indicate where it stands in respect to ensuring good governance, consolidating democratic norms, making the parliament functional, and accommodating the opposition in whatever form it exists.

And as a teacher I expect that the young people's views and their right to dissent will be respected and their demand for a larger budget allocation for the education sector will be heeded. If these are done, we will have a quality shift in our democracy, social dynamics and education.

After such an electoral debacle what should be BNP's course of action?

I believe BNP's future lies in standing on its own. It should reconsider its alliance with Jamaat-e-Islami—which has not brought it any good results, at least this time—and part ways. If the government allows BNP the space it needs to regroup, I think it will see the benefit of doing progressive politics and come up with a stronger presence in the next election.

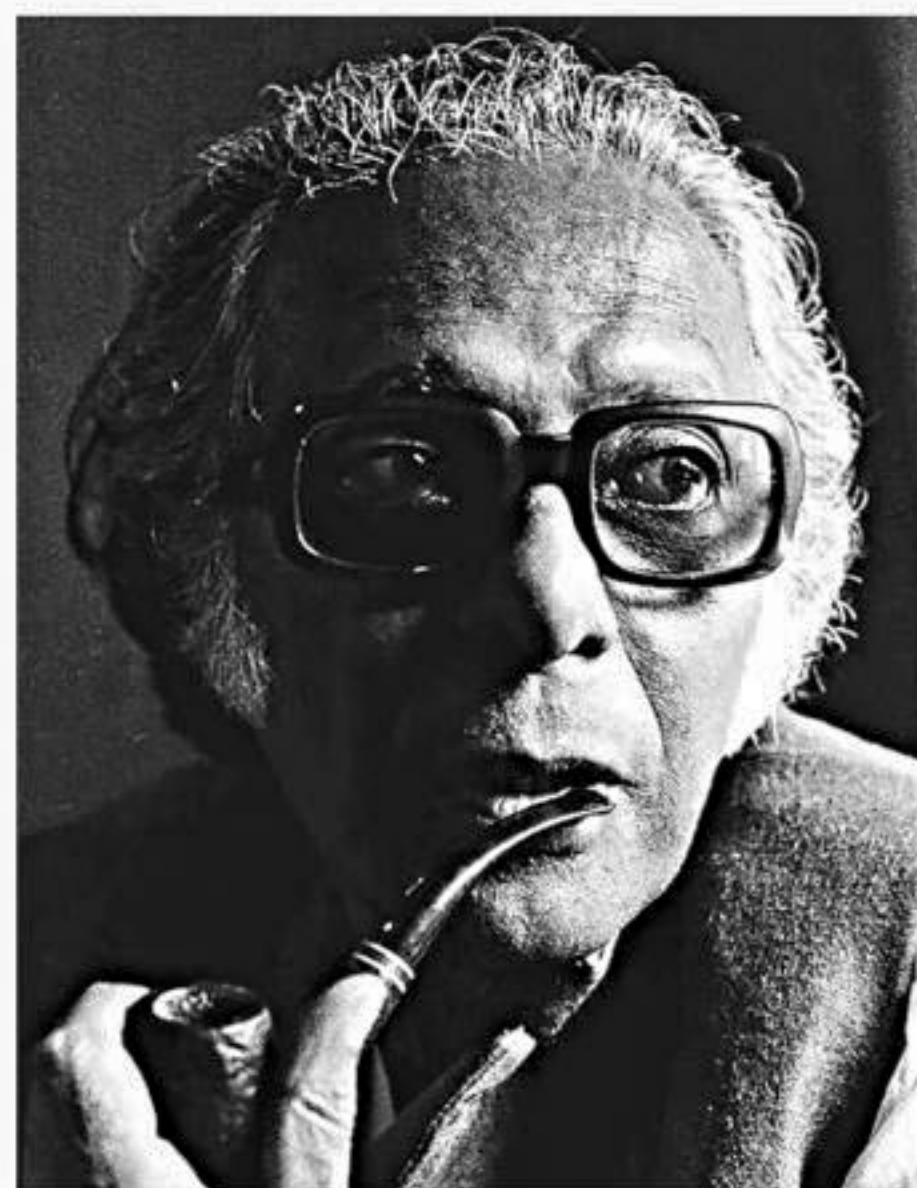
Remembering Mrinal Sen, whose films connote courage and consciousness

NAADIR JUNAID

ONLY a handful of Bengali filmmakers are revered in the realm of world cinema whose names are mentioned with legendary directors such as Jean-Luc Godard, Francois Truffaut, Ingmar Bergman, Luis Bunuel, Akira Kurosawa, Yasujiro Ozu, Ousmane Sembene, Federico Fellini, Michelangelo Antonioni, Glauber Rocha and others. Because of the innovative cinematic language, significant social messages and distinctive stylistic attributes of their films, these Bengali directors are recognised as important icons of global "auteur" cinema. They are Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak and Mrinal Sen who revolutionised art film-making in India.

Their films were instrumental in drawing the world's attention towards Bangla cinema. Films of these three illustrious directors also played an important role in influencing many other filmmakers in different regions of India to make socially-aware and artistically innovative films that depart from the conventions of commercial cinema. Ray and Ghatak died many years ago. Mrinal Sen passed away recently at the age of 95. His films replete with formal innovation and overt political statements will, undoubtedly, continue to inspire filmmakers throughout the world who have a serious interest in coming to grips with contemporary reality and using cinema as an instrument for raising a socio-political consciousness.

Ray, Ghatak and Sen made films in Kolkata in the same decades. Often, they dealt with similar subjects such as moral degeneration and political corruption of contemporary society. However, they used very different filmic forms. Their stylistic signatures are evident in their work and such unique styles serve to qualify their films as auteur films. Ray's films incorporate a liberal-humanist approach and they often emphasise lyricism and subtlety. His films bear certain similarities with the work of European art filmmakers, whereas Ritwik draws largely on indigenous elements to convey his messages. Melodrama is an important



Mrinal Sen

PHOTO: NASIR ALI MAMUN/PHOTOSEUM

statements, Sen makes the spectators think critically about the messages conveyed by his films. Therefore, his films become effective as politically critical films because he counteracts the principles of conventional cinema both thematically and stylistically.

"All [Mrinal] Sen's films, even his most lightweight, have attacked, with undisguised horror and anger, the poverty, exploitation and inherent hypocrisy of Indian society" (*Sight and Sound* 50, no 4 (1981), p 262). This observation by film critic Derek Malcolm succinctly describes the cinema of Mrinal Sen. Sen himself once said, "my

intention is to communicate as effectively as I can, to provoke the audience. The filmmaker has to be an agent-provocateur—one who disturbs the spectator and moves him to action" (cited in Shoma A Chatterji, 2003, p 31).

Sen's films stand out in the realm of Indian cinema because he frequently uses cinema as a weapon for exposing social and political injustice. Instead of providing people with an escape from the troubles and tensions of contemporary reality, Sen disturbs and shocks the spectators by showing the roots of present-day problems. His bitter denunciations make the spectators aware of the guilty forces responsible for oppression, depravity and corruption in society. Due to the uses of an unconventional story line and innovative film techniques, his Hindi feature *Bhuvan Shome* (1969) became very different from mainstream entertainment-driven films. Yet, *Bhuvan Shome* became a commercial success and it ushered in a film movement which came to be known as the New Indian Cinema. The new cinema directors addressed various social issues. But Sen's films were different owing to his strong interest in making explicitly political cinema.

At the early years of the 1970s, Sen's *Interview*, *Calcutta 71* and *Padatik* grappled with turbulent political realities when West Bengal was witnessing tumultuous and chaotic circumstances because of the Naxalite Movement. These films examined the causes of contemporary discontent and the director overtly criticised the unjust attitude of the establishment. Sen was surely taking a stand for the oppressed and displayed his sympathy for the revolutionaries aspiring to change the system. However, in *Padatik* he was also critical of the rigid and flawed beliefs held by a leader of the revolutionary party. During that perilous period, it was not easy to make such criticisms thorough cinema. But Sen amply demonstrated courage and kept making such politically critical films in those turbulent years with a view to creating consciousness of the spectators.

His subsequent films such as *Ak Din Pratidin* (1979), *Akaler Shandhaney* (1980),

Kharij (1982), etc. also became critical of social problems. But at this phase of his filmmaking career, instead of condemning the establishment Sen probed the mentality of people belonging to different classes in contemporary society and criticised prejudiced attitudes, callousness, and moral degeneration of the general people. His attempts to disclose the faults and weaknesses of middle-class members indicate that Sen was aware of the negative qualities possessed by the people of his own class. And he did not hesitate to castigate those undesirable mental attributes. Unorthodox film techniques are also used in these films, showing Sen's interest in keeping his films formally innovative.

Sen's sincere and courageous efforts to make socially-meaningful and politically-conscious films brought considerable reputation for Bangla cinema. Looking at his films, we may ask a question: Do we see that such critically-acclaimed films influence the work of contemporary Bangladeshi directors? Given that we are experiencing various social and political problems in contemporary society, it is very important to produce films which would examine the underlying causes of such problems in order to strengthen people's consciousness. But do we see our filmmakers drawing inspiration from Mrinal Sen who used cinema not as a medium of trivial entertainment but as an instrument for achieving social liberation?

It would be beneficial for our cinema if our filmmakers and film viewers perceive the importance of having artistically-innovative and socially-committed films which help people think deeply and critically about social conditions and their responsibilities towards the society. The establishment should also provide filmmakers with the opportunity to make films which attempt to make people aware of contemporary problems. Mrinal Sen's interest in keeping his films unconventional in form and content enabled the spectators to see some exceptional Bangla films. We hope Sen's successors will gain inspiration from his courage and social commitment.

Dr Naadir Junaid is Professor, Department of Mass Communication and Journalism, University of Dhaka.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS										39 Give a makeover	17 Storybook
1 Go across										40 Bird sanctuary	monster
5 Arrive										41 Tatters	18 Den
10 Metric mass										42 Rice field	19 They may clash
11 Spanish fleet										43 Pub pints	20 Reckless
12 Dope											21 Lotion additive
13 Maze runner										DOWN	
14 Reporter's concern										1 Lose traction	22 Travel document
16 Star's part										2 Air freshener scent	25 Intellect
20 Baltimore team										3 Letter before Bravo	26 Neighbor of Spain
23 Joke										4 Soup add-ins	28 Personal log
24 Hollywood's elite										5 Magnificent	30 Intense fear
25 Racer Andreotti										6 Glowing coal	31 Tired
27 Distress call										7 Black goo	33 Schnitzel base
28 Casual eateries										8 Lupino of film	34 Keenness
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YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

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