

Sen while shooting *Ek Din Pratidin*

SARAH NAFISA SHAHID

I first watched Mrinal Sen's *Interview* (1971) during my undergrad years in an attempt to watch as many "intellectual" films from the campus library as I could. I appreciated it back then, for sure. I revisited the film upon hearing of the filmmaker's passing—at a different stage of my life when I am jobless and slowly assimilating into a different culture in order to gain employment, much like the film's protagonist, Ranjit Mallik. Second time watching, I *really* appreciated the film.

The story is simple—a young man loses a job opportunity with a foreign company due to his failure to arrange a suit for the interview. Yet, the simplicity represents something powerful. Through the metaphor of the suit, Sen reminds us of the ever so common colonial mentality that haunts the postcolonial middle class. Have we not heard of urban parks closing to people in *lungis* or of "clubs" forbidding visitors wearing sandals? Can any of you dare attend an interview in a Panjabi? The postcolonial society birthed from British imperialism still holds the benchmark up to its former oppressors.

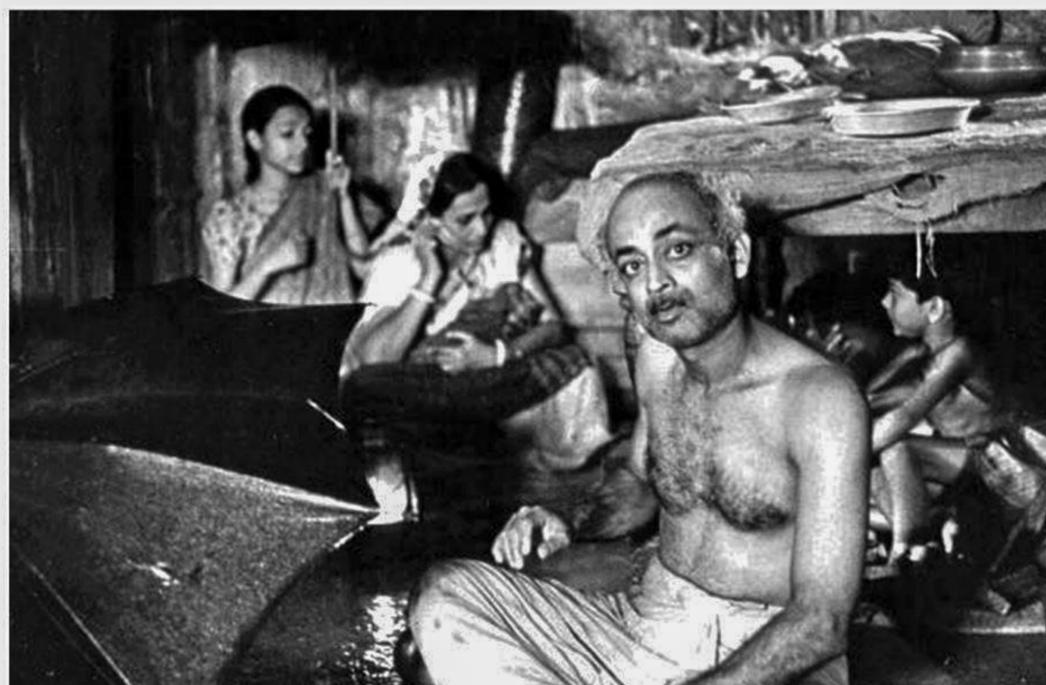
The film begins with a scene of a colonial statue being taken down—much like the recent removal of confederate statues in the US, or of the Gandhi statue in Ghana—an exterior act of anticolonial resistance. Yet, the real decolonisation needs to occur within our minds. The



A still from *Akaler Shandhane*

MRINAL SEN & HIS "POST-MORTEM" OF THE POSTCOLONIAL BENGALI MIDDLE-CLASS

With the legendary filmmaker's recent passing, we look into how the social dilemmas highlighted in his film still plague the rising bourgeoisie



Satya Bannerjee in the 1933 episode *Calcutta 71*

film takes a dig at that—it culminates to Ranjit breaking the glass of a shop window and stripping a suit-wearing mannequin completely naked. Iconic. The jarring, upfront, almost documentary-like scenes in *Interview* breaks the fourth wall to address the structural barriers to success. An upset and enraged Ranjit Mallick talks back at the camera, "If I had some extra money, some saved-up money, four or five spare suits, a wardrobe, then tell me, wouldn't I have secured that job?" With the stripped mannequin, Sen strips the false subtleties of our unequal social structures. And he makes sure the audience is fully aware of his message.

Inclusion of a "reality check" was not uncommon in Sen's film. With several techniques, such as breaking the fourth wall, or freeze frames of news headlines, or sometimes inserting the filmmaker himself in some way within the narrative, he often reminded the viewers of the fragility of cinema. As soon as the audience immersed into the story, they were jolted back to confront that cinema is not a space of utopian realisation. Sen believed that cinema was, in fact, "the medium for social change" and so, viewers must be "called to action."

An avid Marxist, Sen was unapologetic about his film's ideological contents. *Calcutta 71* begins with "[...] For thousands of years, I have been

witnessing history: a history of poverty, of scarcity, of oppression," where "I" is the city of Calcutta. This theme and motif of the robust yet desolate city is recurrent in many of his films, often juxtaposed with documentary footage of strikes, street protests, Vietnam War, or a montage of news clippings contrasted with advertisements and billboards, etc. His clever use of the *image* provided a straightforward understanding of the milieu and its political bearings.

His films not only embodied themes of revolution, they eventually became part of it. In an interview with *Calcutta Doordashan*, he spoke of his film *Calcutta 71* which was released amidst crackdown on Leftist activists during the Naxalbari movement of the late 60s. The families of missing or fleeing activists, who were unable to do much at that point, filled the cinemas to watch the film. Sen said, "All the three shows [of my film] in the largest, centrally-located theatres in Calcutta were full for twelve continuous weeks [...] It was almost like the people [were] buying tickets to attend a protest meeting."

In *Patadik* (*The Guerilla Fighter*), he went straight ahead and told the story of a Naxalite in hiding. But unlike the preceding *Interview* and *Calcutta 71*, *Patadik* turned a self-reflexive eye onto the movement itself.

Continued to page 11