

He eschewed Bollywood fantasies in favor of realism

MRINAL SEN
1923-2018

BY NEIL GENZLINGER

Mrinal Sen, one of India's leading filmmakers and a central figure in the movement known as parallel cinema, a socially conscious alternative to splashy Bollywood films, died on Dec. 30 at his home in Kolkata, India. He was 95.

His son, Kunal, confirmed the death.

Mr. Sen began making films in the mid-1950s, exploring societal divisions and other themes in movies like "Baishey Shravana" ("The Wedding Day," 1960), about a dumpy middle-aged man who marries a teenager, and "Akash Kusum" ("In the Clouds," 1965), about a lower-middle-class man who inflates his credentials to try to win over a young woman.

In 1969, he earned wide acclaim with "Bhuvan Shome," whose title character, a rigid railroad official, takes a life-altering hunting trip. The movie, named best feature at India's National Film Awards, established Mr. Sen as a major director and is considered a foundational film of what is sometimes called India's new wave cinema, whose realism and small-scale storytelling contrasted with the grandiose fantasies, singing and dancing of Bollywood.

In the 1970s, Mr. Sen's films showed his Marxist leanings and his fascination with the teeming city then known as Calcutta, now Kolkata. The 1980s brought

several of his movies recognition at Cannes and other international film festivals.

Kunal Sen, an artist, said his father was always exploring.

"He never got too attached to a particular film, style or award," Mr. Sen said by email. "He changed his style completely after every two or three films, and was usually fond of his latest film, while getting increasingly indifferent towards his earlier work."

Among those noting his death was Ram Nath Kovind, the president of India.

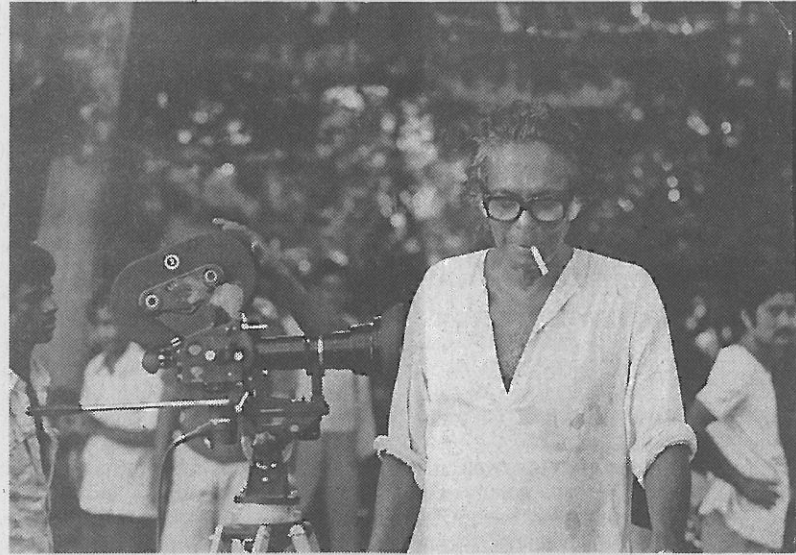
"His penetrating and sensitive portrayal of social realities made him a fine chronicler of our times," Mr. Kovind said on Twitter.

Mrinal (MREE-naal) Sen was born on May 14, 1923, in Faridpur, in what is now Bangladesh, to Dinesh and Sarajubala (Tuli) Sen. He grew up in Faridpur and went to Kolkata to attend Scottish Church College.

He studied physics there but never finished his degree. Instead he became active in political movements and the Indian People's Theater Association, a cultural affiliate of India's Communist Party.

He found work as an audio technician at a studio in the city.

"My work only involved soldering capacitors and condensers," he said in an interview in the early 1970s with Gary Crowdus, later the founder of Cineaste magazine, whose website published the interview last year. "I didn't like that job



HINDUSTAN TIMES, VIA GETTY IMAGES

The filmmaker Mrinal Sen in Kolkata, India, in an undated photo. His early movies had socially conscious messages, while his work later became more introspective.

at all, so I left. But I thought it would be a good idea to educate myself in the techniques of sound recording, so I started to read about it."

In 1943, while doing research in a library, he pulled out a book on film aesthetics, and thus began his interest in films and filmmaking.

He began writing about film, and in 1956 he made his first movie, "Raati Bhore" ("The Dawn") — "It was very bad, a disaster," he told Mr. Crowdus.

Then came "Neel Akasher Neechey" ("Under the Blue Sky") in 1959, followed by "The Wedding Day."

Mr. Sen was often grouped with Satyajit Ray and Ritwik Ghatak as foundational directors from the Bengal region who presented alternatives to Bollywood.

His 1970s films included three that became known as the Calcutta Trilogy ("Interview," "Calcutta '71" and "Padatik"), all exploring class struggle in

that city. But by the end of the decade, his filmmaking had turned more reflective.

"Ek Din Pratidin" ("And Quiet Rolls the Dawn," also known as "One Day Like Another"), which in 1980 became the first of Mr. Sen's movies to play at Cannes, was about a woman who fails to return home from work one night, and the effects of the uncertainty on her family and others.

"I was pointing a finger at the enemy around us," Mr. Sen said in a 2000 interview posted on Rediff.com, an Indian news site. "But from 'Ek Din Pratidin,' I began a journey of soul-searching. The process of fighting the enemy within began from there."

In 1983, Mr. Sen won a jury prize at Cannes for "Kharij," or "The Case Is Closed," about the death of a servant boy in a middle-class household. The movie played at Film Forum in New York the next year.

"Mr. Sen avoids the material's potential for easy irony, instead developing the story in a realistic and understated way," Janet Maslin wrote in her review in The New York Times, adding that he "makes the death part of a complex social and economic structure that is not so easily addressed or changed."

His later movies included "Genesis" (1986), about a weaver and a farmer who are living in relative isolation until a young woman enters their world and disrupts their lives. It was another quiet story with the larger meaning and issues only implied.

"Mr. Sen, who wrote the screenplay, keeps his characters down to earth," Walter Goodman wrote in reviewing it in The Times. "They stand for human beings through the ages, unable to master either their own emotions or life's circumstances. Now and then there is a frightening roar overhead, the sound of the world, that sends them cowering."

His last movie, "Aamar Bhuvan" ("My Land"), was released in 2002.

Kunal Sen said he thought his father had special regard for his later works.

"He reached international fame during a phase when he made overly political films," he said. "However, his later films were more introspective, and I think in general he was more proud of this later phase."

Mr. Sen married Gita Shome, a theater and film actress, in 1953. She appeared in several of his movies under the name Gita Sen. She died in 2017. Mr. Sen's son is his only immediate survivor.

In 1989, Mr. Sen made "Ek Din Achanak" ("Suddenly, One Day"), which, like "Ek Din Pratidin," was about someone who doesn't come home. He made reference to it in the Rediff interview when discussing his own career.

"I wish I could start from scratch," he said. "I have done good, bad and indifferent films. I wish I could erase it all and start afresh like the professor in 'Ek Din Achanak' who walked out on his family on a rainy day and never came back. One of the characters in the film says, 'The saddest thing with life is that you live only one life.'"