

**THE CINEMATIC EXCELLENCY OF MRINAL SEN: A ANALYTIC STUDY OF
AKALER SONDHANE****Dr. Anwesha Mallik**

(Asstt. Dept. of Bengali, Gobardanga Hindu College)

ABSTRACT:

Mrinal Sen, one of the most celebrated filmmakers of Indian cinema, has carved a distinctive niche for himself with his socially conscious and aesthetically compelling works. Known for his exploration of socio-political realities through an innovative cinematic lens, Sen's films often serve as a mirror to the complexities of contemporary society. Among his significant works, *Akaler Sandhane* (1980) stands out as a profound commentary on the intersection of art, reality, and human suffering. The film, set against the backdrop of a famine-stricken village, blurs the lines between fiction and reality, offering a multi-layered narrative that reflects Sen's mastery in storytelling and visual composition. By examining the film's themes, narrative structure, technical brilliance, and its broader socio-cultural implications, this analysis aims to shed light on how Sen uses cinema as a tool to provoke thought and evoke empathy. Through this exploration, we seek to understand the elements that contribute to the timeless relevance of *Akaler Sandhane* and how it exemplifies Mrinal Sen's unparalleled contributions to the world of cinema.

KEY WORDS: filmmaker, famine, cinematic, excellency, Tebhaga movement**Introduction:**

The focus of this article is on the legendary filmmaker Mrinal Sen, whose screenplay exemplifies a revolutionary approach to cinematic storytelling. By analyzing his work, particularly his innovative screenplay techniques, we aim to understand how Sen transcended conventional adaptations of literature to forge a distinct genre of cinema. This chapter will also highlight how his screenwriting diverged from that of his contemporaries, creating a unique cinematic voice that redefined Indian filmmaking. Mrinal Sen's deep engagement with social realities began to take shape in the 1940s, a period marked by political turbulence and socio-economic struggles in India. His screenplays reflect this grounding in realism, infusing his narratives with authenticity and social consciousness. Sen's directorial journey began in 1955 with the Bengali film *Raatbhor*, which paved the way for a prolific career. Over the years, he directed around 26 full-length feature films in languages including Bengali, Hindi, and Oriya, each contributing to his reputation as a pioneer of parallel cinema.

Analysis:

The following discussion will examine how Sen's screenplays, with their intricate portrayal of characters and themes, defied the traditional cinematic conventions of his era, positioning him as a visionary auteur. Below is a list of his films:

- Ratbhor (Bengali) – 1955
- Nil Akasher Nithi (Bengali) – 1959
- Baishe Shrawan (Bengali) – 1960
- Poonash (Bengali) – 1961
- Vastali (Bengali) – 1963

- Khattak (Bengali) – 1964
- Akash Kusum (Bengali) – 1965
- Matir Manish (Oriya) – 1966
- Moving Perspective (documentary) – 1967
- Ichchapuran (Bengali, Hindi, Marathi) – 1969
- Bhuvan Som (Hindi) – 1969
- Interview (Bengali) – 1970
- Ek Adhuri Kahani (Hindi) – 1972
- Kolkata 71 (Bengali) – 1972
- Padatik (Bengali) – 1973
- Chorus (Bengali) – 1974
- Mrigaya (Hindi) – 1976
- Oka Uri Katha (Telugu) – 1976
- Parashuram (Bengali) – 1978
- Ekdin Pratidin (Bengali) – 1979
- Akal Sandhane (Bengali) – 1980
- Chalchitra (Bengali) – 1981
- Tripura Posham (Documentary) – 1982
- Khareez (Bengali) – 1982
- Khandahar (Hindi) – 1983
- The Portrait of an Average Man (TV Movie) – 1984
- Genesis (Hindi, French, English) – 1986

This analysis explores the unique screenplay style of Mrinal Sen, particularly through the lens of his celebrated film *Akaler Sandhane*. Mrinal Sen's approach to filmmaking is distinct from the poetic visual storytelling of Satyajit Ray and the intense emotional undertones of Ritwik Ghatak. Instead, Sen's work is marked by an unflinching realism, where narratives are not linear or straightforward but are meticulously constructed and deconstructed to engage viewers in critical reflection. His screenplays integrate visual imagery and dialogues in a way that blurs the lines between storytelling and social critique, creating a style uniquely his own.

The roots of Sen's realist cinema can be traced back to the 1940s, a period of political upheaval and social transformation in India. The Tebhaga movement in West Bengal, which mobilized peasants against oppressive land revenue practices, left a lasting impact on Sen and his contemporaries, including Ritwik Ghatak, Salil Chowdhury, and Tapas Sen, who often gathered at Kolkata's iconic Paradise Café. Though their ambitious plan to create a film titled *Matir Aayog*, centered on the Tebhaga struggle, never materialized, it laid the ideological foundation for their future cinematic endeavors. Sen's films consistently reflect his commitment to exposing societal inequalities. The political turbulence of the 1940s profoundly shaped his worldview, compelling him to depict the grim realities of poverty, exploitation, and systemic corruption. This thematic realism is evident in *Akaler Sandhane*, which examines not only the historical suffering of famine-stricken Bengal but also the continued cycles of

deprivation and moral decay in contemporary society. Sen's films critique the socio-economic structures that perpetuate poverty, revealing how power and greed marginalize the masses. Despite promises of progress, the shadow of inequity looms large, and Sen's cinema becomes a medium to interrogate these failures. His screenplays transcend mere narratives, becoming vivid portraits of societal decay and moral degradation, making his work both timeless and profoundly relevant.

The making of *Akaler Sandhane* (In Search of Famine) reflects Mrinal Sen's ability to weave together multiple layers of narrative and commentary, crafting a film that is as much about historical memory as it is about the process of filmmaking itself. The original inspiration for the story came from Amalendu Chakraborty, but its thematic roots can be traced back to Sen's earlier work, *Kolkata 71*. In that film, Sen portrayed the devastating impact of the 1943 Bengal famine on the middle and lower-middle-class families of Kolkata, capturing the lingering effects of that tragedy decades later. *Akal Sandhane*, created ten years after *Kolkata 71*, builds on these themes but shifts the focus from the urban to the rural. While *Kolkata 71* depicted how the famine shattered urban lives, *Akaler Sandhane* explores the famine's grip on a village, turning it into a metaphorical crematorium of despair. The story unfolds as a film within a film, following a director and his crew as they attempt to recreate the famine's horrors in the village of Chatui. Sen himself described the script as a collage of elements—story, information, fragments of reality—seamlessly woven together to challenge traditional narrative structures.

The film begins with a powerful juxtaposition: a train passes through lush paddy fields, while modern vehicles—Ambassadors, vans, lorries—rush along a highway in the distance. This opening imagery sets the tone for the film, highlighting the contrast between rural stagnation and urban progress, a recurring theme in Sen's work. The date, September 7, 1980, and the introduction of the film crew traveling from Kolkata to the village signal the blending of historical and contemporary narratives. Through this meta-narrative approach, Sen not only documents the famine's aftermath but also critiques the challenges of representing such a tragedy on screen. The layers of storytelling—recreating the famine while reflecting on its cultural and emotional legacy—showcase Sen's ability to turn filmmaking into an act of historical and social introspection. The script of *Akaler Sandhane* is a testament to how cinema can capture the complexity of human suffering while questioning the ethics and limitations of its portrayal.

On the screen, the name of the film is written on the road. The song plays along with it.

The song

Hey Samalo Dhan Ho,

Kasteta Dao Shan Ho,

Jan Kabul Aar Maan Kabul

Ar Debo Na-Ar Debo Na,

Ar Debo Na,

Rakte Bona Dhan Moder Pran Ho.

I know you, I know you,

I know you,

You are not the black mahout of the white elephant.

I have given my life to fifty million.
I have respected my mother and sisters.
I will not harvest the next crop of rice.
I will not die, and
I will not die of hunger.
I have taken the land of the one who plows.
I have taken the land and
I will not take it.
Don't forget the oath of the strong hand holding this plow.

The scene from *Akaler Sandhane* begins with a subtle yet profound commentary on the disconnect between urban sensibilities and rural realities. The bustling sound of a car's engine and an accompanying song fade into the background, replaced by the serene presence of an elderly farmer standing up. This shift in focus underscores the contrast between modern life and the timeless struggles of the village, setting the stage for a reflection on the nature of suffering and human endurance. The dialogue that follows highlights the villagers' response to the arrival of a film crew, capturing a moment of tension between the filmmakers' intentions and the lived reality of the community. The elderly farmer's comment, "Babura has come to take pictures of Akal. Akal is all around us," evokes the pervasiveness of famine, a stark reminder that the suffering being portrayed is not a distant event but a current, ongoing reality. The term *Akal* (famine) becomes a symbol of the villagers' lived experience, and the temple in the middle of the village, referred to as the "twelfth temple," is a metaphor for the sacredness and futility of their situation—a place that draws both reverence and disdain. Dipankar's conversation with Smita Patil, who plays the role of an outsider, introduces a layer of irony and cultural dissonance. As Dipankar explains the "tradition of Bengal"—the loud, boisterous manner of interaction—the scene subtly critiques the superficiality with which outsiders approach the deeply rooted, often painful realities of rural Bengal. Jochan Dastidar, the producer, serves as a mediator between the director and the villagers, displaying a pragmatic, almost detached approach to the situation. His insistence that the film crew move towards the designated area, away from the temple, further reinforces the distance between the filmmakers' objectives and the local context.

The dialogue between Smita and Dipankar reveals the discomfort of the urban characters in confronting the reality of rural life. Smita's incredulity at staying in the temple and Dipankar's casual dismissal of her concerns expose the urban characters' inability to truly comprehend the gravity of the famine and its cultural implications. This moment, though seemingly trivial, reveals the stark divide between the theoretical and the lived experience of the famine. Sen's screenplay cleverly uses the clash between the film crew's intentions and the villagers' realities to comment on the complexities of representing social issues like famine in cinema. The unfolding conversation and movement forward reflect not only the physical journey of the crew but also the emotional and ideological journey of understanding—or failing to understand—the deep suffering that the famine represents. Through this, Sen critiques the process of filmmaking itself, where the act of representing suffering can sometimes become detached from its true emotional and human essence.

At the beginning of *Akaler Sandhane*, the film crew's journey toward the village to capture the devastation of famine is accompanied by a song that sets the tone for the narrative. This song, serving as a musical prologue, encapsulates the main theme of the film: "*The rice woven with blood is my life.*" This powerful line, introduced early in the screenplay, immediately establishes the core of the film's message—famine as a brutal, life-altering force that strips away human dignity. Mrinal Sen uses this direct approach to guide the audience into understanding the overarching theme of suffering and survival that will unfold throughout the film. The dialogue from the farmer, who remarks that the "Calcutta babus" have come to photograph the famine, provides a clear context for the film. This straightforward statement not only conveys the presence of the film crew but also signals the larger societal dynamics at play: the urban elite's attempt to document the suffering of the rural poor without truly understanding or addressing the causes of their distress. This early exchange foreshadows the tension between the filmmakers and the villagers, suggesting a disconnect between the act of capturing suffering on film and the lived reality of that suffering.

As the screenplay progresses, the narrative deepens, particularly through a scene set in a night-time inner courtyard. Here, the director and his team are reviewing photographs of the famine, which range from horrifying images of starving bodies to more artistic representations. The dialogue in this scene, especially the director's off-screen voice urging the others to look closely at the pictures, underscores the pervasive sense of unease that accompanies the documentation of such traumatic events. The discussion about the 1943 famine, where the director reveals the shocking statistic that five-lakh people died from starvation in a single year, brings the historical context into focus. The famine is not just an event from the past, but an ongoing trauma that is being revisited through the film. The director's insistence on the authenticity of the images—despite Neelkanth's skepticism—reflects the broader question of representation in cinema. The line between documentary and fiction begins to blur as the characters debate the accuracy of the images they are viewing. This tension between fact and artistic interpretation mirrors the larger struggle of how to portray such a devastating event: can it be captured in a way that does justice to its scale and horror? Smita's reaction to the pictures, particularly the stark image of a starving man and a representation of a starving Buddha, highlights the disturbing juxtaposition of hunger and spiritual reverence. The comment about the "Starving Buddha" adds another layer of irony, implying that even in the face of extreme deprivation, the ideal of enlightenment or divine power becomes powerless. Samaresh's remark that "even God is a worm" further amplifies this critique, suggesting that in the absence of basic needs like food and water, even the highest spiritual ideals are rendered meaningless.

This scene serves as a microcosm of the film's central exploration: the futility of cultural or spiritual symbols when faced with the harsh realities of famine and starvation. The conversation that follows, marked by the lighthearted exchanges about food, contrasts sharply with the horrific images they've just viewed, underscoring the tension between the filmmakers' casual attitude and the gravity of the subject matter they are trying to capture. Through this sequence, Mrinal Sen invites the audience to reflect not only on the historical famine but also on the ethical implications of documenting such a tragedy. The film's critique of the filmmakers' approach to the subject reveals the limitations of art and cinema in fully encapsulating the true depth of human suffering.

In this section of the script, Mrinal Sen takes the audience on a journey from 1980 back to 1943, seamlessly blending the past and present to reveal the horrors of the Bengal famine. The producer introduces the audience to the historical context by showing photographs of the famine, which immediately establishes the devastating impact of the event. Through these images, we are transported to the village of Hatui, where the director, Rupi Nayak, recounts the tragic story of 1943—the year when five million people died from starvation. The director's narrative not only explains the famine's toll but also emphasizes the eerie stillness of the event: no bombs fell, no bullets were fired, yet people died simply because they had nothing to eat. This chilling portrayal of the famine is an essential part of the film's exploration of human suffering. Mrinal Sen's storytelling technique, however, sets this film apart from conventional historical dramas. Instead of relying on a traditional "flashback" structure, Sen chooses to weave together past and present in a more fluid, non-linear fashion. He does not use a standard narrative device to signal shifts between time periods, but instead creates a multi-dimensional experience where the boundaries between the past and present blur. As Sen himself notes, this film is an experiment in breaking traditional filmmaking rules to convey a more complex, layered story. His approach challenges the audience to engage with the narrative in a more active way, encouraging them to recognize the continuity between past and present suffering.

This decision to avoid flashbacks and instead use storytelling to merge different time periods reflects the director's unique sense of history. By abandoning the conventional narrative structure, Sen allows the viewer to experience history not as a linear sequence of events, but as a living, ongoing process. This sense of history is central to the film's thematic exploration: the famine of 1943 is not just a historical event, but a persistent reality that continues to shape the lives of the characters in the present. Through this technique, Sen highlights how the trauma of the past is not only remembered but also felt in the present, as the legacies of hunger and poverty persist. Sen's decision to create a multi-dimensional film—a rare feat in Bengali cinema—is an ambitious one. It requires a delicate balance of historical context, character development, and visual storytelling, and Sen pulls it off with remarkable clarity and precision. The result is a narrative that is both rich in historical detail and deeply personal in its portrayal of human suffering. As viewers, we are not just watching a historical recounting of events but are immersed in a narrative that constantly shifts between the past and present, urging us to reflect on the enduring impact of history on the present. In the script of *Akaler Sandhane*, the blending of past and present often leaves the reader uncertain about the exact timeline of events. This temporal fluidity is an essential part of Sen's filmmaking style, forcing the audience to navigate between historical facts and emotional truths. We will examine how this shift between past and present occurs in the script through a few examples, highlighting how Sen masterfully weaves together different time periods without the need for overt flashbacks or conventional markers of time.

In this scene from *Akal Sandhane*, Mrinal Sen effectively creates a tense and haunting atmosphere that reflects the complex, emotionally charged lives of the characters. The screenplay focuses on Smita and Neelkanth, two characters trapped in a harsh reality marked by hunger, poverty, and violence. The dialogue exchanges between them reveal the emotional and physical strain of their lives. The setting, which alternates between the house, veranda, and cooking area, evokes a sense of confinement, both physical and psychological. Smita's actions,

such as lighting the stove and cooking rice, are almost mechanical, as if she is going through the motions of survival, while Neelkanth's increasing frustration and anger add to the oppressive atmosphere. Mrinal Sen's decision to portray these moments without overt sentimentality is key to the film's realism. The mundane yet harrowing task of cooking food becomes a symbol of the struggle for survival in a world devoid of hope. When Neelkanth angrily demands to know where Smita got the rice and oil, it's not just about the material items—it's about the moral decay and desperation that accompanies poverty. Smita's response, cold and detached, underscores the emotional numbing caused by constant suffering. The underlying tension between Smita and Neelkanth grows as their conversation turns to accusations of betrayal, with Smita admitting that she visited the contractor in Kolkata. The physical violence that follows is not just an expression of Neelkanth's anger, but a stark reflection of the emotional violence endured by those in such dire circumstances.

The arrival of Durga, a bystander watching the film's shooting, further complicates the scene. Her scream at the moment of violence breaks the tension, revealing the thin line between reality and fiction in the film's narrative. The director's immediate reaction, turning to observe Durga, reflects his awareness of the emotional weight of the scene he is capturing, blurring the boundary between the film's world and the real world. Durga's discomfort and her eventual departure into the darkness further emphasize the pervasive nature of the trauma they are all enduring. Through this complex interplay of characters, space, and sound, Mrinal Sen masterfully critiques the social and moral decay that accompanies widespread poverty and famine. The scene captures the rawness of human suffering, depicting it not as a distant, abstract concept, but as a lived, everyday experience. The director's method of incorporating a film within a film—capturing the violence and despair of the characters while simultaneously reflecting on the nature of filmmaking itself—adds layers to the narrative, making it a poignant exploration of the intersection of art, reality, and human suffering.

In this section of *Akal Sandhane*, Mrinal Sen brilliantly merges the years 1943 and 1980, illustrating how the tragedies of the past continue to resonate in the present. Savitri's desperate decision to go to Malti's house to sell her body in exchange for rice and oil highlights the depth of human suffering caused by famine. Malti's fall into prostitution due to hunger reflects the brutal realities faced by many during the famine of 1943. However, there is a significant absence in the scene—the character of Malti is missing, as the actress Devika has returned to Kolkata, disrupting the original script's plan. Despite this, the film continues with Savitri leaving Malti's house with the provisions, showing the relentless nature of survival even in the face of such disruption.

The ensuing conflict between Savitri and her husband, Arjun, upon his discovery of her actions, reveals the deep social and emotional toll of the famine. Arjun's violent reaction to Savitri's desperate act underscores the breakdown of relationships under the strain of extreme poverty. The parallel between the scene in 1943 and the present-day scene in 1980 is drawn effectively when Durga, watching the shoot, screams out in horror at the violence. This scream cuts through the moment, not only disrupting the fictional narrative but also blurring the lines between the characters' past and present experiences.

Sen then shifts the narrative to show the continuation of this cycle of suffering. As the camera transitions from 1943 to 1980, it suggests that the struggles of the past are not distant memories but ongoing realities. The scene at Durga's house mirrors the earlier scene of Savitri's

household, reinforcing the idea that history and contemporary life are deeply intertwined. Durga's question to her husband about whether he has seen "Akal" (famine) further emphasizes this continuity of hardship, with Shatru's silent response underscoring the unspoken knowledge of enduring deprivation. Durga's own remark, "That was a long time ago," reveals how famine, though in the past, is a constant, unacknowledged presence in their lives. Through the character of Haren, a village performer, Sen injects a political commentary on the 1980s. Haren's references to global figures like Hitler, Lenin, and Stalin, coupled with the advertisement for a rickshaw service, serve as a backdrop for the village's current state. These references help contextualize the social and political climate of the 1980s, making the audience aware of the ongoing struggle not only in rural areas but also in the broader socio-political landscape.

The seamless transition between 1943 and 1980, achieved without the conventional use of flashbacks, is a masterstroke of storytelling. Sen highlights the cyclical nature of poverty, hunger, and suffering, suggesting that the horrors of the past are not just historical events but ongoing challenges that continue to shape the lives of the characters in the present. Through this technique, Sen underscores the unchanging nature of social and economic inequalities, portraying them as both timeless and inescapable. The fusion of past and present, without a clear demarcation, emphasizes the stagnation of progress and the persistence of hardship, making *Akal Sandhane* a profound commentary on both history and contemporary reality. In this section of *Akal Sandhane*, the character of Master Mashai plays a pivotal role, offering a nuanced reflection on the passage of time and the enduring nature of human suffering. Master Mashai, an educated man from Kolkata, arrived in the village with high ideals of change, but like many others, he finds himself unable to alter the entrenched realities of rural life. He is portrayed as a deeply insightful figure, someone who witnessed the events of 1943 and understands the complexities of human nature and faith. His conversation with the director highlights the power of belief, suggesting that the true essence of human identity lies in faith—something he feels is missing from the film's portrayal. He reflects on the tragic death of the group of boys shot a few years ago, emphasizing that their martyrdom was for a cause they believed in—faith. This moment serves as a poignant reminder that human actions, whether political or personal, are often driven by a deeply held belief, regardless of the consequences.

The character's remarks about the film's shortcomings reflect his broader disillusionment with attempts to change society. His critique of the film *Bilbamangal* and its failure to capture the importance of faith underscores his belief that the essence of life cannot be reduced to mere storytelling; it is something deeper, rooted in human convictions that transcend logic or reason. The Master's observation about faith and the shooting crew's lack of understanding of it draws a parallel between the fictional world of the film and the harsh reality of 1943. His frustration with the superficial treatment of these themes in the film highlights the gap between artistic representations and the lived experiences of those who have suffered. The screenplay moves fluidly between time periods, as the shooting transitions from the 1980s back to 1943, demonstrating how the past and present are intertwined. During the wedding preparations at the landlord's house, the script captures the stark contrast between the celebratory atmosphere and the dire conditions outside the walls of privilege. Villagers like Gurupada, Govinda, and Nimai discuss the state of the country, observing the famine ("Akal") with a sense of despair. Nimai's ominous words about the "kingdom of jackals and vultures" paint a bleak picture of

the political and social landscape, reflecting the struggles of the rural poor, who, despite the celebrations around them, face unimaginable hardship.

In these scenes, the film's portrayal of the exploitation of the landless poor by moneylenders in 1943 mirrors the ongoing cycle of poverty and injustice. The moneylenders, like Bhatchaj, offer a grim choice to the villagers: sell their land and migrate to Kolkata in search of food. The resistance of Savitri's father-in-law, Chandradhar, to this proposition highlights the deep-rooted attachment to land and the painful decisions that must be made in times of crisis. When Master Mashai, watching the shooting, recognizes Bhatchaj as a real-life figure who still remains in the village, the line between fiction and reality dissolves, underscoring the continuity of exploitation over time. The master's reflections on the village's present-day reality further reveal the film's central theme: the past is never truly past. The villagers' complaints about the shooting crew reflect their own struggles with the socio-political situation, where the past's injustices are never fully resolved. Master Mashai, with his sharp memory of the past, reminds them of their complicity in the land-grabbing actions that have shaped their current circumstances. His anger is a reminder that the history of exploitation continues to affect the present, making the villagers' protests against the film's portrayal of their lives deeply ironic. The film, through the lens of Master Mashai, not only captures the story of 1943 but also forces the audience to confront the continuity of social degradation. In the films of the next period, 'Ekdin Pratidin' (1979), 'Akal Sandhane' (1980), 'Kharij' (1982), 'Khandahar' (1983), 'Ekdin Achanak' (1988), 'Mahaprithibi' (1991), 'Antareen' (1993), new styles were again observed. In the films of the first period, he spoke about social consciousness in direct and clear language. Durga, the central character, becomes aware of the parallels between the events of the film and her own life. Although she has not directly experienced the events of 1943, she gradually recognizes that the fate of characters like Savitri and Malti mirrors her own struggles. As she learns more about the film's story, she begins to see how the cycle of exploitation, hunger, and despair continues in her life. This realization becomes a powerful moment of self-awareness, as Durga understands that her future may be indistinguishable from the tragic fates of those who came before her. This connection between the fictional world of the film and Durga's reality underscores the timeless nature of social injustice.

CONCLUSION:

Through these interconnected layers of narrative, *Akaler Sandhane* exemplifies Mrinal Sen's unique cinematic approach. By blending fiction with reality, the film becomes not just a portrayal of historical events but a reflection on the ongoing struggles of the present. It questions the power of storytelling and the role of art in addressing real-world issues. In this screenplay, Sen shifts away from direct political critique and instead offers a more subtle, psychological exploration of social decay, revealing the hidden struggles of individuals caught in the web of systemic injustice. Through these films, Sen challenges the audience to look beyond the surface and confront the deeper, often unacknowledged, realities of society.

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