

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

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## Mrinal Sen (1923 – 2018)

### Life

Mrinal Sen, one of a trio of great Indian film-makers in the middle decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was born into a Hindu family in a city in what was then the Province of Bengal in British India. He went to Calcutta, the location of his most famous films, as a university student, during which time he became closely associated with (although not a member of) the Communist Party of India (CPI). His early cultural activity was not with cinema but with a leftist theatre group in Calcutta. Like many of his characters, he was forced to take a job that he did not want (a salesman for a pharmaceutical company outside the city). In his leisure time, however, he began to read about aesthetics and film-making. Before long, he landed a position as a sound technician in a Calcutta film studio, and his career was launched.

His first two films, produced when he was in his early 30s, were only moderately successful. His big breakthrough in terms of popular success came with *Baishey Shraavan (Wedding Day)* in 1960, although he still had little financial backing. That changed with *Bhuvan Shome (Mr Bhuvan Shome)* in 1969, which put him on the international stage of film-makers. After that, Sen made his famous Calcutta Trilogy and other politically-motivated films that shone a light on contemporary social and political issues. In the heady days of the 1960s and 1970s, his hard-hitting political messages won him audiences in the international film festival circuit and among intellectuals across the world. While his films never achieved the widespread popularity gained by Satyajit Ray's films, they were significant in introducing new ways of film-making, for example, combining elements of the feature film and the documentary.

Sen's uncompromising political views earned him many enemies in the arts and in governments. Some of his films were banned by the (communist) government of West Bengal, and toward the end of his life he was snubbed by the establishment. A revival of interest in his films was promoted by Martin Scorsese, whose organisation helped to restore and remaster many of his greatest movies.

Sen was married to Gita Shome, an actor, who later appeared in several of his films with the stage-name of Gita Sen. They had one child, a son, Kunal.

### Achievements

Mrinal Sen won awards at all the major international film festivals, including Cannes, Venice and Berlin. Perhaps his most prestigious awards were the Cannes Jury Prize for *Kharji (Case Closed)* in 1983 and the Berlin Silver Bear Prize for *Akaler Sandhan (In Search of Famine)* in 1981, in which he used archival footage and a contemporary story to re-examine the Bengal Famine of 1943.

### Films (feature films only)

*Raat Bhore (The Dawn)*, 1955  
*Neel Akasher Neechey (Under the Blue Sky)*, 1959  
*Baishey Shravana (Wedding Day)*, 1960  
*Punascha (Over Again)*, 1961  
*Abasheshe (And at Last)*, 1963  
*Pratinidhi (The Representative)*, 1964  
*Akash Kusum (Up in the Clouds)*, 1965  
*Matira Manisha (Man of the Soil)*, 1966  
*Bhuvan Shome (Mr. Bhuvan Shome)*, 1969  
*Interview* (1971)  
*Ek Adhuri Kahani (An Unfinished Story)*, 1971  
*Calcutta 71*, 1972  
*Padatik (Foot-soldier)*, 1973

*Chorus* (1974)  
*Mrigayaa (The Royal Hunt)*, 1976  
*Oka Oori Katha (The Outsiders)*, 1977  
*Parasuram (The Man with the Axe)*, 1978  
*Ek Din Pratidin (And Quiet Rolls the Dawn)*, 1979  
*Akaler Sandhane (In Search of Famine)*, 1980  
*Chalchitra (The Kaleidoscope)*, 1981  
*Kharij (Case Closed)*, 1982  
*Khandhar (The Ruins)*, 1983  
*Genesis*, 1986  
*Ek Din Achanak (Suddenly, One Day)*, 1989  
*Mahaprithibi (World Within, World Without)*, 1991  
*Antareen (The Confined)*, 1993  
*Amaar Bhuvan (This, My Land)*, 2002



(Sen as a young man)



(Sen on the set of *Mrigayaa*)



(Sen in action)