

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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PADATIK (FOOT-SOLDIER) 1973

Mrinal Sen

(Hindi and Bengali language)

Contents (Overview – Plot – Themes – Characters)

OVERVIEW

Padatik is the final film in Mrinal Sen's 'Calcutta Trilogy', which also includes *Interview* (1970) and *Calcutta 71* (1972). *Padatik* continues the thrust of those other two films by examining the political and social context of Calcutta through the lives of activists. It employs a very thin story-line to dramatise the troubles of Sumit, a political radical and fugitive from justice. Instead of incidents, the film relies on conversations, documentary and archival footage, still photographs, speeches by political leaders and extracts from newspapers and books. Through this eclectic mix of media, the film-maker presents a critique of extreme Marxist ideology and also examines the loneliness of two people. Sumit escapes from a police van and finds refuge in the posh apartment of Sheela (Mrs Mitra), who is also a rebel. She has left her husband and lives on her own with her own income. While in self-imposed captivity, Sumit begins to question his party's ideology. Disappointed in the hard-line response from his party boss, he leaves his shelter and goes back to his home, where his mother has just died. There, his father banishes him but urges him to 'be brave.' The foot-soldier has nowhere to hide.

CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

Like the other two great Indian film-makers of his generation (Satyajit Ray and Shyam Benegal), Mrinal Sen used the cinema to expose the social and cultural problems of his day (especially the 1970s). Sen, however, was a more committed political activist than his contemporaries, as is evident in this film's use of documentary footage and newspapers to highlight the class-struggle in India and around the world. Nevertheless, Mrinal Sen, like his hero Sumit, is enough of an independent thinker to question ideological excesses of radicalism. For example, Nikhil, the party boss, is portrayed as a petty autocrat who oppresses his workers in an underground printing shop. This illustrates a contemporaneous critique of the Marxist left that the leadership did not empathise with the workers whom they were supposed to liberate.

STORY

Context The film opens by establishing the context for the story. As the credits roll, newspapers also roll off the printing machines, and headlines are flashed across the screen. For example, 'Police constable stabbed.' Calcutta is declared to be 'an intimidating, an infernal, unredeemed and probably a doomed city.' Young men race down dark alleyways, faces loom with anguish and gunshots are heard.

Refuge Nikhil, a well-dressed office worker makes a phone call to his friend, Sheela, and asks her to make arrangements to shelter one of 'our comrades' because his current hiding place is not safe. We then see Sumit, the man who had escaped from a police van and is hiding somewhere. He is bored, listless and worried about his family. Biman, a 'comrade', appears and prepares him for the journey to his new hiding place. Biman brings him a complete change of dress, fancy shirt and trousers, which Sumit says will make him look like a 'Park Street capitalist.' This is appropriate because Sumit is taken to a posh block of flats and shown into one owned by Mrs Sheela Mitra. Sumit wonders why a married woman lives on her own. The apartment is luxurious, and the two young men enjoy the view. As Biman leaves, he explains to Sumit that his identity is that of Mrs Mitra's cousin visiting from Delhi.

Flashback Through a flashback we see Sumit fleeing from the police van, ducking gunshots and finding refuge with the young woman we saw in the opening sequence. He is upset that the terrorist action he undertook was not properly planned and that it put him at risk of death. He fears that he will always be 'on the run.' Biman says that he spoke with his (Sumit's) father, who is upset that his son is

a revolutionary, even though he himself used terrorist tactics in the fight for independence. We then see historical footage of Gandhi-led mass protests, followed by more recent footage of emaciated, nearly starving people listening to political rhetoric over loud speakers.

Sheela The owner of the flat, Sheela arrives. She is attractive, sophisticated and completely at ease. Not what Sumit expected. When he says, in gest, that he feels like he has taken over her flat, she quips, 'Umm, without violence.' This comment is followed by more historical footage, this time of the Vietnam war. Biman arrives, and the two young radicals are served tea by Sheela. The three of them laugh and enjoy each other's company.

Nikhil Nikhil works hard at writing his political leaflets and getting them printed clandestinely. His printers and assistants appear overworked. Biman arrives and tells Nikhil that the common people who support the party are not getting the message and they only come to meetings out of fear.

Sheela's backstory We then see Sheela in her 'element,' at a drinks party with office colleagues. She is lauded for her presentation to a client, a baby food producer. Arriving back at her apartment, she has a phone call from her ex-husband and angrily tells him to leave her alone and that she will not give him any more money. Later, she tells Sumit that she also has a young son. Sheela also tells Sumit about her younger brother, who was also a revolutionary and was killed in the struggle.

Betrayal Sumit writes a letter to Nikhil expressing his support for the revolution but raising doubts about its tactics. 'Even a small mistake would be disastrous,' he warns his party boss. Biman tells Nikhil that Sumit and Sheela may be more than just friends. Sumit gets a call from Nikhil who tells him that he is no longer trusted by 'the party' and that he must leave Sheela's flat because he has overstepped the bounds of proper behaviour with her. Sheela tells Sumit that he can stay in her flat, but he refuses the offer.

Departures Sumit leaves the flat because he hears that his mother is ill. Sheela drives him to his family house and drops him. When he arrives, his mother has already died. His father tells him calmly that he cannot stay in the house because of his radical reputation. 'Don't worry about me, I will manage,' the father says. 'And you don't need to perform the last rites at the funeral [as the oldest son, this is his duty].' The father also tells him that he refused to go on strike at his office. 'Go now. Be brave,' he says to his son, who wears a defiant look as he leaves.

THEMES

Rebellion Through the two main characters, Sumi and Sheela, the film presents an unlikely pair of rebels who find a deep rapport between them. Sumit is a young committed Marxist revolutionary from a lower middle-class family, while Sheela is middle-aged advertising executive with a large income. But Sheela is also alienated from society. She has divorced her husband and lives on her own in a fancy apartment, where Sumit finds shelter while hiding from police. Sheela also keeps her distance from the fun-loving, superficial party life of her office colleagues. We later learn that Sheela is a leftist sympathiser (and allows revolutionaries to stay in her flat) because her younger brother was a radical and died in a police shoot-out. There is also a third rebel, Sumit's father, who participated in the fight for Indian independence. Despite his past radical activity, the father has little respect for today's student revolutionaries. The two main rebellions dramatised in the film—the political struggle and the feminist struggle—turn out to be intertwined. In a televised interview, a well-known female writer explains that despite some progress in gender relations nothing will really change until the underlying social conditions change. More telling is the fact that Sumit is forced to leave Sheela's apartment because they are suspected of having an affair. What else can be expected when a woman living on her own becomes friends with a man? The answer, which the film supplies, is that they can develop a deep, non-sexual rapport. Perhaps that is the greatest rebellion of all.

Isolation The rapport between the two rebels develops largely because of the isolation in which they both find themselves. Sumit is in physical hiding, living in fear of being rearrested and probably tortured by the police. Sheela lives alone by choice, although her decision was forced upon her by a feckless and abusive husband. In addition, Sheela is alienated from her 'set' and does not socialise with them. Their physical seclusion is matched by a psychological loneliness, which they overcome only by mundane exchanges, such as the repeated scene of them having tea. Isolation creates fear. Every time the doorbell rings, the fugitive Sumit flinches in anticipation of a police raid. Whenever the telephone rings (and it must be a dozen times), Sheela cringes, thinking it is her ex-husband once more demanding money. The isolated rebels sometimes feel the need for solidarity. The political exile seeks the companionship of his 'comrades,' while at the same time developing doubts about the

wisdom of the party leaders. Similarly, the social rebel looks forward to having her son home from boarding school. These two misfits, thrown together by accident, create their own affinity, laughing over little things, such as Sumit's habit of not throwing away the tea leaves.

CHARACTERS

Sumit Sumit is the film's protagonist and a political radical. Sumit is a young political radical. Perceptive, and the son of a freedom-fighter in the Gandhi era, he is committed to creating a new society based on justice and equality. Despite the hard-line politics, he is playful, genial and polite. Confined in the flat, we watch him begin to question the tactics of the revolutionary movement to which he belongs. In relation to Sheela, he shows an instinctive kindness and depth of understanding for her situation. Reading political tracts and smoking his cigarettes, full of idealism, sometimes bored, and often confused, he is a typical young man of the 1970s in Calcutta.

Playful As a young man, perhaps not even twenty years old, Sumit has a light-hearted, playful side to his character. This is nicely illustrated through some witty dialogue in his first encounter with Sheela, the woman who owns the flat in which he has been given refuge from the police. When she tells him to make himself at home, he laughs and uses the language common among political radicals to reply, 'Well, I feel as if I've forcefully occupied.' She responds in kind by saying, 'Oh, a peaceful transition, then.' And he says, 'Yes, almost like capturing a palace. Without bloodshed, of course.' This banter shows us that the committed revolutionary is not a hard-bitten, desperate person. Rather, he is youthful, not yet formed and not beyond joking about his situation. By the end of the film, however, his playfulness will have been snuffed out of him.

Brave One of the effects of Sumit's confinement is that he has a lot of time to read revolutionary books and to think. Midway through the story, his doubts have risen to the level where he feels confident enough to write a letter to his party boss, Nikhil. 'I salute the revolution,' he writes, 'and I realise that India needs deep change at every level, to eliminate poverty and superstition. But if we make a mistake in this war, if rage blinds us to compassion, then history will never forgive us.' Sumit has already discussed his doubts with Biman, but his companion is unwilling, and probably unable, to question the party leadership. Sumit takes the brave step of writing to the boss and outlining his thinking. It is the first independent act he has committed as a radical, and it is the act that will get him thrown out of his sanctuary and expelled from the party. Foot-soldiers are not supposed to question the generals in any form of war.

Alone Sumit is a comrade, a party man in solidarity with many, many others. And yet he is always alone. He was left on his own when he committed the (unspecified) terrorist act that landed him in police custody. In hiding, he is also on his own, except for infrequent visits from Biman and conversations with Sheela. He is then thrown out of his hiding place and out of the party. But the most dramatic example of his predicament comes in the very last scene, when he goes home to visit his ailing mother. By the time he arrives, she is dead. Relatives and friends crowd the house and murmur when he appears; everyone knows that he is a radical and is on the run. His father takes him aside and explains in a soft voice that he must leave the house immediately because someone may alert the police. 'Your younger brother will carry out the funeral rites [which by Hindu custom is the duty of the oldest son],' his father informs him. 'Go, and be brave.' Sumit has no place now, either in the party or in the family.

Sheela Sheela is the woman in whose apartment Sumit finds refuge. Sheela is a wonderfully drawn character. At first all we know is that she is 'a lady' whose flat is used by political radicals hiding from the police. When we meet her, we find out that she is divorced, is successful in an advertising business and treats young Sumit like a brother. She is fiercely independent and private but extremely warm and open on the outside. In the end, we realise that she is as lonely as Sumit, that both are prisoners of their history.

Withdrawn Sheela, though apparently happy and successful, is a private person. This aspect of her personality is displayed in a scene at a drinks party with her work colleagues, who are a group of young men and women in the advertising business. Everyone is laughing, drinking and enjoying themselves, except Sheela. She sits quietly with a glass of juice. Then the boss makes an announcement praising Sheela for her outstanding presentation to a client that day, which won the company a big contract. Embarrassed, Sheela protests that she was just 'following the brief.' The boss waves her modesty aside and says, 'Let's all celebrate Sheela's achievement. And you, Sheela, please take a glass of whisky, just this once.' Sheela meekly hangs her head and ducks out of any

answer.

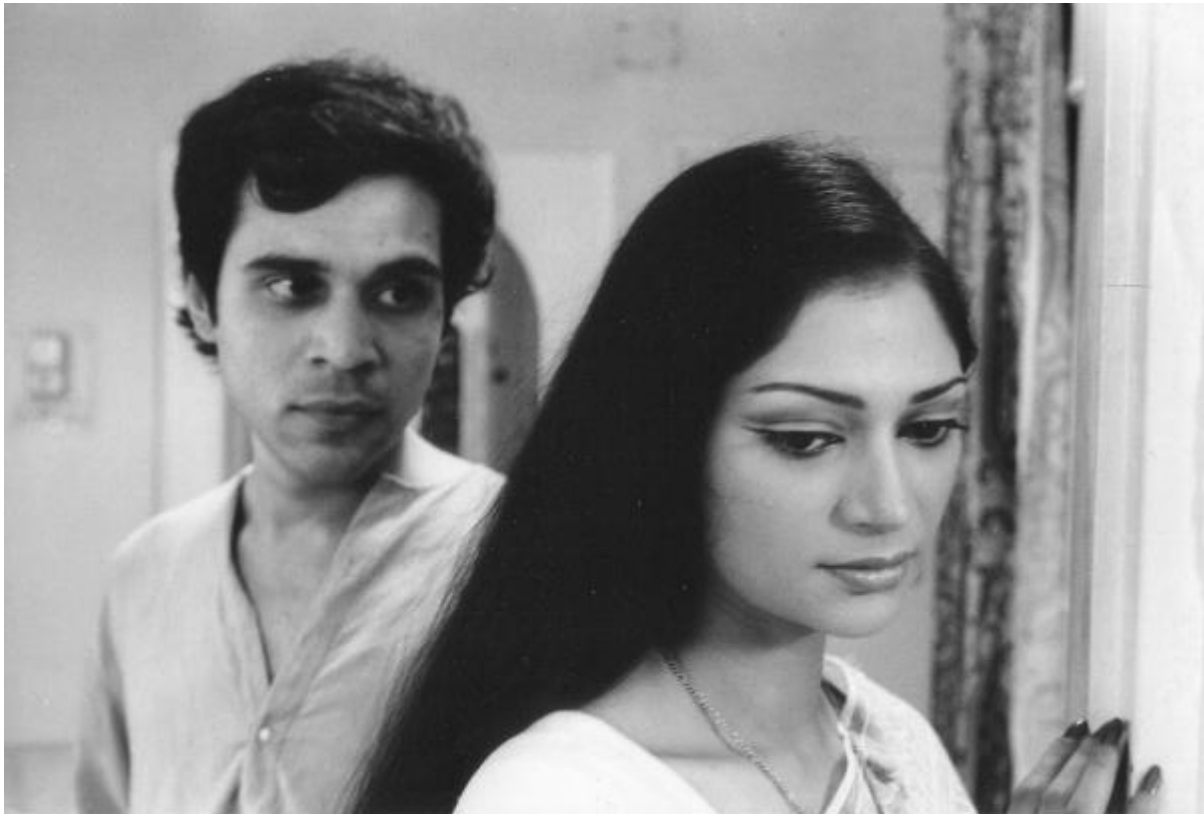
Independent Shy Sheela is not, however, a wall flower. She is a strong, independent-minded woman. This characteristic is dramatised in a telephone conversation she has with her ex-husband. The very fact that she is divorced, works in an advertising company and lives on her own is enough to establish her independence. Now, through the phone call, she is given the opportunity to enact it. We only hear her words, which emphasises her control: 'Do not call again and disturb me....The relationship is ended...No, I will not give you any money.' At the end, comes the definitive statement: 'Let me live my own life.'

Sympathetic Some female characters in a role like Sheela's would be portrayed as severe, cold and selfish. Sheela, however, is the complete opposite. She gives sanctuary to Sumit (and presumably to others) and treats him with respect. The reason for that kindness is revealed in what many consider the most memorable scene in the film. Sheela and Sumit are talking over tea, as they often do, when she strays into a story about her family and her younger brother. 'He was bright, just like you,' she says. 'From the beginning he rebelled against my father, his business and privilege. He left all and went away. He wrote me a letter. He said he was "fighting for a new society for the poor and oppressed." That was his last letter. He was killed.' From this, we understand Sheela's willingness to let her flat be used by political radicals as a sanctuary, something she could not do for her own brother. Not only sympathetic, she is a leftist sympathiser.

Nikhil Nikhil is Sumit's political party boss.

Biman Biman is a political activist and friend of Sumit.

Father The unnamed father is the head of Sumit's family.



(Sumit and Sheela)



(Sheela and Sumit having tea)



(Biman and Sumit enjoying a joke)



(Sumit's father tells him he must leave home for good)