

CALCUTTA 71 1972

Mrinal Sen

(Bengali language)

Contents (Overview – Plot – Themes – Characters)

OVERVIEW

This is the second film in Mrinal Sen's 'Calcutta Trilogy' (comprised also of *Interview* and *Padatik*). Despite the common thread—a documentary-style look at Calcutta in the 1970s—that links the three, *Calcutta 71* departs from the others in significant ways. First, it is not a single narrative, but instead a series of four separate stories. And second, in this film Sen sets aside any pretence to cinema as fiction and endorses film as political statement. The four episodes, written by Bengali short story writers, range over a spectrum of social ills, including rural poverty, the indifference of the rich, prostitution, political corruption, smuggling, student riots and police violence. In opting for this overt political dimension of film-making Sen sacrifices some of the depth of character and pleasure of narrative that feature in his other films, but it is an experience that makes an indelible mark on the viewer.

CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

As with many cultural forms (novels, music, theatre) presented in the decades after Independence in 1947, this hard-hitting documentary-style film provides a mirror in which Indians can attempt to understand their own country, without colonial stereotypes or foreign financial control. Not exactly art-house cinema, and certainly not Bollywood entertainment, Sen's movie is a searing indictment of his country's attitude toward its deepest problem: poverty. As the film-maker himself explained in an interview: 'This was the time when I felt I should spell out the basic ills of the country, the fundamental diseases we are suffering from and the humiliations we have been subject to. This was the time to talk of poverty—the most vital reality of our country, the basic factor in the indignity of our people.'

Again, Sen explained that he 'wanted to interpret the restlessness, the turbulence of the period that is 1971 and what it is due to. I wanted to have a genesis. The anger has not suddenly fallen out of nowhere. It must have a beginning and an end. I wanted to try to find this genesis and in the process redefine our history. And in my mind this is extremely political.... We have always been trying to make poverty respectable, and dignified...As long as you present poverty as something dignified, the establishment will not be disturbed.' Sen's film did disturb the establishment, to the extent that the communist-led government of the state of Bengal banned the film for some time.

STORY

Opening The film opens with a montage of shots of music and politics to create the atmosphere of Calcutta in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Students throw rocks at police, police dogs chase students, women and girls gyrate in short skirts. Views of high-rise buildings alternate with those of emaciated bodies.

Story 1 The first story takes place in a slum section of the city and inside a crowded, dingy and leaky house or hut. Mother, father, young daughter younger son and baby live in a single room. Mother and daughter constantly get up at night to empty the vessels that are collecting the rain dripping through their roof. They mop the wet floor and try to find a dry spot under a table for the baby to sleep. The father wakes with a cough, empties the pot full of water near his head and then smiles as he remembers the life-giving monsoon of his village childhood. He, like the rest of the family, are resigned to this situation. They do not complain, even though the storm gets worse and they have to open up umbrellas inside their house. Slowly the damp house becomes intolerable for them, and the family are forced to find shelter. Dripping wet, they slosh down the alleys until they come to a brick building, where many other poor people have sought refuge from the storm. The scene inside resembles a shelter after a major natural disaster, such as a hurricane, tsunami or flood. The indignity

of it all is highlighted by the fact that the family are forced to squat next to a relative, who had thrown them out of another, comfortable house for lack of money to pay the rent. The episode closes with the husband finding a voice of protest, to ask, 'Why are we forced to live like animals?'

Story 2 That last scene of the 'huddled masses' segues into the second story, which is set during a famine of 1943, something still a part of living memory when the film was made. It focuses on a mother and her two daughters (one only a teenager), who, despite being middle-class, are suffering from lack of food. A wealthy male cousin arrives from Delhi, but he appears indifferent to their situation. Slowly, their condition improves and we realise that the mother has forced her daughters into prostitution. This debasement eventually leads to the older daughter committing suicide.

Story 3 The next story occurs a decade later, in 1953. It tells the brief tale of a young man in a rural family who gives up the prospect of a good education to make money as a rice smuggler (the government had strict price-controls in place on staples such as rice). We see his simple operation as he collects sacks of rice from poor families in his village and then travels by train to sell it on the black market in the city. He is only one young man in a large network of men, who bring rice to the city every day. He is paid a pittance but gets fed well, the only danger being the railway police who patrol the platforms. Travelling on the train, he has various encounters, for example, with a charlatan holy man, authentic folk singers and pompous businessmen. He sidles up to the businessmen, imagining that he is their equal and that they can be friends. There is also a group of skinny and hungry children travelling in the same compartment. One of the pompous businessmen gets into a slanging match with the children and eventually begins to beat up one. Watching this, the other passengers either show indifference or make minor protests. The young smuggler, however, is so angry that he pushes the bully off the train. Later, in the middle of a private party of rich people, a politician delivers a lecture on poverty to his mindless admirers. His platitudes are intercut with still photographs of starving children and a street riot in which a protestor is shot dead.

Story 4 In the brief, final episode the dead protestor comes back to life and addresses the audience, like a ghost. Speaking for the film-maker, this revenant tries to tie together the disparate events of the preceding three sections. Poverty, he explains, breeds violence, which engenders more cycles of poverty and rebellion. At the end, when he urges the audience to participate in direct action, he is shot dead a second time.

THEMES

Poverty The dominant theme of this unusual film, as explained by the dead protestor at the end, is the reality of poverty and its consequences. In the first story, a poor family (like many others) is reduced to the status of animals in a shed when they are forced to seek shelter from a leaking roof. In the second episode, poverty forces even middle-class women into prostitution. And in the third, poverty leads a young man into petty crime. Poverty is also presented in the archival footage of the Bengal Famine of 1943, in which millions died, and in more recent photographs of starving children across India. The film suggests that confronting and alleviating poverty is important to reduce not only human suffering but also social violence. Poor people, even the most resigned, can be moved to protest, as in the first story, which sometimes leads to organised movements that turn violent.

Degradation Poverty is dangerous not just because it can lead to starvation but also because it degrades its victims. This is the other, more subtle, point that the film makes as a whole. For example, the shelter-seeking family in the first story feels humiliated by having to share space with a rapacious relative, while the children in the third story are insulted by the businessman on the train, who gets his comeuppance when he is pushed off the train and lays sprawled on the ground. But this theme is most powerfully presented in the second story, which is the most provocative of the four. The degradation of the mother and, through her, her two daughters is shocking. Indian audiences are used to seeing prostitutes in films, but not women who come from middle-class families like their own.

CHARACTERS

The Father The father (in Story 1) is the head of the family. His wife and children play minor roles. The father in Story 1 is the pivotal character. As the head of the family, he is a responsible but defeated man. Amid the dire conditions in which they all live, he is powerless to bring change. With proud, piercing eyes and a strong face, he is resigned to his fate. But he also has the inner strength to rebel when things become intolerable.

Resigned The father's resignation is demonstrated in the opening scene. The family are huddled

into a dilapidated hut with a leaky roof. There is no dialogue, only the sound of a baby crying and the incessant heavy rain dropping on the mud floor. It is past midnight. Slowly the father wakes and empties the overflowing vessel he has placed near his bed to catch the rain. His wife says that they must move, that she can no longer bear to live in that house. But her husband shrugs his shoulders, sighs and says that the monsoon comes every year, that it makes the crops grow and that they should not complain. It is god's way of giving life.

Determined After they have moved to a building in which hundreds of other poor people are sheltering from the torrential rain, the father undergoes a transformation. Looking around at the people, who have been forced to live like animals in a shed, he tells his wife that they deserve better. Then he sees a relative, a greedy landlord who had forced them to leave their earlier, comfortable apartment. Now, the once-resigned father turns his blazing eyes to the camera and says, 'I will do something—I don't know what—to change our lives.'

The Mother The mother (in Story 2) has two daughters.

Shobana Shobana is the older daughter. Shobana, the older of the two sisters (in Story 2), is a study in degradation. Although she is educated and middle-class, the death of her father and lack of other income support force her into prostitution. She retains her dignity only by adopting a cold exterior and strangling her natural impulse to be open and kind. Her humiliation eventually leads to suicide.

Degraded Shobana's degradation is only slowly revealed, although from the beginning we detect cracks beneath the happy surface. The most dramatic illustration of her abasement occurs in a long conversation with a male cousin who has come to visit. Concerned, he asks about the family's income since there is no man in the house. Phrase by phrase, Shobana is forced to reveal the terrible truth that she earns money the 'only way that poor women can.' When her cousin turns to her with a look of confusion and disgust, she cannot face him. Sitting rigid with shame, she cannot speak. It is painful to watch.

Girlish This horrible scene is then followed by a flashback, which shows Shobana as a young girl. She is playing sports in her school uniform, laughing and running around with other young girls. The camera zooms in on her and freeze-frames her smiling face. The teeth are somewhat crooked, the face flushed and the pigtails untidy, but the face radiates a happiness that is tragic because we know how that face looks now.

The smuggler The smuggler (in Story 3) is a teenage boy and the protagonist of the story. The teenage boy in Story 3 is a smuggler who takes sacks of rice on a train to Calcutta, where he sells it on the black market. He is a typically carefree boy, although he wishes he could go to school like his friends. His youthful geniality is scarred by the people he meets in his smuggling activity. He reminds one of a Dickensian scamp.

Innocence corrupted The opening scenes of story 3 swiftly establish the boy's innocence and its corruption. First, we see him joking with another boy who is working hard on his school lessons. The smuggler is envious but, as a defence mechanism, mocks his friend's scholarly dedication. They both laugh as only young boys can, freely and without rancour. Then, we watch the smuggler 'at work', and the smile is replaced by a scowling face. On the train ride to Calcutta, with his sacks of rice, other boys sing, but his face is twisted in anguish.

Moral sense Despite his illegal actions, the smuggler retains a basic sense of right and wrong, which he displays in a confrontation with a bully on the train. As the boys in the train sing louder and louder, a pompous, large and obviously wealthy man shouts at them to stop. They ignore him and continue to enjoy themselves until the man begins to beat up one of the smaller boys. The smuggler watches this with smouldering eyes and waits patiently. The train stops at a station, the wealthy bully picks up his suitcase and starts to leave the compartment. When he puts his polished shoe on the stop step to descend to the platform, the smuggler gives him a hard shove from behind and sends him sprawling. Now, the smuggler leans out of a train window and greets him with a huge grin. It is the only kind of justice that a poor person can administer to the rich.

Minu Minu is Shobana's younger sister.

Bholu Bholu is their male cousin.

Bully The bully (in Story 3) is a wealthy man on the train.



(archival footage of a police and a student riot in Calcutta)



(The father in Story 1)



(The mother in Story 2)



(Shobana in one of her rare happy moments)



(The smuggler, third from left, with his black-market associates)