

Decolonizing Indian Cinema: The Influence of Indian Paintings and *Nayi Kahani* literature on Mani Kaul

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Abstract

The New Indian Cinema movement was started in 1969 by a new group of filmmakers who wanted to distance themselves both from the alternative film practices shaped by Satyajit Ray and mainstream practices of Bombay film industry. The main force of the brigade was a group of young filmmakers, most of them were fresh graduates from the Indian Institute of Film & Television, Pune. Mani Kaul was one of the most important figures among them. His first film *Uski Roti* (1969), based on the story of Mohan Rakesh, indicated the emergence of a new style of filmmaking in Indian Cinema. His other compatriots of the New Cinema Movement also started making moves extracting inspiration from the *Nayi Kahani*'s of modern Hindi literature. As far as narrative is concerned Mani Kaul's films were inspired by *nayi kahani* of Gajanan Mukhtibodh, Mohan Rakesh, Vijaydan Detha and Vinod Kumar Shukla. His visual chic, on the other hand, was shaped by the Indian image making practices of Rajput, Mughal and Kangra miniature paintings. In addition to that Mani Kaul's film sound was designed after the sonic traditions built by the schools of Indian classical music. The paper would argue how the inspirations of *Nayi kahani*, Indian miniature paintings and Indian classical music helps Mani Kaul in foregrounding the effort to decolonize the cinematic practice in India.

Keywords:

New Indian Cinema, Decolonization, Indian Miniature Paintings, Indian Classical Music, Politics of Vision, Cinematic time, Hindi *Nayi Kahani*

It is reasonable to assume that spatial practice, representations of space and representational spaces contribute in different ways to the production of space according to their qualities and attributes, according to the society or mode of production in question, and according to the historical period.

- Henri Lefebvre (1991: 46)

Introduction

As a filmmaker his works emphasized on local/ native cultural and physical spaces, and thereby presented critiques of the conventional imaginations of cultural nationality discourse. There is a very few number of writings available on Mani Kaul though global academic interest on Kaul's cinema is seen increasing. Most of the existing writings on Mani Kaul deal with his style. But a

detailed study of Kaul's works, keeping in mind the historical perspectives of decolonization, is due.

Historical Perspectives

This long and eventful development of South Asian politics and nationhood frame a complex postcolonial history and culture of India. Western modernity came to India in the form of British industrial capital. In two centuries of colonial rule, there were several clashes of foreign modernity and local tradition in India; there were instances of assimilation too. After ninety years of struggle for independence (1858-1947) India won freedom and emerged as a constitutional republic. But British rule left its heavy influence on postcolonial India in terms of legality, bureaucratic structure of administration, judicial system and realism in art and literature.

In the 1950s and early 1960s Nehruvian quasi-socialist dream of 'nation building' determined the idea of representative democracy, governmentality, cultural policies and artistic productions. In the meantime India fought two wars one against Pakistan and another against the PRC. Nehru's India took important role in non-aligned movement. Nehru's foreign policy was appreciated by the radical section (mainly CPI) of the Indian politics. After the death of Nehru in 1964 Indian politics became slightly unsettled. Communist Party of India (CPI) was divided into two in the same year as CPI and CPI(Marxist). The CPI(M) was constituted with the radical faction which expressed no-confidence in Nehruvian model. CPI(M) alleged that Nehruvian ideas failed to decolonize India; a revolutionary change was the only path.

The discontent against Nehruvian ideas and ruling Congress Party was fuming in the late 1960s in India. The youth of the nation demanded a radical change. This demand was reflected as CPI(M) itself was divided in the year 1969 and a pro-Chinese faction came out from CPI(M) and formed CPI (Marxist-Leninist). They explained the postcolonial India under Congress rule as an economically, politically and culturally 'dependent' state. According to them the nature of postcolonial India was a semi-colonial semi-feudal society. As far as capital was concerned, they opined that India was dominated mainly by the comprador bourgeoisie; Indian bourgeoisie never achieved the status of independent national bourgeoisie. CPI (M-L) demanded a radical process of decolonization of economics, politics, education and culture by launching a peasant revolution cum guerrilla movement of urban youths following the Maoist way. (Banerjee:1980) The then Indian state ruled by the Congress Party started brutal repression and onslaught, first on the

revolutionaries and then on all the socialist-democratic factions of India. The revolution was failed. The white terror was followed by the national emergency for 21 months declared in the year 1975 when all democratic rights of people were suspended. In 1977 in the general election people rejected the Congress party and a democratic consolidation in the name of Janta Party (People's Party) came in power.

In this new postcolonial perspective New Cinema Movement (NCM) in India was launched as they published a manifesto in the year 1968. The manifesto says, "New Cinema [in India] engages itself in a ruthless search for 'truth' as an individual artist sees it. New Cinema lays stress on the right questions and bothers less about the right answers. New Cinema believes in looking afresh at everything including old values and in probing deeper everything, including the mind and condition of man". (Sen & Kaul: 1968) The New Cinema collective clearly argues in favor of an *auteur* cinema as opposed to industrial cinema and they vow to make aesthetically and socially conscious cinema which would reflect the Indian reality afresh. With experienced Mrinal Sen and Arun Kaul, young aspirant filmmakers like Mani Kaul, Kumar Shahani, Saeed Mirza, graduated from Film & Television Institute of India (FTII), Pune in the latter half of the 1960s, joined the NCM in India.

Mani Kaul's Visual Style

Mani Kaul (1944 – 2011) emerged "as a solitary genius – who invented 'an entire vocabulary of cinema' that was 'astonishingly unique', whose 'concept of the narrative' is 'both radical and original', and who ultimately 'forged a totally new path' –." (Burnett: 2013) Mani Kaul's *Uski Roti* (1969) was one of the first New Cinema films. He was never directly political in his films. But perhaps the radical urge for cultural decolonization left an indirect influence in him. His filmmaking style radically broke either from Satyajit Ray's lyrical realism inspired by the history of the 19th century modernity in India or developmental aesthetics of Nehruvian nation-building project. Kaul experimented with landscape and duration in his first feature film *Uski Roti*. The vast rural landscape of Punjab in the film never appears as national/transcendental but looks specifically local. The film shows some long takes and almost action-less/ dialogue-less shots which foregrounds the aesthetics of time/*duration*. The nineteenth century enlightenment, which was the historical basis of the cultural modernity in India, was attacked by the radical Marxists of Indian politics that it was a move by the native elite class, the class which

was the beneficiary of the colonial rule. Later postcolonial historians also criticized that the nineteenth century modernity turned as ‘derivative discourse’ since the emergence of nationalism in India. (Chatterjee: 1986) The major influences which dominated the Indian cinema of the 1950s and 60s were Hollywood classical realism, Bombay popular melodrama and Soviet-style socialist realism. Mani Kaul took a completely different route.

He invented a realism based on the minor and unrepresented trends which were neither explored by the Indian artists/ intellectuals under the spell of colonial modernity nor did they become a part of ‘symbolic nationalism’ (Hobsbawm: 1992) promoted by the postcolonial state. The space-subject relationship in Kaul’s films was not determined by the Western perspectivalism imported in modern Indian visual culture in the form of Raja Ravi Varma’s mythological arts or Havell’s Oriental Art School paintings developed in colonial period. Nor did they correspond to Shantiniketan’s lyrical realism. (Kapur: 2000) Mani Kaul’s framing and construction of subject-space relation often follow perspectivlessness of Persian, Mughal, Rajasthani and Kangra miniature paintings, and other indigenous forms. The logic of editing or spatial alignment in timeline was also miles away from the so-called continuity editing. One major example could be drawn from *Duvidha* (1973) where the female protagonist is shown most of the time against the flat surface of the huge stone-wall of the *haveli*



Images from *Duvidha* (1973)



Rajasthani miniature paintings



Mughal miniature paintings

Mani Kaul was a student of Ritwik Ghatak. The sensuousness of space and object in the shots of Ghatak's film was admired by him. According to him he was influenced by Robert Bresson and Yasujiro Ozu as these two filmmakers usually keep the camera static, follow the slow movement of characters and objects or often choose a frame of non-action. Not only for depicting the physical space, but while showing the social space, Mani Kaul, like Bresson and Ozu takes a nonchalant but introspective style of exposition (e.g. *Naukar ki Kameez*, 1999). Like Bresson and Ozu Kaul believes that narrative should not be the determining factor in depiction of space (photography) and time (editing). The space, even if it is a part of diegesis, depicted in each shot, has its autonomy in relation to time. The editing style of Kaul responds to this position.

Ashish Rajadhyaksha summarizes beautifully Mani Kaul's three-point rule book for making 'cinema with a material that exists purely on the margins of realism' which was theoretically influenced by Bresson's idea of cinema written as 'Notes on Cinematography'. The first rule Rajadhyaksha says, "[T]he space of all organization exists exclusively within a domain of visual-textual marginality. This kind of marginality has a privileged presence in Kaul's schema." The second rule is: "[C]ontrary to the commonplace idea that cinema produces objects 'before us' and, so to say, 'in our image,' what is produced is not so much the object as the shared *space* —a space *between* object and spectator — that permits the object to be apprehended, received in an individuated way." And the third rule, as Rajadhyaksha refers to Kaul, is: "In shifting his emphasis entirely upon the production of space, Kaul is also able to technically calibrate a shift in his shooting, editing, sound-recording, and mixing conventions. We have an enumerable description for the fundamental nature of the cinematic apparatus, the production of what Kaul calls "qualitative space–time variance –". (Rajadhyaksha: 2010, Kaul: 1991)

These three points are very important in understanding the aesthetics and politics of spatial articulation in Mani Kaul's practice. In *Uski Roti* (1969) the sequences where the young woman called Balo is waiting for her husband Sucha Singh who is a bus driver, the camera takes long duration shots from more or less a static position where the action is either almost suspended or very slow and the camera angle is deliberately made *un-attractive*. The space is observed in an unusual but indifferent style in a long duration take – which consequently presents a space-time relationship that Kaul theorized as 'qualitative space-time variance'. Kaul's treatment of landscape (outdoor) and the interior of a closed space (indoor) is also very unique. In *Duvidha* and *Naukar Ki Kameez* Kaul nicely deals with space-object relationship and space-subject relationship. He creates a dialectical tension between the object-in-space and the object-in-itself. For specific example, refer to the rain sequence in *Naukar Ki Kameez*. He invents a unique logic of pulling off the emotional space from the narrative space and connecting it with the architectonics of the physical space unfolded in the film. The tension between morality and desire of the woman protagonist in *Duvidha* is revealed through framing her against the *flat* surface of the stone wall of the *haveli* (following the visual strategy of Rajasthani miniature paintings) and the intervening shots of the landscapes outside. As the narrative action is extremely minimized, the desire of the subject spills over the diegetic space and spreads over the 'visual-textual marginality' of physical spaces, e.g. *conventionally un-cinematic* interior of a room or an *indifferent* landscape. And that finally foregrounds 'a space between object and spectator' as understood by Kaul.

As far as the locale is concerned Mani Kaul explores village, small town, bus stop, transitional spaces between the rural and the urban, kitchen or small court yard of a lower middle class house (*Duvidha* is an exception). The locations of his shots are primarily the down to earth quotidian spaces; but while framing the space he follows a unique individual logic which unfolds unconventional relationship of space-(inanimate) object-physiognomy. For example, *Arrival* (1980) – a film on slaughter house of Bombay, starts with a series of images of a village and then enters at the city. The spaces are not at all thematically connected with the slaughter house; far from the conventional cinematic logic they are independent to a great extent; but if we enter into the social logic of production of space and labor they are only justified.



Arrival (1980) Please watch from left to right. Frames from the first twelve shots of the film.

Amrit Gangar explained this style of spatial articulation, “[A]s Kaul believed (and practiced), not looking through the camera but freed the camera from a slavish synchronicity with the placements and movements of objects and figures in space.”(Gangar: 2011)

‘Time’ in Mani Kaul’s Cinema

The major objective of Kaul was to defamiliarize the sensuousness. He told in an interview. “So ultimately, at least for me, an artistic activity is one that somehow attempts to alter this sensuousness. It somehow tries to bring a new relationship into this sensuousness and drops most of its dead material.” (Kaul 1982) The sensuousness binds us with our everyday experiences. What is the meaning of a touch, smell, taste and looks? It’s all mediated by social practices and systemic rationale of a sensuous act. Cinema is a medium that mostly operates through senses. While watching a film we exercise our sense organs, particularly visual and aural. We also have a secondary experience of tactility and smell as the characters interact with each other in a film. The politics of sensuousness operates in two broad layers in a film – one, in the lived world of the subjects which is portrayed on-screen and two, how it is communicated to the viewers using the cinematic craft. Both intervenes into the creation of meaning. Let us consider the first sequence of *Uski Roti*. The actions are slowed down in order to emphasize the feeling of sensuousness generated by each and every movement. The slowness contributes to

shifting the emphasis from narrative-action to time/ duration of shots. Usually in conventional cinematic practice time, an important dimension of our coordinate, is absorbed and subsumed in the cinematic craft of smart cutting that naturalizes the actions at the cost of making the feeling of time invisible. Mani Kaul slows down the action and divides the action in such a way that the feeling of time prevails over other coordinates. In our time in Punjabi cinema Gurvinder Singh, a disciple of Mani Kaul, in his two films *Anhe Ghore de Dhan* and *Chouthi Kut*, has successfully used this style and philosophy of making film.

Kaul drew inspiration of slow cinema, which he practiced, materially from social rhythms of Indian life and aesthetically from the traditions of Indian classical music. He took training of dhrupad, a pure form of classical music that emphasizes on *vistar*, from Ustad Zia Mohiyuddin Dagar. He made two films *Dhrupad* (1982) and *Siddheswari* (1989) based on the Indian classical music. Notion of time in Indian classical music is very unique. The form of a dhrupad or khayal is not bind by a dramatic structure but it expands the notes, the pure sound components, over time and duration. The notion of time here opposes the notion of time of capitalism, which is known as homogeneous empty time. The time is considered by capitalism as an empty container where actions are placed and arranged as per the requirement of industrial or financial production. But in Indian life time is majorly considered as seasonal time. Each *writu* or season provides heterogeneous notion of time or *kaal*. In a society where agrarian mode of production is prevalent, the social rhythm of time is build upon the seasonal concepts. This is one reason mahakavi Kalidas became important for Mani Kaul.

The seasonal time or writu was best expressed in the aesthetics and emotional feeling generated by Kalidasa's poetic imaginations. The seasonal time is deeply connected materiality with the nature, and in that sense more sensuous and organic in quality. The homogeneous empty time is nothing to do with natural time but it is a concept of time that was manipulated according to the need of the system. Mani's second film *Assar k eek din* (1971) is rather a direct tribute to Kalidas. He took inspiration from Mohan Rakesh's play of the same title. Mohan Rakesh in his play blends Kalidas's biography with the sensibility of *viraha* as the poet communicated in *Meghdutam*. For Mohan Rakesh Kalidas was a poet who often mourns his own dislocation from his village and abandonment of his first love Mallika. But Mohan Rakesh being an author endowed with modern sensibility shifted the focus from Kalidasa (Yaksha) to Mallika. His play

and Mani Kaul film both carefully portrayed the *viraha* and *apeksha* of Mallika, needless to say that they never came to fulfillment and catharsis.

To Kaul, the purpose of decolonization, was to give rise to another ways of understanding of our sensuous world, its present and past. His theory of decolonization not at all conforms with the clichéd binary of our culture/ their culture. He resisted in his works the hegemony of the perspectival system of articulating space and time in visual culture. He presented a critique of the hegemonic system which had been imposed on us by the colonial rule. He was in search for an alternative system of articulation. *Mati Manas* (1984) can be sited as a good example. The film in general traced the history of terracotta and fresco in India. But he emphasized in particular on the connection of artisanal works of art and terracotta. The film elaborately discussed the artisanal mode of production in India with reference to pottery and artifacts made out of clay, origin of which was traced back to pre-Aryan age,

It is true that Mani Kaul built his framework following the classical art-forms. But a modern artist and thinker cannot take refuge entirely to the classical. She needs draw inspiration from modern resources. Here '*nayi kahani*' enters into his world.

Among Nayi Kahani writers he engages deeply with Mohan Rakesh. It is Balo's time, an illiterate rural girl whose world never extends beyond her village... She is waiting so long for her husband... [no moral judgement, no new event, no other person is present with whom Balo can initiate a dialogue (dramatic or explanatory conversation), she speaks with herself] Mohan Rakesh is not depicting a reality that situates Balo (as social realism used to do) but he deeply concentrates on mental world of Balo who is waiting so long in an eventless situation. Balo's world and the world outside reflects each other without sacrificing each other's autonomy. He found association between Mohan Rakesh and modern paintings of Amrita Sher-Gil. In his search for multiple perspective that can go beyond ocular-centric realism he identifies with Mohan Rakesh.

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