

Nirad Mohapatra : Theorist and Film Maker

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Four years ago Mani Kaul, leading figure of India's new wave movement of the 1970s, died of cancer. He was 66. Two weeks ago Nirad Mohapatra too died of cancer. He too was in the mid-sixties. The careers of the two veterans of parallel Indian cinema may have been cut short by the dreaded disease, yet they continue to live in the hearts of those cine-buffs who have a penchant for alternative cinema.

Mohapatra, again like Kaul, was a graduate of the Pune's Film and Television Institute. Kaul made his debut with *Uski Roti* in 1970, which was critically acclaimed, but also severely criticized then by the mainstream media for, precisely, moving away from Hindi cinema's traditional song-and-dance format. While paying tribute to Kaul, Osian's chief Neville Tuli had remarked 'he (Mani) implicitly scorned the mediocre majority'. Mohapatra didn't have to face that kind of censure because he was making films for a nascent Odia audience.

If 'Maya Miriga' (The Mirage) shot into international fame in 1984, its making too was some kind of a history. In Mohapatra's own words, 'the making of *Maya Miriga* was an exciting experience of improvisation within the broad framework of a written story.' The film was shot at Puri, a seashore town. With a small crew and a team of non-professional artistes, tents were

put months in advance to dress up an abandoned house including its courtyard, which was to be the only set. That was proved to be lucky for Mohapatra because he had the best of both the worlds – a set on location.

Maya Miriga was basically concerned with the gradual and irreversible process of disintegration in a middle class joint family living in a small town in Odisha. Such breakup may be the norm in the present times and across societies, but 'Maya Miriga' enormously portrayed the reality of an impending disaster- the nuclear family.

Towards the end of the film there is an uneasy silence. The disintegration of the family is by now apparent. In the quietness of the night, and in the privacy of their rooms, the family members merely recollect the warmth of their togetherness, being painfully aware of the unfeasibility of staying together. One fine morning, Tutu (second of the three sons with an IAS job) and his wife leave with their dowry items. Prabha(the eldest daughter-in-law), for the first time, declines to light up the oven feigning sickness. Ultimately, the mother has to take on the responsibility of the family. Reflecting on the state of affairs, Raj Kishore Babu (retired head master and head of the family) asks his two year old grandson: "will you too leave us?" Very poignant dialogue indeed!

Mohapatra - himself coming from a middle class family -was rather candid in his approach: 'I intended the film to be long and compassionate look at its characters, watching the members of a family inexorably progress towards their break-up. I belong there, to the small-town middle class joint family and have been fascinated by its dreams and agonizing nightmares. In it, I see a lot of warmth, fellow-feeling, sharing of experiences and a sense of responsibility. But I also see the tight-rope walking of the married sons, the bitterness of its locked-up daughters-in-law, and their need for freedom, economic or otherwise, and the maladjustment in marriages and above all, selfishness that can damage its very fibre.'

'Maya Miriga' earned quite a few laurels for its powerful portryal. It got a place in Critics Week Section in Cannes Film Festival (1984), was adjudged the 'Best Third World' film in Mannheim-Heidelberg International Film Festival, second best feature film in national film awards and a special jury commendation in Hawaii Film Fesival. It was screened in Los Angeles Film Festival, Locarno Film Festival and at Regus

London. Plus the best director and best film award in the State.

Nirad Mohapatra had a keen understanding of the theory of cinema. Many noted and acclaimed directors of the parallel film movement namely Girish Kasaravalli, Jahnu Barua, Saeed Akhtar Mirza, Ketan Mehta, Manmohan Mohapatra, Vidhu Vinod Chopra were contemporaries of Mohapatra. He was in the Board of Directors of FTII and was also a mentor to aspiring filmmakers. Interestingly, Mohapatra never made another feature film, but has made several exceptional documentaries and has won many awards.

If the New Indian Cinema of the early eighties presented a 360° vivid, modern human perspective, in contrast to the make believe fantasy world depicted by the popular cinema, Nirad Mohapatra did his bit. He belonged to that group of brilliant film makers whose films were characterized by significant ideas and innovative treatment. There was a kind of cinema that sought after truth, didn't obey convention, and certainly didn't become subservient to common notions of what was good and palatable.