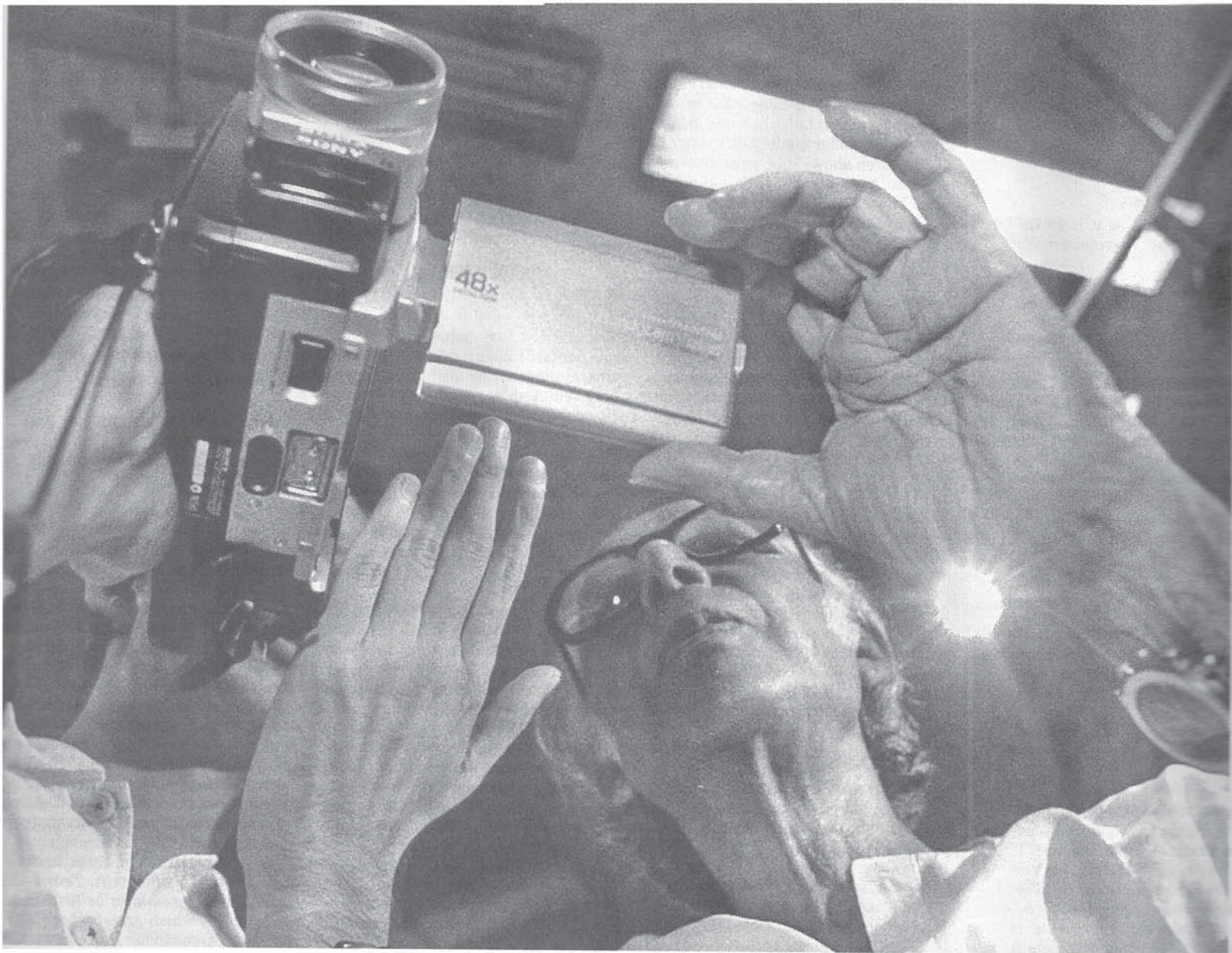


IN CONVERSATION

Lost reel treasures

A Mrinal Sen retrospective, to be organised in Cannes this year, had to be cancelled due to the prints being in bad condition. What are we doing to preserve some of the best films made in India?

RANJAN DAS GUPTA



LOST TREASURES: Who will help Mrinal Sen save his early films?. PHOTO: PARTH SANYAL

Eminent filmmaker Mrinal Sen is perturbed and unhappy. The living icon of Indian cinema had to cancel his retrospective, which was to be organised at Cannes this year. The classic section was to have shown the maestro's, Calcutta Trilogy: "Calcutta 71", "Interview" and "Padatik". Sen had to let it go as the prints are not good enough to be shown to an international audience.

A morose Mrinal Sen sips a cup of tea at his South Kolkata residence. "The classic section of the prestigious Cannes Film Festival wanted to organise a retrospective of the three films I made on the disturbed political scenario of Kolkata in the early 1970s. None of the prints is in good condition and neither the producers like Film Finance Corporation (now NFDC) nor the Government of West Bengal has bothered to restore them. It is a costly procedure and none have the required finance."

Negligent attitude

Sen carries on, "It is the same issue with films of other eminent filmmakers like Ritwik Ghatak, Tapan Sinha, Rajen Tarafdar and Ajay Kar. Nowhere in India is the scene as pathetic as in Bengal. Prints of earlier films of Prathamesh Barua, Durgadas Banerjee and even some popular Uttam Kumar

starrers are lost or in too poor a condition to be shown at auditoriums. The negligent attitude of producers and distributors as well as corporates in maintaining the prints is responsible for this fate of Bengali films."

On the contrary, Hindi, Telugu, Tamil and even Malayalam films are better preserved. Expressing astonishment at the condition of Mrinal Sen's films, well known filmmaker Govind Nihalani comments, "It is a matter of national shame. One should not forget that Ray and Sen put India on the map of international cinema. I strongly appeal to the producers of all Mrinal Sen films to submit them to the national film archives, where they will be properly restored. Earlier films of Dr. V. Shantaram, Raj Kapoor, Dev Anand and B.R. Chopra have been well

maintained by the producers themselves."

Mrinal Sen agrees, "I shudder to imagine what would have happened to the prints of Ray's classics had not the Academy Of Motion Pictures taken initiatives in restoring his prints. According to Ray Schindler, Chairman, Preservation Committee, Academy Of Motion Pictures, it costs \$ 50,000 for a black and white print and \$1,00,000 for a coloured print to be restored properly. A couple of Ritwik Ghatak's films have been restored, thanks to his son's initiative. But what about other films?"

In Cannes video projection of films is not allowed. Sen confirms, "Had there been such a system, I would not have had to cancel the retrospective of my films. In Cannes only first class

brand new prints are shown to the niche audience. There is nothing I can do at the moment to restore the prints of my films though my son is trying to get some organisations involved."

No initiative

Supporting Mrinal Sen's cause, filmmaker Goutam Ghosh states, "There are many speeches about corporatisation to improve film culture. But not one has taken the initiative to restore any film prints. A few producers have taken some steps to protect their creations. Narsimhan — the producer of my debut film in Telugu 'Ma Bhumi' — has restored the print marvellously. If Mrinalda's film prints are not restored, future generations will not be able to watch some of the best films made in India."

Mrinal Sen finishes his tea and looks up. He takes a deep breath and says, "Prasad Laboratories is keen to restore the prints of some of my films. But where is the money? If more time passes, my earlier films may not even find an entry into a theatre and even the negatives will be damaged. Just look at the dedication and sincerity with which European countries and Hollywood restored the masterpieces of Sergei Eisenstein, Sir Charles Chaplin, Jean Luc Goddard and Sir David Lean. What a country to live in?"

"I SHUDDER TO IMAGINE WHAT WOULD HAVE HAPPENED TO THE PRINTS OF RAY'S CLASSICS HAD NOT THE ACADEMY OF MOTION PICTURES TAKEN INITIATIVES IN RESTORING HIS PRINTS." MRINAL SEN