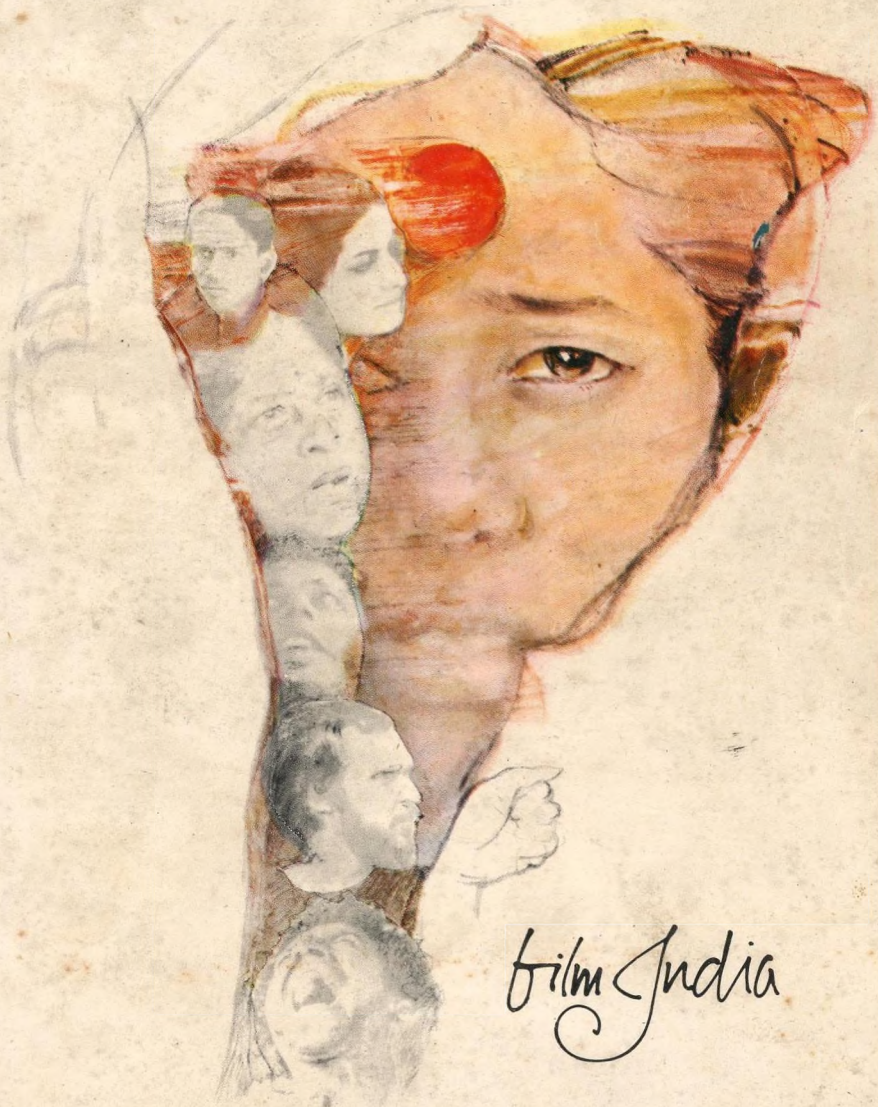


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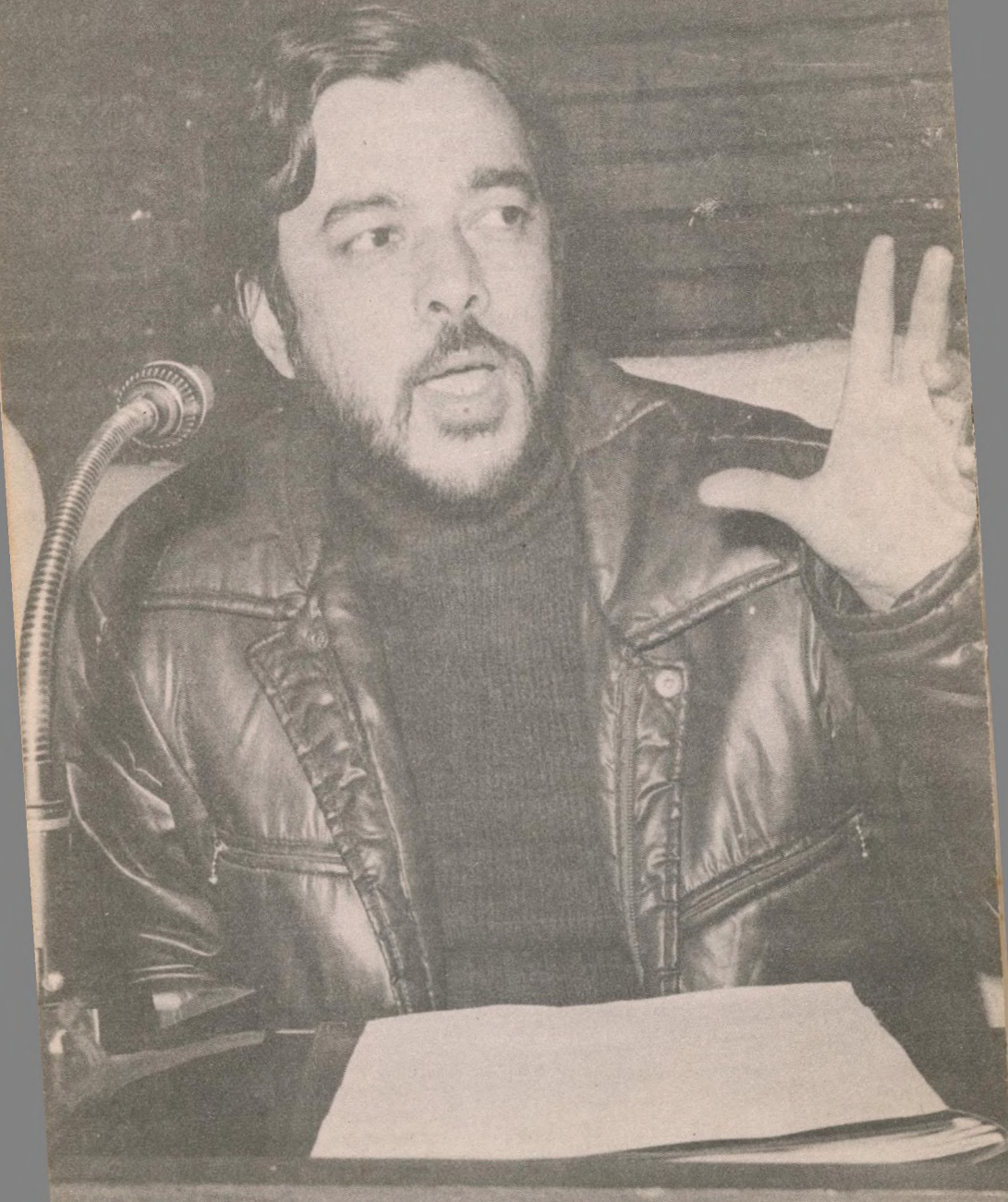
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SAEED MIRZA

If you were to ask Saeed Mirza an awkward question, he would probably fling an even more tricky one at you. A very difficult man to corner, Mirza is the most vociferous spokesman on the Parallel Cinema movement in India, Compact, with a straight no-nonsense beard. Saeed Mirza, in his mid-thirties, is still an angry young man.

"Middle class" is generally anathema to Saeed Mirza, and he conveys it in his work. To him, it is represented by the State and its inefficient bureaucracy, and also the false facade of morality that is prevalent everywhere. In both his feature films, he has tried to expose the class for the hypocrisy it harbours.

Right from the start, Mirza makes it clear that he is no watered-down socialist, getting across his leftist philosophy obliquely or subtly. He is direct, he hits at the audience, whether in a cinema hall or across the table. In fact, in his films he has rejected the standard narrative form precisely because it dilutes the impact of the social comment that he is making. "The form has lost its credibility," he says.

Of late, Mirza has been using a deliberate kind of pastiche to convey his ideas. However, in his first film, *Arvind Desai Ki Ajeeb Dastaan* (The Strange Tale of Arvind Desai) Mirza used a classical though non-narrative structure. The central character Desai, was, quite simply, Mirza himself, in a state of flux, as he puts it. The film was an "attempt at understanding the urban middle class, who are exposed to ideas, but reject them when it comes to the crunch, especially economic." Like Desai, Mirza was brought up on unquestioned values. But for him, when it came to the crunch, he held back and questioned, instead of succumbing. "Not that I passed the test of my own convictions," he says with a smile, "but at least I saw through the hypocrisy."

Mirza's cynicism about the society he lives in, although not of a very bitter kind, stems in part from his own experience. As far as his work goes, he has been fairly unlucky. The two documentary films which he made before renouncing the form, "because documentary being State controlled, has to project a certain view," were kept in the cans. The films—one, about the eviction of slum dwellers and the other, on problems of urban housing, were regarded as controversial. For Mirza, it is now a closed chapter, but he has not forgotten. *Arvind Desai* has also not yet had a theatrical release, because the National Film Development Corporation (NFDC) that financed the film did not, until recently, have an effective distribution and release set-up.

However, in *Albert Pinto Ko Gussa Kyon Aata Hai*, (What Makes Albert Pinto Angry) Mirza has evened the score. The film, set in an Indian Christian family, a culture that Mirza is familiar with, being married to a Roman Catholic himself, has been applauded everywhere. "It's nice to be successful," grins Mirza. And with belated, inevitable cynicism, he adds wryly. "Now the critics will begin saying that I've gone commercial, that I've sold out." He continues, "My next film will convince them of it." Already scripted, the next venture is to explore the ethos

of a five-star hotel, and predictably enough, it is titled *Five Star Hotel*.

He seems to have a penchant for unusual, expressive titles. A film planned for the future is going to have the impossible title *Mr. and Mrs. Joshi Go to Court for Justice*. "*Five Star Hotel* is to be a comedy," says Mirza with a mock-serious expression on his face, "and it will put my point across as forcefully as ever."

Mirza throws his own convictions at the audience throughout the film. "I want to keep at it," he says. So long as the logic of the film is intact, he believes that there is no harm in using characters and situations that are tangential to the plot but part of the ideology that he wishes to propagate. "I provide my own perceptions," he says frankly, and the audience can take it or leave it.

In Mirza's films, rarely is a character "established" in the conventional sense of the term. He is more the clothing for an idea. Mirza's fondest wish (and he becomes very serious as he talks of this) is to achieve a cinema of ideas, in the true sense, where you can rise above the characters and make your social comment without inhibition.

Because of this attitude, his work is often described as patchy, derivative and incoherent. To Mirza, this point of view is evidence of a pragmatism towards art and life, which he abhors. But generally speaking, he is the last person to avoid criticism. He subjects his own work to a harsh enough analysis. He admits that his future efforts will be more organised, his style more defined, in that it will strive for a form that is politically and historically relevant to the present context. "Each film is the take-off point for my next film," he explains, and that's how there is a distinct development in his style.

It is the mixed interpretations to his work in themselves that spell a kind of success to Mirza. "Nobody was indifferent to my film," he says with satisfaction. To him, planting an idea in the viewer's mind takes precedence over all else.

Mirza's openness to ideas manifests itself even in the way he works. The atmosphere during the making of a film is very casual, with "everybody throwing up suggestions," as he puts it. Although he has every shot defined before he starts shooting, he allows the actors a fair amount of freedom. "I let them improvise," he says, "so long as they do not misconstrue the basic premise of the film."

He finds that he has more and more to say. "And I will keep saying it," he says determinedly. Because he refuses to compromise. "I see around me a dehumanised world," he says with conviction. "It has a kind of morality that is extremely false. It represents a middle class fascism, which is the ruling idea, the ruling philosophy. All I'm trying to do is to question it." In other words, what Mirza is trying to do, and what many hope he will achieve on the basis of the promise that he holds out today, is to conduct his own little revolution — on celluloid.

What is certain is that Mirza is a talent very much to be reckoned with, now and in the future."

Derek Malcolm
Guardian (U.K.)
January 17, 1981

Rohini Nilekani