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Recording Famine, Rehearsing Memory: Empty Plates and Silent Frames in Satyajit Ray's *Ashani Sanket* and Mrinal Sen's *Akaler Sandhane*

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Abstract

This article examines the cinematic representation of famine through a comparative reading of Satyajit Ray's *Ashani Sanket* (*অশনি সংকেত* / *Distant Thunder*, 1973) and Mrinal Sen's *Akaler Sandhane* (*আকালের সন্ধানে* / *In Search of Famine*, 1980). Both films engage with the cataclysmic Bengal Famine of 1943, an event of colossal human suffering rooted in British colonial policy. However, they do so through strikingly different aesthetic and narrative strategies: Ray through the moral clarity of historical realism and Sen through the critical lens of meta-cinematic reflexivity. Taken together, they map the shifting cultural work of famine in South Asian visual narratives, from the immediacy of testimonial depiction to its haunting persistence as memory and political allegory. *Ashani Sanket*, adapted from Bibhuti Bhushan Bandyopadhyay's novel, renders famine as a lived catastrophe. Through a meticulously constructed realist mise-en-scène and a gradual desaturation of its famously vibrant colour palette, Ray foregrounds the slow, inexorable unravelling of rural life through hunger, scarcity, and social breakdown. His approach insists on the famine's legibility as a historical event shaped by external policies and internal human greed, positioning cinema as a crucial medium for bearing witness. In stark contrast, *Akaler Sandhane* displaces famine into a film-within-a-film, where a contemporary crew attempting to recreate the event becomes entangled in its ghostly traces. Sen's central thesis is that famine

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resists full representation, surviving instead as cultural memory, silence, and a recurring trauma that destabilizes the present. The crew's presence exposes enduring socio-economic vulnerabilities, revealing the ethical impasse of portraying a suffering one has not experienced. By juxtaposing these films, the article argues that famine in South Asian cinema cannot be confined to a single representational mode. Ray positions famine as an event to be recorded and ethically remembered, while Sen reconfigures it as a spectral afterlife that continually interrupts and questions the very possibility of artistic capture. This comparative lens illuminates the broader tension within trauma studies between historical testimony and allegorical haunting.

Keywords: famine, cinema, representation, trauma, absence.

Introduction: The Famine as Cinematic Problem

The Bengal Famine of 1943-a cataclysm of colossal human suffering rooted in British colonial policy, an artificial catastrophe that claimed an estimated three million lives in Bengal alone- stands as a foundational trauma in modern South Asian history. The famine was not a singular 'event' with a clear end, but a 'collateral of World War II', a direct consequence of imperial policy that created a long-lasting, structural condition of vulnerability. Its causes—a complex web of British colonial wartime policy, market failure, and administrative indifference—have been extensively documented by historians. However, its cultural and psychological imprint, its translation into collective memory, presents a different kind of challenge: one of representation. Unlike the immediate spectacle of war or the sudden rupture of partition, famine operates as a "slow violence" (Nixon 2). It is a gradual subtraction of life, an attrition of the everyday that resists easy visualization. The cinematic representation of such an event poses a unique challenge: how does one film the absence of food, the slow erosion of dignity, and the silence of starvation without aestheticizing the suffering?

This article argues that two seminal Indian filmmakers, Satyajit Ray and Mrinal Sen, offer paradigmatically different yet complementary answers to this question. Through a close analysis of Ray's *Ashani Sanket* (1973) and Sen's *Akaler Sandhane* (1980), this article explores the famine's dual existence as a *historical event to be witnessed* and as a *traumatic memory that haunts the present*, framed by the theoretical apparatus of trauma studies. While both films grapple with the same historical trauma, they occupy opposite ends of the

representational spectrum. Ray utilizes the moral clarity of historical realism to render the famine legible, insisting on its status as a lived catastrophe. Sen, writing back to the realist tradition, employs a critical lens of meta-cinematic reflexivity to question the very possibility of representing such pain. By juxtaposing these films, this article argues that famine in South Asian cinema cannot be confined to a single representational mode. Instead, these films map a shift from the immediacy of testimonial depiction (Ray) to the haunting persistence of famine as an unresolved political allegory (Sen). Ultimately, they reveal the famine not merely as a record of past catastrophe, but as a continuing and urgent narrative problem.

Trauma theory, particularly as articulated by Cathy Caruth, Dominick LaCapra, and Shoshana Felman, provides a crucial scaffold. Caruth defines trauma as an overwhelming experience that is not fully assimilated at the time it occurs, but returns belatedly in repetitive, intrusive fragments. LaCapra distinguishes between "historical trauma" (specific events) and "structural trauma" (the existential condition of absence), and warns against the dangers of "acting out" (unconsciously repeating trauma) versus the potential for "working through" (a conscious, critical engagement with the past). Felman, focusing on testimony, interrogates the possibility and ethics of bearing witness to catastrophe. These concepts illuminate the core tension in famine representation: between the imperative to document and testify (Ray's project); and the recognition of famine's essential irrepresentability, its persistence as a ghostly, disruptive memory (Sen's project).

Theoretical Framework: Trauma, Testimony, and the Limits of Representation

To understand the divergence between Ray and Sen, one must situate their work within the discourse of Trauma Studies. Trauma is often defined by its resistance to representation. As Cathy Caruth argues in *Unclaimed Experience*, trauma is an overwhelming experience that defies simple understanding or narration at the moment of its occurrence. Trauma Studies posits that catastrophic events rupture the very frameworks of understanding and narrative. The traumatic event is not fully 'known' in the instant, but returns later in repeated, often intrusive ways (Caruth 91). Thus, the traumatic event is marked

by a paradoxical temporality—it is both absent (repressed, unassimilated) and persistently present (through flashbacks, nightmares, repetitive behaviours). This creates a crisis for representation. Traditional historical realism, which assumes a stable past accessible through empathetic recreation, risks simplifying trauma into a coherent narrative, thereby betraying its fractured essence. Conversely, an overemphasis on trauma's unspeakability can lead to a fetishization of silence, potentially abdicating the ethical responsibility to engage with historical truth.

However, the Bengal Famine presents a unique challenge to this definition. It was not a singular 'blow' to the psyche but a protracted material condition. Therefore, the cinematic task splits into two ethical imperatives:

(i) The Imperative to Witness (Testimony): Drawing on Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's concept of the "witness," cinema must serve as a medium that breaks the silence. For Felman, the act of witnessing is performative; it brings the truth of the event into being (Felman 16). This aligns with Ray's project in *Ashani Sanket*, which seeks to make the invisible visible and the famine historically legible. Therefore, Ray's *Ashani Sanket* aligns with the testimonial impulse within trauma studies. It seeks to bear witness to the famine's historical reality and human cost. It operates on a logic of "working through", using realist aesthetics to create a comprehensible, albeit harrowing, narrative of societal collapse.

(ii) The Crisis of Representation (Haunting): Drawing on the concept of the "spectral" or "ghostly", trauma is seen not as a past event to be recorded, but a living, disrupting force. Sociologist Avery Gordon describes "haunting" as a state where the past is not done with the present (xvi). This aligns with Sen's project in *Akaler Sandhane*, where the famine is not a finished historical chapter, but a "spectral afterlife" that continually interrupts the present. Sen's *Akaler Sandhane* is a film about the impossibility of straightforward testimony. It "acts out" the trauma by staging its repetitive return in the present. Sen's meta-cinematic form embodies the traumatic

> disruption of narrative itself, directly engaging with the ethical quandaries of representing a suffering one has not personally experienced. It explores famine not as a contained event but as a "spectral afterlife", a lingering presence that exposes contemporary social fractures and the ethical vanity of artistic recreation.

The compelling dialectic between Satyajit Ray's *Ashani Sanket* and Mrinal Sen's *Akaler Sandhane* can be further illuminated and complicated by situating them within broader scholarly discourses on postcolonial memory, the ethics of representation, and the specific history of Bengali cinematic engagement with trauma. Recent scholarship reinforces that the 1943 famine was not a 'natural disaster' but a 'collateral of World War II', a direct result of British imperial policy that prioritized war logistics over colonial lives. This historical framing is crucial, as both films contend with an event that was systematically omitted from the 'grand narratives of the Second World War', creating an 'archive of absence' in official history. Cinema, therefore, becomes a vital site of counter-memory.

Building on the core Trauma Studies framework of "acting out" versus "working through", one can introduce the concept of "metahistoriography"—a critical examination of how history is constructed and narrated. Sen's film is a quintessential metahistoriographic work. It does not just represent the famine; it represents the crisis of representing the famine. This aligns with a critical stance noted in academic analysis, in which *Akaler Sandhane* functions as a 'metanarrative acting as a commentary on the impossibility of adequately representing great tragedies through art' (Mandal). Sen interrogates the very process of historical recovery, suggesting that the past cannot be authentically recreated but can only be encountered through its disruptive, ghostly traces in the present. Ray's approach, while more traditionally realist, is equally concerned with historiography. His "working through" is an act of constructing a morally legible historical record against colonial amnesia, creating an archive where one was denied.

Furthermore, both films engage deeply with gendered trauma. Academic analysis of *Ashani Sanket* highlights that 'women were more exploited and dominated by men during the Bengal Famine',

often forced into transactional sex for survival (Azad and Khanam 266). Ray portrays this with devastating subtlety through the character of Chutki (Sandhya Roy), whose quiet, shame-filled exchange of sexuality for rice signals the complete collapse of social morality. Sen mirrors and radicalizes this theme. In *Akaler Sandhane*, the actress Smita Patil portrays Sabitri, who in the film-within-a-film is driven to the same act. This fictional performance then violently collides with the reality of Durga (Sreela Majumdar), a present-day village woman, whose economic desperation forces her toward an identical fate. Sen thus argues that the gendered exploitation of famine is not a historical artifact but a recurring structural trauma, a 'slice of her own life' re-enacted across four decades. The woman's body becomes the enduring site where the historical famine (*Ashani Sanket*) and its contemporary economic afterlife (*Akaler Sandhane*) are inscribed.

Satyajit Ray's *Ashani Sanket*: The Legibility of Lived Catastrophe

Satyajit Ray's *Ashani Sanket* (*অশনি সংকেত* / *Distant Thunder*, 1973) approaches the famine through the lens of historical realism. Ray's primary concern is the 'legibility' of the event. In the tradition of the testimonial narrative, the film seeks to integrate the traumatic experience into a coherent history, transforming chaotic suffering into a narrative of cause and effect.

The Irony of Beauty and the Slow Unravelling

Ray's film is an exercise in gradual, visceral revelation. Ray constructs a meticulously realized *mise-en-scène* that initially highlights the lush, idyllic beauty of rural Bengal. The film opens not with images of death, but with the vibrancy of village life. Set in a peaceful, idyllic Bengali village at the onset of World War II, the film tracks the insidious creep of famine. This is a deliberate strategy. The trauma here is introduced through a terrifying juxtaposition: nature remains bountiful while humanity withers. Ray's realist strategy is one of accumulation and sensory detail, moving from plenitude to absolute deprivation. His approach can be seen as building a cultural archive against historical absence, using the cinematic medium to visualize 'the reality of the famine' and its deep impact on social life.

Theoretical scholar Dominick LaCapra distinguishes between "acting out" (the repetitive reliving of trauma) and "working through" (the narrative integration of trauma) (21-22). Ray attempts a form of "working through". He gives the famine a clear narrative arc: a beginning (scarcity), a middle (social breakdown), and an end (mass starvation). By doing so, he prevents the famine from becoming an abstract horror; it remains a social phenomenon shaped by 'external policies and internal human greed'.

Scene Analysis: The Feast and the Empty Plate

The film's early scenes are saturated with colour and life, establishing the Brahmin protagonist Gangacharan's privileged world. A pivotal scene shows Gangacharan eating a lavish meal while his wife, Ananga, fans him. The frame is warm, the sounds of eating comforting. The plate is full, a symbol of order, caste privilege, and natural abundance. Ray meticulously documents this world to establish a baseline from which it will be torn. As the famine tightens its grip, the same dining ritual is repeated, but with devastating difference. The colours drain from the frame, moving from ochres and greens to dusty browns and ashen greys. The sound of hearty eating is replaced by the silence of staring at an empty plate, or the faint, desperate scraping of a bowl. This visual and aural desaturation is Ray's masterstroke in trauma representation. The trauma of famine is not shown through graphic images of corpses (though those appear), but through this systematic negation of life's sensory richness. The empty plate becomes a traumatic signifier—an object that once signified sustenance now screams absence. This technique corresponds to a "working through". The cause of the emptiness is made clear: the diversion of grain for the war, the profiteering of local merchants, the collapse of social morality. Ray traces a clear historical and moral causation, insisting the famine is a knowable, representable event rooted in human decisions.

Scene Analysis: The Brahmin and the Abject

A pivotal scene that exemplifies Ray's approach is the moment Gangacharan, the Brahmin protagonist, is forced to confront his own hunger. Throughout the film, Gangacharan has maintained his caste superiority, believing his status protects him. However, as the rice disappears, the social hierarchy collapses.

One can analyse this sequence through Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection. For Kristeva, the "abject" is that which crosses the boundary of the self, disturbing identity and order—often associated with bodily fluids, filth, or the collapse of meaning (4). In the scene where Gangacharan's wife Ananga husks a meagre amount of rice, the "abject" creeps into the frame. The camera lingers on the physical labour, stripping 'Bamoon Didi' of her spiritual aura and reducing her to a biological organism desperate for calories.

When a lower-caste woman begs for food, the couple is paralyzed. The 'empty plate' here is not just a sign of hunger; it is a sign of abjection—the breakdown of the boundary between the 'pure' Brahmin and the 'impure' starving masses. Ray uses the moral clarity of realism to show that the famine forces a re-negotiation of the self. The camera bears witness to the precise moment when survival instinct overrides caste pride, making the abstract statistics of the famine intimately personal.

Scene Analysis: The River of Refugees

The film's traumatic core erupts as a silent, endless stream of refugees passes through the village. Ray films them in long, unbroken shots, often from Gangacharan's distant, helpless perspective. There is no dramatic score, only the ambient sound of shuffling feet, laboured breathing, and occasional wails. This scene embodies the Caruthian notion of belated impact. For the insulated villagers (and by extension, the audience), the famine arrives not as a statistic, but as this slow-moving, spectral human river. It is an overwhelming sight that cannot be fully processed in the moment. The trauma here is in the scale and the silence, in the violation of the pastoral order. Ray's realism captures both the external event and its internal, psychological shockwave, as Gangacharan's worldview and privilege crumble. Cinema becomes the vessel for this historical testimony, preserving the image of suffering for collective memory.

Scene Analysis: Gendered Exploitation and the Female Body

Ray's realism powerfully exposes the gendered dimension of famine trauma, a theme highlighted in post-famine cultural analysis (Khatri). The subplot of Chutki (Sandhya Roy) underscores the exploitation of women's bodies during the crisis. An outcast man pursues her, offering rice in exchange for sexual favours. Initially disgusted, she

ultimately succumbs to her desperate hunger. Scholars note that Ray's depiction conflates Chutki, dressed in a red saree, with the goddess Annapurna, the giver of nourishment—an ironic juxtaposition that highlights the perversion of traditional symbols of care and plenty (Khatri). This scene lays bare how famine dismantles social morality, forcing women into transactional sex for survival, a brutal reality well-recorded in the history of 1943. The woman's body becomes the primary site where the trauma of scarcity is violently enacted.

Desaturation as Aesthetic Trauma

Visually, Ray employs a subtle but powerful technique: the gradual desaturation of his colour palette. As the grip of hunger tightens, the film's lush visuals drain away. The vibrant greens of the paddy fields and the rich reds of the women's saris become muted, mirroring the biological draining of the subjects. This aesthetic choice underscores the famine's reality; it is a 'lived catastrophe' that shapes the material world. By focusing on the material—the rice that disappears, the bodies that thin—Ray positions cinema as a crucial medium for bearing witness.

Mrinal Sen's *Akaler Sandhane*: The Spectral and the Meta-Cinematic

If Ray provides a window into the past, Mrinal Sen's *Akaler Sandhane* (*আকালের সন্ধানে* / *In Search of Famine*, 1980) offers a mirror reflecting the present. Sen posits that a direct, realist representation of the 1943 famine is no longer possible, or perhaps even ethical, in 1980. *Akaler Sandhane* is not about 1943 but about 1980, about a film crew from Calcutta arriving in a village to make a movie about the 1943 famine. The famine is thus displaced, becoming an object of investigation, a period recreation. However, the past refuses to stay in its period costume. Sen displaces the famine into a film-within-a-film, using the structure to critique the act of looking itself. The film turns a critical gaze on 'the politics of artistic representation' of misery and the ethics of the middle-class filmmaker.

The Ethics of Simulation and Postmemory

The film follows a contemporary film crew as they arrive in a village to shoot a movie about the 1943 famine. Here, Marianne Hirsch's

theory of "postmemory" becomes relevant. Hirsch describes postmemory as "the relationship that the 'generation after' bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before—to experiences they 'remember' only by means of the stories, images, and behaviours among which they grew up" (Hirsch 5). The crew members have not experienced the famine, yet they are attempting to curate its memory. Sen exposes the 'ethical impasse of portraying a suffering one has not experienced' (*Akaler Sandhane*).

The dissonance is established early on. The crew arrives in a jeep, stirring up dust and the village's quiet. They bring with them the machinery of cinema—cameras, lights, and, crucially, an abundance of food. The crew's consumption of lavish meals while discussing the 'aesthetics of starvation' creates a grotesque irony. Sen suggests that their attempt to represent the famine is an act of colonization; they are mining the village's trauma for artistic capital.

Scene Analysis: The Anthropological Gaze Disrupted

The most haunting sequence in *Akaler Sandhane* occurs when the 'reel' famine intersects with the 'real' famine. The actress Smita Patil, playing a famine victim from 1943, is in costume—haggard, dressed in rags. She portrays the role of a poor village woman named Sabitri—a desperate wife and mother who, to feed her starving family, ultimately resorts to selling her body to city contractors. While Smita performs scenes of emotional breakdown as a famine-stricken village wife (sometimes involving themes of prostitution for survival), the villagers watch the shoot. During the filming of a particularly harrowing scene from the 1943 Bengal Famine period drama, Sabitri's husband, in rage and starvation, smashes utensils and threatens to dash their infant to the ground, forcing Smita (in the character of Sabitri) to scream in protest. As Smita delivers this raw, performed cry, a genuine, heartrending scream of anguish erupts from the crowd of villagers watching the shoot, disrupting the filming and evoking real, unresolved trauma from the past famine. It belongs to Durga (Sreela Majumdar), a local village woman whose own life eerily mirrors the scripted tragedy: poverty, a disabled husband, and the unbearable weight of survival. The village woman Durga is gaunt, her eyes hollow, bearing the actual scars of chronic malnutrition that persisted in 1980. Durga's outburst—unscripted, visceral, born of buried trauma—shatters the illusion of the take,

blurring the line between cinematic artifice and lived suffering. While Smita can 'cut' and step out of her role, Durga cannot escape hers, underscoring the film's haunting critique of how history's wounds persist into the present.

The interaction between Durga and the film crew (particularly Smita) can be read through the lens of the "anthropological gaze". The film crew operates with a gaze that objectifies the villagers as 'historical artifacts' or 'aesthetic props. However, in this scene, the gaze is returned. The village woman looks back. Her stare is not one of admiration for the actress, but of silent interrogation. This return of the gaze disrupts the power dynamic. Smita Patil, the professional simulator of suffering, is silenced by the presence of actual suffering. This 'silent frame' serves as a rupture in the narrative. It validates Sen's thesis that the famine 'resists full representation.' The heart wrenching cry and gaze of the village woman acts as the "spectral afterlife" of 1943, haunting the crew and rendering their artistic endeavours futile.

Scene Analysis: Photography, Memory, and the Blank Frame

Sen further deconstructs representation through a poignant scene where the crew plays a guessing game with historical photographs of famines from different eras. This game builds a chronology of perpetual suffering, but the crew's often callous attitude succinctly captures the great chasm between the well-meaning middle class and the actual sufferers. The final photograph is a totally dark, blank frame, which the actress Smita Patil describes as a metaphor for 'the past, the present, and the future'. This blank frame serves as Sen's ultimate statement on representational limits: famine's essence may be an unrepresentable void, a silence that contains all temporal dimensions of the trauma.

Sen highlights the impossibility of authentic recreation. The real trauma is not safely in 1943; it is here, in the present-day economic conditions of the village, which the crew's presence exploitatively illuminates. As one villager sarcastically remarks at the film's opening, 'The Babus have come in search of the famine; the famine is all over us' (Khatri). The crew's presence acts as a catalyst: it strains local resources (causing price hikes and resentment), metaphorically 'creating' a contemporary famine-like situation, and forces

confrontations that reveal unresolved historical wounds. The crew's attempt to 'act out' the past famine inadvertently "acts out" a present one, revealing trauma as a recurring pattern. The narrative deliberately blurs the boundaries between the 'reel' (fictional, historical reconstruction) and the 'real' (ongoing rural deprivation), showing how the trauma of famine is not confined to the past, but persists through cycles of poverty, exploitation, and socio-economic neglect in the present.

The Uncast Body: The Spectre of Malati and the Village Crypt

A critical rupture in *Akaler Sandhane* occurs when the film crew attempts to cast a local woman from the village as Malati, a character who turns to prostitution to survive the famine. While the crew views this merely as a casting challenge—seeking 'authenticity' for their art—the villagers react with vehement hostility, eventually forcing the crew to abandon the location. This conflict is not merely a clash between conservative rural morality and liberal urban values; it is a defensive reaction to a specific, unhealed wound from the 1943 famine.

Trauma theorists Nicolas Abraham and Mária Török offer the concept of the "crypt" to describe a psychic space where shameful secrets and unavowable losses are buried to keep the self (or community) intact (Abraham and Török 22). The famine of 1943 was not only a biological catastrophe of starvation but also a moral catastrophe in which social bonds collapsed. As historian Janam Mukherjee notes, the 'sex-starvation trade-off' was a grim reality; many women were forced into sexual labour to feed themselves or their families (Mukherjee 132). For the village elders in 1980, the figure of Malati is not a fictional character; she represents the 'phantom' of the mothers, sisters, and daughters who were forced into abjection to survive.

By refusing to let a living village woman play Malati, the community is guarding its "crypt". To cast a local woman would be to physically re-enact the trauma of 1943—to once again place a village daughter in the position of the "fallen" woman for the consumption of outsiders (this time, the film crew rather than colonial soldiers or profiteers). Sociologist Kai T. Erikson, in his work on collective trauma, argues that trauma damages the "tissue of

community" and that the community often coalesces around a shared silence to protect its remaining dignity (Erikson 154). The villagers' refusal is an act of agency. They assert that while the crew may own the *history* of the famine (as data/script), they do not own the *memory* of its degradation. The villagers refuse to perform their own historical shame for the camera, effectively drawing an ethical line that the filmmakers, in their pursuit of realism, failed to see.

Separately, an urban actress named Devika (played by Devika Mukherjee) is initially part of the film crew but gets summarily expelled after she plucks her eyebrows and cuts her hair short—failing to deglamourize herself in order to play the role of the poverty-stricken prostitute, Malati—acts that the director sees as inadequate and insincere for embodying true deprivation. This incident sharply critiques the disconnect between the privileged actor fraternity, accustomed to glamour and performative suffering, and the authentic, lived experience of poverty they seek to portray. Sen uses this narrative thread to underscore the ethical pitfalls of artistic representation, questioning how outsiders can genuinely capture—or risk exploiting—stories of extreme hardship without bridging that experiential gap.

The Ghostly Traces

Sen's film argues that the famine is not an event that ended. It survives as cultural memory and silence. When the crew attempts to recreate the past, the past interrupts the present. The village they are filming in is still ravaged by poverty; the famine of 1943 bleeds into the hardships of 1980. The trauma destabilizes the present, proving that the event resists 'artistic capture'.

The film ends with the crew retreating. They cannot finish shooting the film because the reality of the village is too overwhelming. This retreat is Sen's admission of defeat, but it is a productive defeat. It forces the audience to acknowledge that some traumas cannot be contained within a narrative; they can only be acknowledged as an ongoing, haunting presence.

Sonic Trauma: The Soundscapes of Hunger

While visual analysis dominates famine studies, the auditory landscapes of *Ashani Sanket* and *Akaler Sandhane* offer equally profound insights into the nature of trauma. The acoustic dimensions

of both films are fundamental to their trauma aesthetics. The 'silence' mentioned in the abstract is not merely an absence of dialogue; it is an active sonic texture that signifies the limits of language.

Ashani Sanket: The Crescendo of Silence

In *Ashani Sanket*, the film title itself—*Distant Thunder*—points to a sonic metaphor. World War II precipitates the famine, yet the war remains off-screen. We do not see soldiers; we only hear the 'distant thunder' of warplanes flying overhead (*Ashani Sanket*). This soundscape creates a sense of ominous dread. The mechanical roar of the planes disrupts the organic sounds of the village—the birds, the wind, the husking pedal. Ray uses sound to locate the village within global geopolitics of violence. The planes are the auditory signifiers of the colonial policies that are stripping the village of its rice. As the famine deepens, the film's soundscape changes; the vibrant chatter of the marketplace is replaced by a heavy, oppressive silence, punctuated only by the weak groans of the dying.

Ray uses sound realistically, but with profound symbolic weight. The film's soundscape begins with the lush symphony of rural life: birds, rustling leaves, flowing water, and domestic chatter. As the famine progresses, this soundscape is progressively stripped away. Meals become silent. The marketplace becomes quiet and tense. The most powerful sound becomes the absence of sound—the silent stares of the hungry. The auditory trauma is in this hollowing out. The non-diegetic instrumental music, composed by Ray himself, that occasionally appears, is not sentimental but funereal, marking the death of a world. Ray's sound design testifies to loss by documenting what has been lost.

Akaler Sandhane: The Clash of Discourses and the Noise of Intrusion

In *Akaler Sandhane*, Sen's soundscape is fragmented and dialectical, emphasizing alienation. It is dominated by two conflicting layers: the self-important discussions of the film crew and the ambient, often-ignored sounds of the village's present-day life. The trauma is heard in the dissonance. The crew's dialogue is intellectual, full of famine-related words. The village's reality is often wordless. Sound is used to expose the artificiality of the cinematic apparatus. The film is filled with the jarring noises of filmmaking: the sharp *clack* of the

clapperboard, the director shouting 'Cut!', the whirring of the generator (*Akaler Sandhane*). Sen uses intrusive mechanical noise, such as the constant drone of the film unit's generator, as 'a metaphor of their intrusion into and alienation from the actual lives of the villagers'. These sounds are aggressive; they impose a modern, industrial rhythm on the slow, impoverished time of the village. Sen juxtaposes this 'noise of representation' with the 'silence of the real'. The noise contrasts sharply with the serene rural sounds, audibly marking the violence of the cinematic 'invasion'. The villagers often speak in whispers or remain entirely silent, their trauma existing in a register that the loud, confident filmmakers cannot record. The crew's final retreat is marked by a return to the ambient sounds of the village, suggesting that the 'noise' of history-making has failed to capture the quiet persistence of suffering.

Furthermore, Sen uses sound to blur the reel and the real, most powerfully when the scream of Smita Patil's character (Sabitri) during a filmed scene merges with the scream of Durga (played by Sreela Majumdar), a watching village woman whose own life mirrors the fiction. The scream becomes a transhistorical signifier of gendered suffering, refusing to be contained within the frame of the film-within-a-film. This sonic puncture collapses the distance between representation and reality.

Comparative Analysis: Record Versus Rehearsal

The juxtaposition of these two films illuminates a broader tension within Trauma Studies: the conflict between historical testimony and allegorical haunting. Satyajit Ray's *Ashani Sanket* (1973) and Mrinal Sen's *Akaler Sandhane* (1980) constitute an indispensable dialectic in the representation of historical trauma. Ray, the humanist, believes in cinema's capacity and responsibility to bear witness. Through empathetic, realist "working through," he makes the famine an object of historical understanding and ethical remembrance, creating a cinematic monument to the victims. Sen, the radical sceptic, argues that such monuments are always incomplete and potentially unethical. The traumatic truth of famine escapes direct representation; it survives as a ghost that disrupts the present. His meta-cinematic "acting out" forces a confrontation with the ethical limits of art and the persistent scars of history. An effective way of putting this would be:

(i) Ray's Modernist Confidence: Ray believes in the power of the image to record history. His film acts as an archive. The 'empty plate' in Ray's film is a historical fact, an accusation against the colonial administration. He trusts that if the viewer *sees* the suffering clearly enough, they will understand the historical truth.

(ii) Sen's Postmodern Anxiety: Sen doubts the image's ability to contain the truth. His film acts as a critique of the archive. The 'silent frame' in Sen's film (where the camera stops or the actor fails to perform) represents the failure of art to bridge the gap between the observer and the victim. He suggests that 'seeing' is not enough; we must also interrogate *how* we see.

Ray positions the famine as an event to be recorded and ethically remembered, preventing it from slipping into oblivion. Sen, conversely, suggests that 'recording' is insufficient because the trauma has not ended; it has merely mutated. The famine in *Akaler Sandhane* is not a memory; it is a ghost that refuses to be exorcised.

Together, the two films map the terrain of famine in the South Asian imaginary. It is both a *record* and a *rehearsal*. Ray gives us the record with stunning fidelity. Sen shows us the endless, troubled rehearsal—the attempt to grapple with a past that will not stay past. Their work answers the central question not with a single solution, but with a necessary tension, challenging the Eurocentric biases of traditional trauma theory. They demonstrate, as postcolonial trauma studies advocates, that the traumas of colonialism and its aftermath must be addressed on their own terms, often through aesthetic strategies that prioritize cyclical haunting and ethical interrogation over cathartic narrative closure. To represent famine is to navigate between the Scylla of reducing it to a consumable historical image and the Charybdis of surrendering to its unspeakability. It requires both Ray's courage to look directly at the empty plate and Sen's wisdom to listen to the deafening silence that surrounds it. This silence is not void but charged with the echoes of catastrophe and the ongoing murmur of its consequences.

To deepen the comparative analysis, one can examine the films through their treatment of class and caste privilege and their position within the political evolution of Bengali Parallel Cinema. Ray, often

celebrated as a humanist, employed a 'glacial' satire to critique social hierarchies. *Ashani Sanket* meticulously documents how caste privilege initially insulates the Brahmin Gangacharan. His early declaration, 'We mustn't lower ourselves in their eyes,' underscores a social order that famine brutally dismantles (Britto). Ray's critique is immanent to the historical moment; the famine exposes the fragility of this privilege and, potentially, awakens a social conscience. Sen, a more overtly Marxist filmmaker, extends this critique into the contemporary era and targets the intellectual class. The urban film crew in *Akaler Sandhane* represents a modern, artistic bourgeoisie. Their project, though well-intentioned, is an act of intellectual tourism that fails to grasp the material continuity of hunger. The infamous 'spot-the-famine' game, where the crew tries to date horrific photographs, reduces historical suffering to an abstract puzzle, highlighting their disconnection from it. For Sen, the ethical failure is not just of colonial policy, but of the privileged intellectual who seeks to represent suffering from a position of unexamined comfort.

This difference reflects the filmmakers' distinct positions within what is often termed the Indian "New Wave". While Ray's social realism sought to bear universal witness, Sen was part of a more overtly political, Brechtian-inspired strand. This context is enriched by considering the shadow of a third maestro, Ritwik Ghatak. A 'flawed genius' whose work was forged in the successive traumas of the 1943 famine, World War II, and the 1947 Partition, Ghatak developed a unique cinematic language of "radical melodrama" to express 'uncertainty, displacement, homelessness, exile, and loss of identity'. His influence looms over both Ray and Sen. While Ray's realism differs from Ghatak's expressionism, they share a focus on the human-scale victim. Sen's meta-cinematic fragmentation and political directness owe a greater debt to Ghatak's Brechtian methods. Ghatak's lifelong obsession with the "homeland" lost to Partition creates a thematic bridge: Ray shows the loss of a *social* homeland (the rural order), Sen shows the *conceptual* impossibility of returning to a historical homeland (the past), and Ghatak laments the loss of a *geographic* homeland. Together, they form a triad exploring the cataclysmic mid-century breakdown of Bengal from complementary angles.

The table below synthesizes the core representational strategies of the two primary films:

Aspect	*Ashani Sanket (Ray, 1973)*	*Akaler Sandhane (Sen, 1980)*
Core Strategy	Historical Realism / Testimony	Meta-Cinematic Reflexivity
Temporality	Linear, past tense. Famine as a contained historical event.	Collapsed, present tense, famine as a recurring, haunting memory.
Theoretical Mode (LaCapra)	Working Through: Creates a coherent narrative for comprehension and mourning.	Acting Out: Enacts the repetitive, disruptive return of trauma.
Representational Goal	To make the famine legible, knowable, and ethically memorable.	To probe the limits of representation and the ethical impasse of recreation.
Site of Trauma	The social body of a village; the moral conscience of an individual.	The filmmaking process itself; the structural poverty of the present.
Soundscape	Crescendo of Silence: Systematic removal of life's sounds to signify loss.	Clash of Discourses: Dissonance between intellectual talk and wordless need.

The core representational strategies of Ray's ***Ashani Sanket*** (1973) and Sen's ***Akaler Sandhane*** (1980)

Broader Context and Cinematic Legacy

Placing these two films in a wider cinematic context reveals that they are part of a sustained artistic engagement by Bengali filmmakers with the famine and its aftershocks. Mrinal Sen himself had addressed it earlier in *Baishey Shravana* (1960) (Mandal). The famine was also the formative wound for Ritwik Ghatak, whose entire oeuvre on displacement stems from this 'searing experience'. Even commercial cinema touched on it, though often as a romantic plot device, as in *Saptapadi* (1961). Ray's and Sen's works are thus the most sophisticated peaks in a long topographic map of cultural memory.

Their legacy is one of **urgent relevance**. As noted in a contemporary reflection on *Akaler Sandhane*, the film serves as a 'striking mirror to our times', highlighting how crises—be they pandemics or economic collapses—affect people along entrenched lines of class and geography. The gulf between the village and the city that Sen identified has, if anything, widened. Ray's warning about the social unravelling caused by inequality and greed remains perpetually current. Ultimately, these films teach us that representing historical trauma is not an archaeological exercise but a political and ethical one. Ray provides the essential, empathetic record—the ***monument***. Sen insists on the necessary, uncomfortable ***interrogation*** of who builds monuments, for whom, and at what cost. Together, they ensure that the distant thunder of 1943 continues to resonate as a demand for memory, justice, and self-critical reflection in the present.

Conclusion: The Continuing Narrative Problem

The Bengal Famine of 1943 was a catastrophic human tragedy that plunged millions into an abyss of destitution and death. While the ongoing Second World War initially disrupted the crisis, it was further exacerbated by the British government's colonial policies. A devastating combination of prioritizing military food supplies, inefficient distribution, and speculative hoarding led to an acute rice shortage in the marketplace. This scarcity triggered an exponential price surge, pushing basic sustenance far beyond the reach of the

rural poor. Consequently, village communities across Bengal were left to starve, resulting in the wholesale mortality of a stricken population. The two primary films, *Ashani Sanket* (1973) and *Akaler Sandhane* (1980), analysed in this article, reveal the Bengal Famine not merely as a record of past catastrophe, but as a continuing and urgent narrative problem. Ray's realism provides the necessary historical grounding, ensuring the event is not forgotten. Sen's reflexivity provides the necessary ethical check, ensuring the suffering is not aesthetically consumed without conscience.

These films illuminate the shifting cultural work of famine in South Asian visual narratives. Ray teaches us how to look at the past; Sen teaches us to question our own gaze. In the 'empty plates' of Ray's characters, we see the history of colonial extraction. In the 'silent frames' of Sen's frustrated filmmakers, we see the limits of our own empathy. Both models are essential to grasp the enormity of the famine—one gives us the text of the trauma; the other gives us the texture of its lingering ghost.

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