

## Cinematic Representations of the Bengal Famine of 1943

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### Abstract

The representation of famines is a complex issue for several reasons, including the risk of aestheticizing a humanitarian disaster. Turning suffering into something visually appealing or artistically pleasing spectacles can diminish its true horror. This paper examines how visual media, particularly film, uses various cinematic techniques to communicate the realities of famine. Focusing on the Bengal Famine of 1943, this paper uses a comparative film analysis to examine Satyajit Ray's *Ashani Sanket* (*Distant Thunder*, 1973) and Mrinal Sen's *Akaler Sandhane* (*In Search of Famine*, 1980). Ray employs naturalistic cinematography and an intimate focus on individuals, particularly women's experience, making the political interrogation of famine a humanistic and gendered one. Sen, on the other hand, deploys a film-within-a-film structure to foreground the act of representation itself. Both filmmakers highlight a structural problem in humanitarian visual media: the tension between emotional engagement and political accountability. By reading these films through frameworks of ineffability (Steiner) and witnessing (Ricoeur), this paper argues that famine representation in cinema is never neutral. Famine cinema is shaped by ideology, authorial positionality, and the risk of aestheticization, even as the genre seeks to resist it.

**Keywords:** Bengali cinema; Bengal famine; *Ashani Sanket*; *Akaler Sandhane*; Satyajit Ray; Mrinal Sen; disaster cinema



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## Introduction

India has witnessed several famines throughout its history. The Bengal famine of 1943 was one of the devastating famines. Dyson & Maharatna (1991) estimated that approximately 2.1 million people died from the famine. While historical documents account for the factual details of this tragedy through fact and figures, films offer a different lens that allows us to explore affective lived experience and micro-history through cinematic narratives. In historical documents, famine becomes a tragedy; in cinematic narratives, it becomes a tragedy as a process because films provide the durational nature that allows the viewer to experience the slow, agonizing process of famines.

The challenges of representing such a traumatic event are significant for many reasons. Firstly, despite a genuine societal desire to engage with these histories, that desire often goes unrealized. As Evans (2017) shows, even early attempts to adapt famine narratives for the screen, such as John Ford's adaptation of Liam O'Flaherty's "Famine," were never released. A second challenge is the political nature of famine representation. As Amartya Sen (1981) argued, famines do not occur in functioning democracies with a free press; Famines are failures

of entitlement and distribution. If Sen says famines are caused by political decisions rather than natural forces alone, then any film about famine is a political film, and political films attract political resistance. Films about the Holodomor (the Ukrainian famine of 1932–1933) faced production and distribution challenges due to the political sensitivities surrounding its causes and attribution. Therefore, to represent famine cinematically is to enter a territory of examined politics. In famine cinema, questions of blame, agency, and historical memory are never settled.

A third challenge concerns authenticity. Famine resists easy knowing because it is not a single event with a clear beginning and end. Famine happens differently across regions, classes, and genders. This makes it difficult to know and represent. Historical accounts aim to understand it at the macro level through statistics, policy decisions, and economic data, while films aim to understand it at the micro level. Films try to capture famine from the inside, through individual stories, emotional experience, and visual reconstruction. When a film puts a human face on the backdrop of famine, its emotional and aesthetic choices risk being received by audiences as historical fact. The film cannot simply reproduce the historical record, nor can it depart from it without risking distortion. The question is not whether film can be as accurate as historiography. Films cannot, and should not try, but whether it is a different kind of truth, its

capacity for intimate emotional engagement with lived experience, can complement the historical record without falsifying it.

This paper examines the Bengal famine of 1943 in two films: Satyajit Ray's *Ashani Sanket* and Mrinal Sen's *Akaler Sandhane*. Using a comparative film analysis of their cinematography, mise-en-scène, and sound design, this paper argues that famines are defined by two representational ethics: aesthetic humanism and reflexive political interrogation. While historical texts approach famine by prioritizing data, films approach famine as a story. Therefore, this paper examines the social and political contexts that inform these cinematic representations.

### Representation of Famines in Visual Media

The central problem of famine representation is ethical before it is aesthetic. The compositional choices made when filming or photographing suffering already involve framing, editing, and rendering it. There is a risk of removing the horror of that event. This risk is what George Steiner (1985) identifies as the danger of the "unspeakable." According to Steiner, certain experiences of extreme suffering oppose expression, and any attempt to put them into language or image may diminish rather than preserve their horror. For Steiner, the aesthetic motivation is itself a threat to the integrity of traumatic memory. However, refusing representation entirely comes at a cost. As Kelleher (1997) discusses, Ricoeur insists that fiction

possesses the power to "give eyes" to readers and viewers. Fiction allows us to render the past imaginatively accessible in ways that statistical records cannot. Moreover, fiction needs to have a narrative. So that a disaster like famine can be witnessed, mourned, and politically understood, this tension between Steiner's warning against aestheticization and Ricoeur's insistence on the necessity of imaginative representation is the ethical need within which all famine cinema operates. The question is not whether to represent famine, but how to do so without betraying the suffering it seeks to honor.

Kelleher (1997) identifies one frequent strategy in famine literature and visual culture: the feminization of suffering. Ellmann (1993) argues that hunger "deranges the distinction between self and other," a weight that Kelleher observes is frequently displaced onto individual female figures. According to Kelleher, the immense sorrow of a population becomes legible through a single body. The image of the starving mother and child is the most familiar instance of this strategy. This feminization is not only sentimental; it is a representational logic that makes the political personal and the systemic individual, as this paper will show. Both Ray and Sen employ feminized representations of famine, but to very different ends.

A further challenge specific to cinematic representations of famine is the scarcity of documentary evidence. Bhattacharya (2022) notes that because footage of the 1943 Bengal

Famine is extremely limited, cinema must create what she calls a "sensorium" of the disaster. This sensory reconstruction fills the archival gap. For the urban audience of both 1973 and 1980, "seeing" the famine through cinema was the primary means of "knowing" it. This places enormous responsibility on the filmmaker: the cinematic reconstruction does not merely illustrate history, it constitutes it for most viewers. The visual choices made about what to show, what to withhold, how to frame a body, and how to use color and sound are therefore not aesthetic preferences but epistemological and political decisions.

Indian cinema has produced relatively few films on famine, a silence that is itself significant. Majumdar (2012) notes that some criticized Ray's *Ashani Sanket* for aestheticizing the horror of the famine through its lush visual style, which creates the Steiner problem. Sen's *Akaler Sandhane* can be read as a film that refuses to let the question of how to represent famine go unexamined. Together, these two films embody the two poles of the debate this paper traces: Ray's commitment to making the famine speakable through intimate human narrative, and Sen's claim that the very act of speaking it is politically suspect.

This literature review has identified four themes that will structure the analysis that follows. First, there is the ineffability of suffering, which is characterized by the belief that the scale of horror defies the adequacy of language and literature. This struggle to articulate the

"unspeakable" can be analyzed in famine films. Second, visualizing the famine and the techniques used to frame the unimaginable. Third, the social and political contexts in disaster cinema give famine a new visual language. The fourth is to compare the filmmaking styles of Sen and Ray.

## Film Analysis

### The Ineffability of Suffering and the Limits of Representation

*Akaler Sandhane* explores the struggle to represent the horror of famine in several ways. These struggles discuss the limitations of language and representation in addressing extreme suffering. Though the concept of the ineffability of suffering has been discussed in literature, it is underexplored in film. However, the ineffability of suffering helps to theorize the representation of pain and suffering.

*Akaler Sandhane* opens with a noticeable difference between historical documentation and cinematic reconstruction. The crew brings with them a collection of archival photographs from 1943, which serve as the facts and figures of the tragedy. When the director and his lead actor look at the skeletal remains in the photos, they realize these images represent a level of suffering beyond dialogue. The crew attempts to humanize these statistics through performance. However, Sen uses this to highlight the limits of representation. In the film, the actors are seen to be concerned with their looks, for example, in debates over plucked eyebrows or the beauty

of a shot. Sen suggests that aesthetic humanism risks domesticating the very horror it tries to archive.

In the film, as the crew intrudes into rural space, there is a problem with the crew's gaze: because their gaze comes from urban space, it carries certain privileges. Instead of capturing the 1943 famine, the crew creates a mini-famine by driving up local prices and disrupting the village economy. While the crew believes they are "giving eyes" to the past, the village Headmaster serves as the voice of Steiner's warning. He explicitly tells the crew that there are "two worlds"—the comfortable world of the observers and the ineffable world of the sufferers. Therefore, the film demonstrates that the famine as a story cannot be enacted in its entirety because the social conditions that enabled the 1943 famine (poverty, exploitation, and superstitious beliefs) remain active in the 1980s village. Sen shows us the unspeakable present by making the ineffability of suffering the character of Durga and the village women. As the crew tries to film a scene about a woman forced into deviant survival strategies (prostitution) during the famine, they are met with resistance from the villagers. This resistance highlights the limits of representation. The villagers refuse to allow their history and present reality to be consumed by the city. Thus leading to the failure of subjective gaze, and the film ends with the crew exiting the village. This departure suggests that the tragedy is a process that cannot be archived within a frame. The suffering remains unspeakable because any attempt to speak it or

to represent it becomes a form of further exploitation. Therefore, to represent famine is to acknowledge its impossibility. *Akaler Sandhane* moves toward a reflexive political interrogation that leaves the tragedy unresolved and unspeakable. Hence, the key question is: How can filmmakers show the unimaginable suffering without making it seem like entertainment, sensational, or exploitation, i.e., taking advantage of the victims' pain? Director Mrinal Sen uses a "meta-cinematic approach" to address this challenge.

Meta-cinematic is a cinematic device in the film's self-awareness. To better understand this, Siska, W. C. (1979) explains two forms of reflexivity: 1) Reflexivity upon the medium of expression and 2) Reflexivity upon the artist as creator. The first describes how films engage with the mechanics of filmmaking, such as showing the camera crew, revealing special effects, and disrupting narrative flow to highlight the film's construction. The second explores the filmmaker's creative process, motivations, and relationship to their work. *Akaler Sandhane* is set in rural Bengal. A film crew arrives in a small village to shoot a film about the Bengal Famine of 1943. The crew includes both professionals and newcomers, reflecting the complexities of the Bengali film industry itself. Chatterjee is a politically conscious and demanding director obsessed with authenticity. Producers, camera operators, sound technicians, and other essential personnel exist.

For the cast, Debika, a modern, urban actress, plays a rural woman affected by famine. As the film progresses, Durga, a local woman from the village, is eventually cast in the movie. Smita Patil is present from the very beginning as one of the lead actors. She plays two roles within the film-within-a-film structure. One is herself, and the other is a character within the fictional movie the crew is shooting. Smita Patil plays an impoverished village wife struggling during the 1943 Bengal famine. The film crew is filming in the exact location where the famine occurred. By showing the filmmaking process, Sen acknowledges the difficulty in completely recreating the trauma of a famine.

Sen also shows understanding that the famine is difficult. This is highlighted when Smita Patil suggests the spot-the-famine game. When Patil shows her colleagues historical famine photographs, she challenges them to identify the year. Many of her colleagues get many of them wrong. Sen shows that understanding the specific details and unique characteristics of each famine, even when presented with visual evidence, can be difficult. If Sen emphasizes that accurately capturing and conveying the specificities of historical trauma is difficult, then we could argue that each famine has its own context and horrors, and that there may be no need to oversimplify or misrepresent them. The final photograph shown by Smita Patil is entirely black. This photograph is not a literal depiction of a famine scene. Instead, this scene, combined with the film's earlier depictions of the crew's attempts to recreate the famine, highlights that

famines and food crises recur in India. The black photograph suggests a void, an absence, and the unspeakable nature of the famine experience. Sen's usage of this photograph is relevant to academic literature, precisely Steiner's concept of the 'unspeakable.' The black photograph and the crew's inability to interpret it directly suggest that some experiences, such as the full horror of famine, are so overwhelming that they are difficult, if not impossible, to fully express in words or images. They resist easy articulation and visual representation. The blackness serves as a metaphor for the inaccessibility of such profound suffering, a visual representation of the limits of representation itself.

Satyajit Ray's *Ashani Sanket* indicates how cinema navigates the ineffability of suffering through the lens of aesthetic humanism. While historical documents provide the facts and figures of the 1943 famine, this film translates the unspeakable into a deep-down account of the famine as a story. Ray handles the ineffability of starvation by focusing on what is not shown. Unlike graphic war archives, Ray avoids images of rotting corpses until the very end of the film. Instead, suffering is portrayed through a particular system of social structures and institutions. We see this in the Brahmin protagonist, Gangacharan, who shifts from a position of caste entitlement to a desperate man forced to pulse-check an untouchable woman to confirm the village's first starvation death. The unspeakable, therefore, is also found in the silence. For

example, in an empty kitchen or the sight of women foraging for wild snails and tubers (foods they would normally consider taboo). Tragedies, such as famine, are processes of gradual dehumanization rather than sudden events in Ray's world.

The film's opening scene features several beautiful landscape shots. Ray establishes these landscapes intentionally. He uses lush, saturated colors to underscore the contrast between nature and the human-made tragedy. From these landscapes, the scene cuts to Ananga's hand in a pond, and planes flying above her. The film's lyricism (the red saris, the golden fields) risks domesticating the horror. Ray balances this by ending with a stark, silhouette-filled frame that finally provides the facts and figures, the statement that 5 million people died. As Ray explained in an interview with Udayan Gupta (29; 1982), Ray deliberately avoided depicting the stereotypical images of famine, such as scorched earth and starving faces. These are the images people usually associate with famine: dry, barren land, and people visibly emaciated and starving. Ray chose not to show these directly. Instead of these prominent images, Ray focused on the subtle ways hunger manifests, even in a clearly prosperous environment. He showed the effects of famine by depicting people becoming increasingly anxious about food, rising food prices, and the difficulty of obtaining it, the breakdown of social structures and relationships due to resource scarcity, and the initial stages of malnutrition and illness. For example, Ray highlights the rising anxiety surrounding food acquisition. He shows Gangacharan and Ananga

observing the gradual increase in food prices and the growing difficulty in obtaining necessities. He depicts the breakdown of social structures through scenes in which villagers begin hoarding resources, and suspicion arises among neighbors.

The film enacts history subjectively through the domestic sphere. By narrowing the focus to one couple, Ray makes the 1943 tragedy speakable through the camera's following of the women's experiences of hunger and exploitation (e.g., the character Chutki succumbing to an outsider for rice), making the political interrogation a gendered one.

### Visualizing the Famine

In *Akaler Sandhane*, Mrinal Sen operates a self-reflexive, meta-cinematic approach to visualize the famine. The film frequently utilizes archival photographs from the 1943 Bengal Famine to ground the narrative. In one scene from the film, the crew examines black-and-white stills of starving people from 1943. These images place themselves within the narrative as historical artifacts in the color-saturated world of 1980; Sen visualizes the unimaginable as both historically distant and viscerally present. Sen frames the famine not as fiction but as a hard fact that the film crew struggles to match in performance.

Sen repeatedly reminds the viewer that they are watching a reconstruction of a famine by showing the film-within-a-film. Sen prevents famine from becoming a very object of beauty or

consumption. We see the clapboard, the director's instructions, and the technical apparatus (lights, microphones) in the frame. This reflexive political style of filmmaking forces the audience to examine the process of representation. The limits of representation are highlighted by the artificiality of the makeup and the actors' attempts to look hungry, which distinguishes them from the villagers' actual poverty as the villagers watch the shoot.

The film uses POV shots to emphasize the depth between the urban observers and the rural subjects. The camera often adopts the perspective of the film crew looking out from their palace (the old mansion they stay in) at the village. By framing the villagers staring back into the lens, Sen reverses the gaze. Therefore, the frame visualizes the ineffability of suffering by showing that the crew can gaze at the village but cannot truly see or understand the lived experience of hunger.

Sen also uses sound to frame famine narratives. For example, the sound of the crew, such as the generator, the shouting of orders, and the arrival of the ambassador's car, is loud. Sen juxtaposes the quiet, domestic spaces of the village with modern representation to show that modern representation is loud amid the silence of historical pain. The silence of characters like Durga (the village woman) represents the unspeakable nature of actual suffering. Whereas Ray also uses sound as a political and social marker of the famine as an unfolding process. The

sound of the fighter plane links the isolated village to the global war, causing the scarcity. In the early sections of the film, we hear the chanting of religious rituals and the confident dialogue of a Brahmin schoolteacher who believes in his social entitlement. As the famine takes hold, these sounds are replaced by the quiet, desperate noises of others in the film. The sound of digging for wild roots or scraping for snails in the mud acknowledges the ineffability of suffering through the gradual silencing of traditional village life.

Unlike the monochromatic tradition of most famine cinema, *Ashani Sanket* uses saturated technicolor to highlight nature's indifference. For example, the film uses high-saturation cinematography of the Bengal countryside. The opening shot of Anaga's hand following through water filled with lotuses creates a sensual, vibrant world. If Ray is making the environment look beautiful against the backdrop of the coming famine, the film points out that the famine is not a natural disaster (where the earth turns brown or dry) but a human-made, political one. The horror is framed by the fact that the food exists in the world, but is being taken away, leaving the famine as a story to unfold in a deceptively ideal setting.

The famine is visualized as a remote threat that arrives, disrupting the village's organic sounds. The recurring visual and sound of WWII fighter planes flying over the village. These planes represent the facts and figures of the global war that caused the local famine. The

villagers look up and see shining birds, unaware that these machines are the harbinger of their starvation. The film also uses specific visual markers for caste and tradition. Ray does this to show how hunger can fragment the social structures that humans follow. The focus on Brahminical rituals and their gradual abandonment indicates that famine affects not the human body but social structures. For example, Gangacharan (a brahmin) is forced to physically touch a dying woman from a lower caste to check her pulse. This scene shows that the famine's unspeakable nature is such that when hunger becomes absolute, the subjective rules of society (such as untouchability) disappear.

The film's final scene pulls back from Gangacharan and Anaga's story to the silhouette of a starving family walking across the horizon. As the silhouettes multiply, the film pulls back to an objective view of the masses. The final text appears, stating that 5 million people died. The aesthetic, humanistic famine story of the first two hours ends with Ray acknowledging that while cinema can give the individual eyes, the scale of the suffering remains ultimately unspeakable.

### Famine Cinema as Political, Famine Cinema as Social

Famine in visual media must be examined through political and social lenses, as these factors significantly contribute to it. Both Mrinal Sen's *Akaler Sandhane* and Satyajit Ray's *Ashani Sanket* address the social and political factors that contributed to the Bengal Famine, but

they do so using very different approaches. Sen uses a meta-cinematic structure, allowing him to critique who has the power to tell stories, whose stories get told, and how the perspectives of those telling them shape those stories. Filmmakers are often from urban, middle-class backgrounds, and Sen's film questions how this perspective might influence their portrayal of rural life and suffering. The filmmakers' gaze can lead to misinterpretations or a lack of understanding of the true realities of rural communities. *Akaler Sandhane* shows how difficult it is to portray the past accurately and how easily stories can be misinterpreted or used for other purposes. Mrinal Sen does not see famine as a historical recreation. Instead, he creates a new visual language of witnessing at the intersection of urban privilege and rural poverty, but it is very deconstructive in its nature. Sen views representation as a potential violation of the subject. The film analyzes the 1943 Bengal Famine not as a closed chapter of history, but as an ongoing social and political process.

Sen constructs two distinct worlds due to the class divide. In the first world, Sen places the urban bhadralok (an educated elite Bengali who emerged during British rule) film crew, and in the second world, he places the rural villagers. When the film crew arrives in the village with their lights, cameras, and processed food, they view the village as a location rather than a living community. These two worlds are explicitly justified in the Headmaster's monologue:

Director: *What do you suggest then, given the situation we are in?*

Headmaster, *I am not sure whether you should continue. But the belief you started with... does that belief still exist? Or is it just a matter of 'give and take' now?*

*There is a gap... a deep misunderstanding. It is as if there are two worlds: yours and ours.*

*I was once one of you. I, too, came from the city, from Kolkata. My education, my upbringing—it was all there. Through long years of experience here, I have tried to break myself, to change. I have changed. I wanted to understand, but I could not. However, the fault is not one-sided. These people (the villagers) have their ignorance, superstitions, greed, and selfishness. I will not deny that. However, you people are not exactly 'holy water' either. You have your own faults.*

*With your status, your social pedigree, I can call you a privileged class, can't I? For so long, you have been imposing yourselves upon them. Why should they tolerate it?*

*I am sorry. I have spoken far too much, and perhaps at the wrong time.*

*My advice? You should wait. Go back to your studios. Finish the rest of the work there.*

*There, you will not fear the public or need the police.*

The monologue serves as an important text, critiquing the social structure, just as Ray does for *Ashani Sanket*. Sen also examines the social stigma surrounding survival. When the crew approaches a local girl, Durga, to play the role of a 1943-era prostitute, the villagers are triggered. One reason for the village's outrage is the society's moral values and social structures. Sen's language of witnessing is radically reflexive and deconstructive because, for Sen, it is a witness to the act of witnessing itself. One of the most radical techniques in this new visual language is the photo-guessing game. The crew looks at photos of starving people and tries to determine whether they are from 1943 (the Bengal famine), 1959 (the food movement), or 1971

(the Bangladesh war). Sen attempts to visualize famine not as a singular event, but as an ongoing process. Sen argues that the visual markers of hunger are timeless and systemic. Witnessing in Sen's films also means to deconstruct. If deconstruction is a way of rereading (Spivak 1993,11), then Sen's filmmaking process is a form of unlearning.

Ray's film takes a different approach by focusing more directly on the social divisions within the village. Each social group experienced the famine differently. Just as Sen's film presents two different worlds, Ray also positions his characters similarly. The privileged position of the Brahmin priest, Gangacharan, is in contrast to the suffering of other villagers. The privileged world ultimately dismantles itself, unlike Sen's open-ended narrative. Gangacharan belongs to the top of the traditional Hindu social hierarchy. However, because of his brahmin status, he was initially less immediately affected by the food shortages. Towards the end of the film, the character Gangacharan slowly begins to understand the true extent of suffering in the other world and how social and economic inequalities leave some people much more vulnerable than others. When the famine hits, Gangacharan's journey of understanding is a key element of the film's social commentary. The title itself, *Ashani Sanket (Distant Thunder)*, refers to World War II, which is physically remote from the village but politically and economically present. The recurring visual of fighter planes flying over the village serves as a

reminder that this is a human-made famine. The political context is one of a colonial administration (the British Raj) siphoning resources for the war effort, leading to a collapse of entitlements for the rural struggling class of people. There is no invading army; the enemy is a rice shortage caused by hoarding and policy. The visual language here is not one of battlefields, but of empty market stalls and the rising price of grain, turning a geopolitical conflict into a domestic tragedy.

Ray's language of witnessing moves away from the unspeakable horror of corpses toward the affective lived experience of the victims. The film rejects shock imagery in favor of a durational look at the famine as a story. Witnessing is achieved through focusing on the kitchen, the gathering of wild snails, and the exchange of jewelry for a handful of rice. Hunger is feminized. The camera follows women as they become the primary foragers and victims of sexual exploitation for food, archiving a side of the tragedy often overlooked in official facts and figures. The film ends by transitioning from the story of a few individuals to a massive, silhouetted march of the millions. This technique bridges the gap between the imaginatively accessible fiction and the historical reality of 5 million deaths.

### Sen and Ray's Filmmaking Styles

Sen's use of the film-within-a-film technique and other experimental techniques, such as jump cuts and voiceovers, firmly places *Akaler Sandhane* within a reflexive framework.

Reflexivity, as discussed by Stam (1992), draws attention to the film's own construction and to the process of filmmaking. Reflexivity in Sen's films is a form of self-interrogation, in which he questions his own role, his actors', and the nature of the film itself. In doing so, he also involves the viewer in the interrogation process. Sen's approach can be seen as part of a radical left-wing political cinema. Furthermore, breaking the illusion of cinema is an interesting way to analyze the famine, as Mrinal Sen was interested in challenging the illusions cinema creates. While Ray, a realist, did not try to break the illusion of cinema in the same way

Sen's portrayal of the famine in *Akaler Sandhane* captures its physical, emotional, and psychological devastation. The film-within-film ends with Sabitri leaving the village alone. In that particular scene, Sabitri is part of a long line of people going to the city in search of food; she pauses and turns back. As the director in the background tells her to turn back and break down, there is a shift between reality and fiction, and, as the audience, we might see that it is all the same. As the film is being shot, the director instructs Sabitri to turn slowly; he then further instructs her, "*Your village...your family...your dear family....your child... He would have died of hunger. But your husband....*" As the director gives instructions, Sabriti breaks down in tears. While the scene is being shot, villagers watch the crew; however, a woman in the audience (Durga) also breaks down in tears. With this, the film-within-the-film ends.

However, in the actual film, Mrinal Sen ends with a still of Durga, slowly decreasing in the background; there is a voiceover: "*Durga is alone. Her infant died. Her husband cannot be found.*"

While Sen showcases the collective effects of famine on a broader group, Ray's *Ashani Sanket* focuses primarily on the individual experiences of Gangacharan and his wife, Ananga. Towards the end of *Ashani Sanket*, the character Moti, one of the workers who used to work in the Brahmin household, appears in front of Gangacharan's house; it is then that Ananga, Gangacharan's wife, comes to see Moti, and Moti is in a worse state. The famine has left no one in the colony. Everyone in Moti's household is dead. Ananga carefully looks at Moti, and then Moti says, "*Do not touch me, Brahmin sister. You would have to take a bath?*" To Ananga, caste no longer matters. Looking at Moti's condition, Ananga offers Moti some food. However, Moti dies. The Brahmin priest later looks at Moti sorrowfully and walks away helplessly, but in the background, a kid from the village watches the entire event. As the priest walks away, the kid appears in front of the dead woman (who is Moti), takes the food, and walks away.

*Table 1* compares the filmmaking styles of Mrinal Sen and Satyajit Ray. While both films acknowledge the devastating human cost of the famine, they take different approaches to representing it.

Feature	Akaler Sandhane	Ashani Sanket
Overall Approach	Reflexive, Prioritizes political provocation over emotional narratives.	Aesthetic humanism, Poetic realism seeks to bridge the gap between history and empathy.
Perspective	Critiques the urban elite's attempt to consume rural tragedy for art.  Privileged Gaze.	Focuses on the internal narrative of the village and social systems.  Rural Gaze.
Visual Style	Muted colors, jagged editing, meta-cinematic breaking of the frame.	Vibrant Technicolor, uses lush irony to contrast nature's beauty with man-made horror.
Engagement with the Filmmaking Process	Deconstruction: Views representation as a potential violation of the subject; exposes the limits of the lens.  Sen critiques representation as a violation of the subject.	Witnessing: Views representation as a moral act of "giving eyes" to the victims of the archive.  Ray critiques representation is an act of witnessing for the subject.
Social and Political Commentary	Direct and overt, often critical of the establishment  Famine is viewed as a historical tragedy of entitlement.	More subtle, conveyed through character interactions and symbolism.  Famine is viewed as a recurring, systemic process.

Table 1: Comparative Film Analysis of Sen and Ray's Filmmaking Styles.

## Conclusion

This study has examined the cinematic representations of the 1943 Bengal Famine in the works of two prominent Bengali filmmakers, Satyajit Ray and Mrinal Sen. Through a comparative analysis of their distinct filmmaking styles, as outlined in Table 1, this research shows how films can explore difficult and painful historical events and social problems from

two perspectives, and how a judicious mix of film techniques can have diverse impacts on the audience.

Ray's approach is a blend of realism (showing life as it is) and beautiful, symbolic elements that touch on the poetic. Ray tells the stories of individual people and families. He shows how the famine affected their lives within their particular social setting. Ray's use of vibrant colors, poetic imagery, and emotional narratives creates a strong connection with the audience. However, making a film about something horrific and beautiful can raise ethical questions about whether it downplays the event's true horror.

Compared to Ray's approach to filmmaking on famine, Sen's style is described as politically charged and reflexive. Sen uses experimental techniques such as non-linear narratives, fragmented storytelling, and direct address to the camera. Both filmmakers, with their very different styles, offer valuable insights into the Bengal Famine and the power of cinema.

This paper argues that famine representation in visual media intersects with contemporary discussions over visual ethics and, more broadly, with disaster cinema. There is no blueprint for making a film on famine. However, making a film about famine goes beyond telling a human story (as in Ray's approach) or critiquing power structures (as in Sen's approach).

Famine cinema must understand both the individual and systemic factors that contribute to such tragedies.

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