

INTERVIEW

‘WE HAVE ELECTED AN EMPEROR DEMOCRATICALLY’

Saeed Akhtar Mirza, a screen writer, director, author, teacher and traveller has been working for the last five decades on bringing the sidelined to the mainstream. He began his career in 1976 as a documentary filmmaker and took to writing with his first book, *Ammi: A letter to a Democratic Mother* in 2008. He is the director of the National Film Award winning parallel cinemas like *Naseem* (1995).

In a freewheeling interview to **NAMITA RAJESH** and **SHRUTI SHARMA**, Saeed Akhtar Mirza speaks about himself, cinema, social change and leadership,

What made you transform from a screen writer, director to an author?

There are several reasons. One is the fact that when I made my last film called *Naseem*, it was after the Babri Masjid (demolition) and I just felt like I had nothing more to say. So, I made the film and I said that this is the epitaph of our dream of India. Then I started travelling around. I have been travelling since 1984 onwards but after the anti-Sikh riots, I needed to see what was happening in this country.

Sometimes three months on the road and sometimes four, just meeting ordinary people, sitting in *dhabas*, chit-chatting, trying to understand, sharing a meal, shaking a hand then travelling on. Then I decided to record people that I met. Then I thought, why don't I write about them, about the ordinary people?

When I started writing, I wondered, what am I doing? I am recording people and writing about them. I am transcribing them. But, do I understand them? That is when I felt that this experience of travelling is very good but I needed to go into another realm of writing which can contain all that is going through my mind. That was when I wrote my first novel, *Ammi: A letter to a Democratic Mother*.

Apne aap ko sametna, jo khayal bane dimaag mein use sametna (To bring together the thoughts that emerge in my mind). So I took the pen and I got incredible pleasure out of writing.

Will you go back to making films?

It is not that I will not go back to films. I do teach young people at Film and Television Institute and Satyajit Ray Film and Television Institute. I come to Jamia Millia Islamia and teach. I might be out of films but I am teaching young filmmakers to continue that journey. It is a nice feeling to do two things simultaneously. You can write, you can travel and teach. I am doing my stuff.

What is your take on current and mainstream cinema?

In terms of cinema that is made today, fundamentally it is pretty hedonistic. It is fun that is the way it is. You have a group of other filmmakers who are making fairly anarchic work, which is good. You see the works of Sudhir Mishra, Anurag Kashyap, Dibakar Banerjee, Tigmanshu Dhulia. Then you

also have works by young fellows who are trying to figure out a world: Anand Gandhi's *Ship of Theseus*, these are good things that are happening. All kinds of films have been made but in terms of sheer numbers it is a very small percentage. Otherwise, the big platforms with multi-starrers, very lavish with commercial motives.

Do you think cinema as a medium of spreading social change and social messages has lost its relevance with the emergence of television and social media?

Yes, cinema as a medium has lost its relevance with the emergence of television and social media. Broad ideas have been disbursed through cinema. But if you think that cinema is going to bring about change then I don't agree. It is going to come with people. And that is another battle. In fact, that is what the battle is really all about. You might think that there is one film that will bring about a revolution the next morning; it is not going to happen like that. It never happens. Cinema has a limited role but it is very significant.

What do you think India looks like today?

We are a multi-religious, multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic country. It is wonderful. But when you claim that, you make sure that it is. And if it is not then I have got a question to ask because I do not want any person to be frightened of his or her life, of the lives of his family or his relatives, his friends and loved people to be determined and too many people have died. It is shocking and we call it democracy? We talk about Tiananmen Square. For God sake, we are having a Tiananmen Square here every year. *Kisko ullu bana raheho* (Whom are you trying to fool)? So how many more do we need? That is why I say that we have elected an emperor, democratically. Look at the contradiction in terms.

What do you think about the leadership across parties? Do you see a leader in any? Why is there a vacuum?

I will not pass judgements but I think we have to rethink the politics of this country. There are forces that are trying to do good. There are quite a few of them. I do not have a disdain for the Left parties. They are trying their stuff. Somehow, I feel that maybe they need to rethink their entire approach. I have a very healthy respect for the Aam Aadmi Party, anarchic or not. The point is it was an alternative. It was there in your face, it was there! And they did say they were anti corruption, anti communalism and they stood. It was like a breath of fresh air! But these are things that I wish can be sustained. They need to be sustained. Otherwise, by and large, politically the other parties are pretty bleak.

What do you think is the run up for? What type of change do the leaders keep talking about?

You know you hear a Kancha Ilaiah, he is very good. But the point is that he is trying to find a new formation for power, not questioning why do you want power? So if at all they are the so-called progressive forces, I am trying to understand what is the entire game plan? It is to gain power. And, I have a problem with that. What do you want power for? If it is not to stand by the Constitution, then what is it?

Schedule castes, OBCs, minorities, Brahmins, upper caste, these are all words now. They are words to me. People are dying and we need to see it again, once again. There is an entire anti-Brahmin discourse. A lot of Brahmins are very good people and there are some not. It is a mix.

If the idea of Brahminism is being attacked, I will understand it. Brahminism is an idea. But if you talk about people just because they have to be Brahmins, they will be led to the slaughter? What is this?

What is your message for the youth?

You have got to go on to social media and respond to all kinds of hate mail that is floating around the country. And, if you can bring some voice of sanity in the social media, respond, reply, get engaged, so that at least voices of sanity are also heard.

I write something on Narendra Modi, I get one piece which says well done and five thousand pieces which will abuse me, which will condemn me. It is incredible. There is a whole dedicated cadre sitting on the net, on social media just to do this. That is their job. They are paid for it. Nobody is talking about it. Not the media. All these journalists know. Why aren't they talking about it? Not one of them. And also things like corporate houses buying over media, which is just ridiculous.