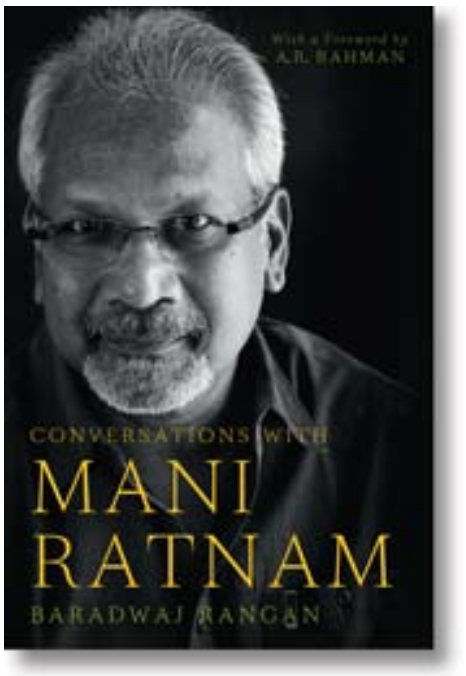
Talking point



Conversations with Mani Ratnam

By Baradwaj Rangan

Viking Penguin, New Delhi, 2012, 305 pp., Rs 799 (HB)

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PRAVEENA SHIVRAM

It is given that in the realm of conversation anything can happen. The unpredictability of its course, the spontaneity of its texture, and the flexibility of its manner allows it to manifest as hugely inspiring masterpieces or baldly tepid revelations. Baradwaj Rangan's *Conversations with Mani Ratnam* falls somewhere in between. For one, the entire tone of the conversation goes against the grain of its nature, mostly following the cadence of a rehearsed performance with Rangan sometimes taking the lead, but most times, simply following his "golden god's" cues. Second, because of that, the conversations seem largely one-sided, morphing into an 'interview' rather than a 'conversation', where Rangan has watched Ratnam's movies, deconstructed and analysed them in his head, and then gone with a set of questions for the filmmaker, when it would have made for much more interesting reading had he gone with his instinct more than his intellect. In his trying not to fall into clichés, trying not be a pigeonholed into a "definitive discussion about each film" and trying instead to project it as a "jam session between two musicians, where we improvised riffs about, as well as around, a theme", Rangan misses out on the soul of what makes a conversation riveting. The polish is too refined, the flow too rigid and the balance too meticulous. Probably a result of how Rangan describes their sessions: "… this is the first time he is talking to someone so extensively and it made sense to retain his voice, even if the first take was often discarded and we'd go back and forth until both of us were happy with the session."

We are not told how long these conversations took (the two books Rangan calls his "guiding spirits" – Hitchcock/Truffaut was a record of conversations that lasted over 12 hours, and Michael Ondaatje's *The Conversations: Walter Murch and the Art of Editing Film* was a result of over two years' worth of conversations), but we get a sense that these sessions probably lasted a few months.

Also, somewhere, Rangan, for all his years as one of the country's best film critics, is unable to shake his obvious adulation for the filmmaker, which is almost a leitmotif in his otherwise excellent Introduction. "No one, just no one, had put on screen what we thought, what we felt, what we dreamed the way Mani Ratnam did", "Call it solipsism, call it tunnel vision – I call it the unvarnished truth", "Because, for us, the real hero was the director. It was Mani Ratnam", "I wanted to embalm in amber the fingerprints of a filmmaker who is, in a sense, a dinosaur, one of the last of a dying breed in India: the mainstream auteur" – Rangan is unabashed in portraying the cataclysmic influence of Ratnam's movies in his and his generation's growing up years, not just in the Introduction, but throughout the book. No harm in that, as both Truffaut and Ondaatje too don't hide their awe of the makers, but in their cases, they rise beyond to transcend the influence and meet them as equals. Maybe they can, considering their mammoth contributions to the world of cinema and literature, but a critic isn't any less, nor is a lay member of the audience, and it would be foolish to think otherwise.

It is this tone in the book though, the largely submissive energy, like a star student in class who has his brilliant moments, born out of a deep sense of internalising something unconsciously first and then consciously building on that sentiment that makes this book both enjoyable and exhausting. You enjoy it because of the 'moments' that are much more evident in the first few chapters, the pre-Roja films, but you are exhausted because the format hampers the structuring of the book, or maybe, the structuring becomes a deterrent to the format.

Rangan takes the one chapter for each film mode, except for Chapter One that looks at Ratnam's first four films together, before his first real hit, *Mouna Raagam*, that placed him firmly on the Tamil cinema map. Rangan reiterates in the beginning that he is "by nature, more interested in the tales than their tellers", but without the teller, there can be no tale. And so, the highs, so to speak, in the book are when the voice of the teller emerges, shining through the morass of deconstruction, breaking through the repetitions and staying with you till the end. I am not referring here to the personal details that begin and end in the first few pages (though you wish there was more of this to make the book breathe a little more), but Ratnam's unwavering honesty in watching how he was changing as a person. He talks about signing a Kannada music director for his first film and then "panicking" after listening to his background score in another film. "I decided to move on without actually having the courage to tell him…It took me a year to convince myself that maybe he would have forgotten my face. But this is what I mean. You also come to know what you are willing to do for your film. I was willing to do something I feel miserable about even after all these years." Or when he talks about the choice of subject for a movie and says, "The kind of stories that you think can be made into a film, the drama that catches your attention, changes. It can't be the same as it was when you were in your twenties and thirties. I think it's just time. It's old age catching up", you get a glimmer of Ratnam's degree of objectivity. And, if you wonder, for a moment, that perhaps it is the voice of retrospection talking, then he is conscious of that too, as he is perceptive enough to point that out right in the beginning in his note, "Memories are not totally trustworthy. They tend to colour things favourably."

When you have such a deeply conscious person talking to you, you wish the questions spoke to that force directly and this is where the structure is flawed. The filmmaking process in India is so unique in its temperament that a better structure would have probably been to take each aspect of the process separately. Especially with a filmmaker like Mani Ratnam whose clarion call to cinema is in his painstaking understanding of the process and the magic he therefore creates with his collaborators. (To get a sense of the richness of Ratnam's collaborators, if not his personal journeys with each of them and the transitions that occurred, refer to the Filmography and Awards section in the end).

The results are frustrating repetitions that are bound to occur in chapters as Ratnam essentially talks about the same process in the context of different films. When discussing his first movie, *Pallavi Anupallavi*, Ratnam says, "Every character you write need not be something that you are… Sometimes, you just put yourself in someone else's shoes." And in the very next chapter on *Mouna Raagam*, "…There's a huge advantage of being a writer or a film-maker. You can live the lives of several kinds of people at the same time. You have the liberty of going away from who you are and put yourself in someone else's shoes and think from that standpoint." And again in the chapter on *Nayakan*, "…If I say something in a film, it doesn't mean that that's me. It just means that I have put myself in the character's position and that the character is saying these things…"

It's the same when Ratnam talks about using songs in his films as a narrative device.

In the chapter on *Agni Nakshatram*, Ratnam says, "…Songs and action are two beautiful tools that you have. You shouldn't use them left, right and centre, but with style". In Bombay, he says, "…If a song can help you get there effectively, it becomes more than just a song. It becomes a huge

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storytelling tool…." In *Kannathil Muthamittal* again, "The song is a huge tool. It is a tremendous high if you use it correctly…I start every film, saying, 'I'm going to do it without songs' but end up doing it with songs…" "Songs can become your trump cards or your pitfall. You have to find a way to make them interesting, riveting, inventive, something that can be taken back home even after the film is over…I start off very early. At some point, during scripting, I'll start writing what I can do for each song." And in *Guru*, "A song is not just something you tick off, something you just add to make it, say, five songs in the film and fill the album. A song is a strong narrative device, and you're looking to use the energy that the song brings with it. It is not a compulsion that is thrust on you, but a special card that you hold in your hand".

If you read this book closely, you begin to see patterns emerge. Every chapter begins with an anecdote of what led Ratnam to make the film, then talks about the characters and their characterisations in depth, along with a rationalisation for the tone of the story and rhythm of the screenplay. Sometimes, because the way the book is structured, you feel with many of Ratnam's explanations that perhaps Rangan hit the nail on the head when he says in jest, "This is Mani Ratnam BA, BL. You have this amazing ability to argue your way out of every corner."

You also get a sense of enthusiasm on Rangan's part for the films that are close to his heart, the pre-Roja era. Those chapters are fantastic and the tension of a conversation is beautifully captured; it's alive and animated. And then it starts to lose momentum (the only exception being *Iruvar*, where you can literally feel Ratnam light up) and by the time you come to *Aayidha Ezhuthu/ Yuva* the pace almost stagnates. Maybe there isn't enough distance for Ratnam to maintain his range for objectivity or perhaps it is Rangan's own "sense of betrayal" as he calls it, when Ratnam shifted from the largely Madras stories to the more national stories. "The exaggerated sense of betrayal, I now realise, stemmed from our selfish desire for Mani Ratnam to keep making Madras Movies – because no one else was capable of making them, and if he stopped, what would we do, whom would we worship?"

So, do you need to read this book? Yes, if your fascination begins and ends with the fact that one of India's best directors comes out of his reticent shell and talks about his movies. But if you are looking for something more, something beyond the reticence, beyond the tip of the iceberg (which you are constantly aware of but never touch), something that gives you more than just the occasional glimmer of his soul, something beyond the teller and tale, then I'd suggest you watch his movies instead. Otherwise, Ratnam's analysis of his second film *Unaru* comes closest to this book as well: "The film possibly suffers because there were two people – actually three – pulling it in different directions. The film is in between, neither theirs nor mine. It was lost in the middle." ■

People's photographer

Janah with his Leica, 1940s

Photographing India

By Sunil Janah

Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2013, 301 pp., Rs 3995 (HB)

ISBN 0-19-806580-9

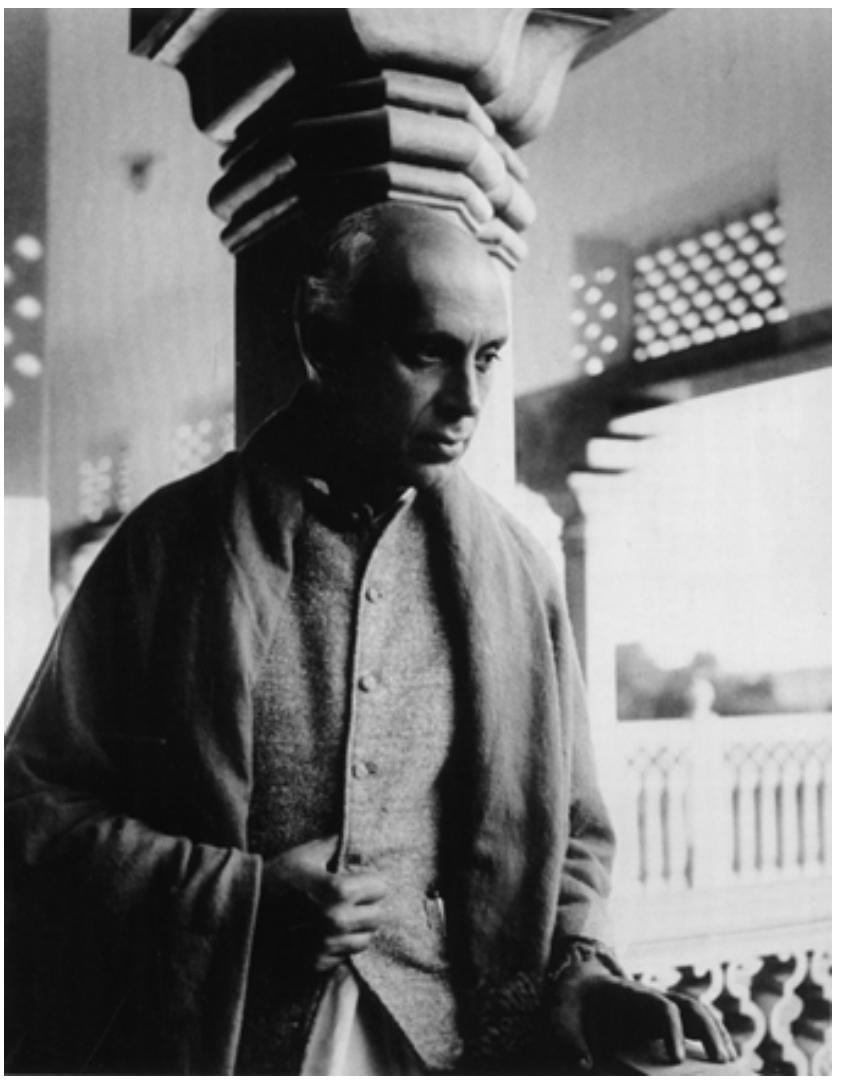
ELLA DATTA

Sunil Janah (1918-2012) was not known to me personally but I knew and interacted with many of the poets, writers and historians like Samar Sen, Debi Prasad Chattopadhyay and others who were part of the exciting circle of leftist intellectuals who dominated the cultural landscape of Calcutta, the city in which I grew up. There were many fascinating, heady stories about them that became a part of the city's lore. And these were not just about their creative or cerebral pursuits but also included anecdotes about their somewhat bohemian lifestyles. These, in a large measure, sprinkle the gold dust of nostalgia on a city that is steadily declining into a provincial outpost.

Janah's name was particularly imprinted in memory because of his searing images of the Bengal famine of 1943 and the turbulent times the city witnessed before Independence, what with the shattering communal riots and violent protests from the time of the Quit India movement in 1942. Much later when I saw the paintings, drawings, graphic prints of artists such as Gopal Ghose, Chittaprosad Bhattacharya and even Somnath Hore, I sensed a resonance that these works shared. For instance, when one saw the painting of a bus in flames by Gopal Ghose, one could not help remember Janah's photograph of a burning bus during the Quit India movement.

It was a strange coincidence that brought me a little close to Janah. On purchasing a plastic folder from a stationery shop in east Delhi I made a wonderful discovery. Separating the sleeves in the folder were typescripts of correspondence between artist Chittaprosad and Govind Vidyarthy, the librarian of the undivided Communist Party of India (CPI). Janah's name came up in the letters several times as the three of them were very close friends. I gave the transcripts to Ebrahim Alkazi, who had a large collection of Chittaprosad's graphics and knew Vidyarthi very well.

It was against this background of prior knowledge of Sunil Janah that I took up his book *Photographing India* with some anticipation. Written in a very crisp, readable style, the book is a record of Janah's professional life with bits of his personal life and views woven in. Janah started taking photographs very early. He says, "...I did not think that photography would be my vocation. It was a hobby ... I was a student of literature and my interests were mainly literary and political." (p 12) In college, he got involved with student politics and joined the student wing of the CPI. He had already attracted attention with his photographs published in the *Ilustrated Weekly of India*. When PC Joshi, the then general secretary of the CPI, prompted by the horror of the Bengal famine, decided to visit the famine-ravaged districts, he asked Janah and Chittaprosad to accompany him. Their photographs and sketches along with his reportage were published in the Party paper *People's War.* "This created a sensation and made Chitta and me famous overnight," Janah writes. At the end of the tour Joshi invited him and Chittaprosad to join as editorial staff of the Party paper and move to Bombay with him. Janah was yet to obtain his Master's degree. But he took up his "dream job in the Communist Party ... I only had to travel, write and take photographs." And thus began Janah's life as a photo-journalist travelling throughout the country, going into remote villages



Jawaharlal Nehru at Anand Bhawan, Allahabad, 1939, photographed by Janah when he was just 17