

YEP TALK

The Young Entrepreneurs & Professionals page

Ray on Ray

The quiet but deep observation, understanding and love of the human race which are characteristic of all his film, have impressed me greatly. Mr Ray is a wonderful and respectful man. I feel that he is a 'giant' of the movie industry.

Akira Kurosawa

The YEP Forum always encourages its young members of different chapters to know about the key persons of their respective professions. This week YEP TALK has published some of the interviews (partial) of the 'giant' of the film world Mr. Satyajit Ray, for the members of YEP film activist chapter and for the readers of this page. The interviews were published in different occasions in different international magazines in the past. The interviews were taken by Folke Isaakson, Sight and Sound, Summer, Cahiers du Cinema, Hollis Alpert, of The American Film Institute at Washington, Firoz Rangoonwalla, Satyajit Ray's Art, Robin Wood, The Apu Trilogy, Praeger Publishers, Kironmoy Raha, The Times of India, Georges Sadoul, Cahiers du Cinema, Sasthi Barta and Josephus Daniels, Spain.

Q: You got what you needed, and the film was finished, and then comes the success story of Pather Panchali.

SR: Well, they were at first not terribly anxious to release the film. It lay three months, or so, without being released. Then in the first two weeks of its run it didn't do so well; but from the third week onwards there were full houses every day. We had what is known as a fixed booking for six weeks, because that's all that was available. After those six weeks it was moved to another theatre, where it played for seven weeks more, and in those thirteen weeks the government got back their money and all that comes after is profit. They've made something like 1,500 per cent profit now, and there is still money coming all the time.



Q: The Italian neo-realism meant a lot to you. When did you see your first De Sica?

SR: It was in 1950. I went to England to work in the head office of the Calcutta advertising agency. I was sent out for six months, and in the six months I was able to see 100 or so films. The first film I saw there was Bicycle Thieves. It was a double-bill at the Curzon with A Night at the Opera. It made a very, very interesting combination. I was terribly excited because I already had this idea of making Pather Panchali, but I wasn't sure whether one could really work with an entirely amateur cast.

Q: And here you had the proof.

SR: I had the proof. And it was all shot on location, at least 90 per cent shot on location. I had the proof that one could shoot out there, in all kinds of light. I had been told by professional directors here that you had to have control over the light, which meant you had to have artificial light. You can't control the sun, that's what they said. "And if you want rain, you have to create it artificially, because how could you control actual natural rain, it stops and goes and comes."

METHODS

Q: You like to do everything in film?

SR: Yes. For example, I had a very good cameraman, but after each shot, he would say, "We must take another." I asked him why. He was never precise. He said "Well..." That is very dangerous when one is shooting on a small budget. So I decided to take the camera myself. Sometimes in a tracking shot where there is a lot of action, a slight shake is not important if the action is good. But he thought only about the shake. He wanted smoothness at any price. I realised that when I work with new actors, they are more confident if they don't see me, they are less tense. I remain behind the camera. I see better and I can get the exact frame. If one is sitting on the side, one is dependent on the cameraman. He frames the shot, he does the panning, the tilting, the tracking — he does everything. It's only when one sees the rushes that one knows exactly what one has. I am so used to doing the framing now that I

Q: You have no trust in my cameraman's operational abilities, but the best position to judge the acting is through the lens.

I started with one cameraman, Subrata Mitra, who was a beginner. He was 21 when he shot the first film; never handled a movie camera in his life. But I had to have a new cameraman, because all the professionals said that you can't shoot in rain, and you can't shoot out of doors, that the light keeps changing, that the sun goes down too fast, and so forth. got a new cameraman, and we decided on certain basic things. We believed in available light. We aimed at simulating available light in the studio by using bounced lights. It didn't happen with the first film but with the second film, when we had to shoot interiors in the studio, supposedly of houses in Benares where there was a central courtyard with no roof and the light all came from the sky. It was a kind of top lighting, shadowless. We started using bounced lighting, with a cloth stretched over and the lights bounced back from it.

Q: And the sound? And the dubbing?

SR: When the studios were built in the north of Calcutta 50 years ago, this part of Calcutta was a village. It was during the silent period in any case. There was no traffic, no noise, but now the city has grown. This area is a part of the city and one hears cars, motor-cycles, scooters. One day one can have perfect sound, but the next day there is noise and we have to dub it, so we have to dub everything.

Q: Does colour make any difference for you?

Now colour is much better than it was 10-15 years ago when one didn't know how to control it. Colour tends to make everything look too beautiful, too pretty, but now I feel that the advantage of colour is that it can give more detail. It must be used very carefully and I don't allow the laboratory to change anything. If I choose the costumes for their colour, I want the film to show those colours. One can make changes by emphasising the blue, yellow, but I am most satisfied when the colour is closest to what I have used. It is very carefully chosen and I don't want the laboratory to do any colour corrections.

Q: Do you always shoot on location?

SR: I also shoot in a studio, but I am very careful about the art

direction and the light and it does not show. One can't tell whether it is a studio or not. It's much easier. Location shooting in Calcutta is extremely difficult. There are always crowds and noise all around you. Sometimes, of course, one has to go outdoors. In *The Middleman*, there are plenty of street scenes in Calcutta, but we work very fast and with hand-held cameras. We arrive, we shoot, we go away. There can be problems if one has a long sequence to shoot. We can't even use the police who don't have a good image in India. The police attract an even bigger crowd because people come and ask what is happening. So we do our own policing. Everybody in the crowd wants to be in the shot; they don't want to be there just to watch. I made a film in '66-'67 for which we were shooting 80 kms from Calcutta in the heart of the country-side. We had constructed a set with a garden and a chicken coop. For a day or two, there wasn't a soul, it was like in a studio. The nearest station was five kms away. On the third day we heard a train stopping in the afternoon and half an hour later, we heard a terrific noise. It was a crowd of young people who had come from Calcutta. They were brandishing sticks of sugar cane and shouting, "We want to see the shooting." They climbed on the trees all around, as if on balconies. We couldn't tilt the camera upwards. The whole shooting plan had to be changed to tilt the camera down. One branch on which six people were sitting, broke. Fortunately, one of our actors was a doctor....

Q: Apart from realism your films are also known for their lyrical approach. Are the two concepts compatible?

SR: Yes, perfectly so. Naturalism which amounts to dwelling on inessentials may differ from realism but a lyrical method can be quite in tune with it. Generally speaking, however, I may be accused of nurturing a classical trend of mind. In rhythm, form and content, I like to follow a simple classical structure. And moreover, there is no point in being excessively avant garde at this stage of development of the Indian audience.

MUSIC

Q: Ray's repeated reference to Mozart is an important clue to the nature of Ray's art. It points up his affinity with Renoir. It also helps us to connect the emphasis on the "musical" aspects of his films with the awareness that "there are always two sides to a thing" — several sides in a film like *Charulata* or *Days and Nights in the Forest*. The simultaneous awareness of different, even incompatible, viewpoints is a characteristic that finds supreme expression in Mozart's operas — Robin Wood, *The Apu Trilogy*

Q: You haven't only made films, you've also composed music.

SR: Yes, I have done the music for my films. For my first six films — *The Trilogy*, *The Music Room*, *Devi* and some others, the music was composed by other musicians. These were principally musicians who specialised in one instrument, the sitar. They were not really directors of music for films.

As a result, I had certain problems and I began to have ideas about music myself. In addition, they were also friends and I realised that they didn't like being told what to do. So I gave it up. For example, in *The Music Room* there was a scene which lasts three minutes and seven seconds. If I gave them this limit, they said they couldn't play a piece of music which lasted three minutes and seven seconds. Ultimately, I made them play for four or five minutes and then edited it. It was very exacting editing work, but absolutely fascinating.

SCRIPT

Q: While you are writing the script of a film, do you think up the sequences purely as visual images? What I mean is, do you just see them or do you also hear the sound, the music or the dialogue in a particular shot or sequence?

SR: Well, it is different to disentangle the different processes at work, but I feel primarily, I confine myself to visual images. The dialogue also comes in sometimes. Of sounds, however, I am not so sure. Occasionally, as I visualise a particular scene, I am bothered about sounds. I mean sounds for building up editorial authenticity. Not for sounds for other purposes. That comes much later.

Q: Have you written all your scripts yourself?

SR: All of them yes. I can hardly call it writing. I've developed a special system, because my feeling is that writing a scenario is not a literary business at all, so I don't waste literary effort on that. I merely write certain very laconic descriptions; mainly it's all in sketches and with little notes on the dialogue and movements.

Q: But literature seems to have a starting point for you in several cases.

SR: Oh yes. But these novels and short stories have all been considerably adapted. There is always something in the story that attracts me. It does not have to be the whole thing, but may be certain crucial things which strike me as being filmic. I read the story many, many times and then, *bang!* the book and I leave it.

Q: When did you start your first children's film?

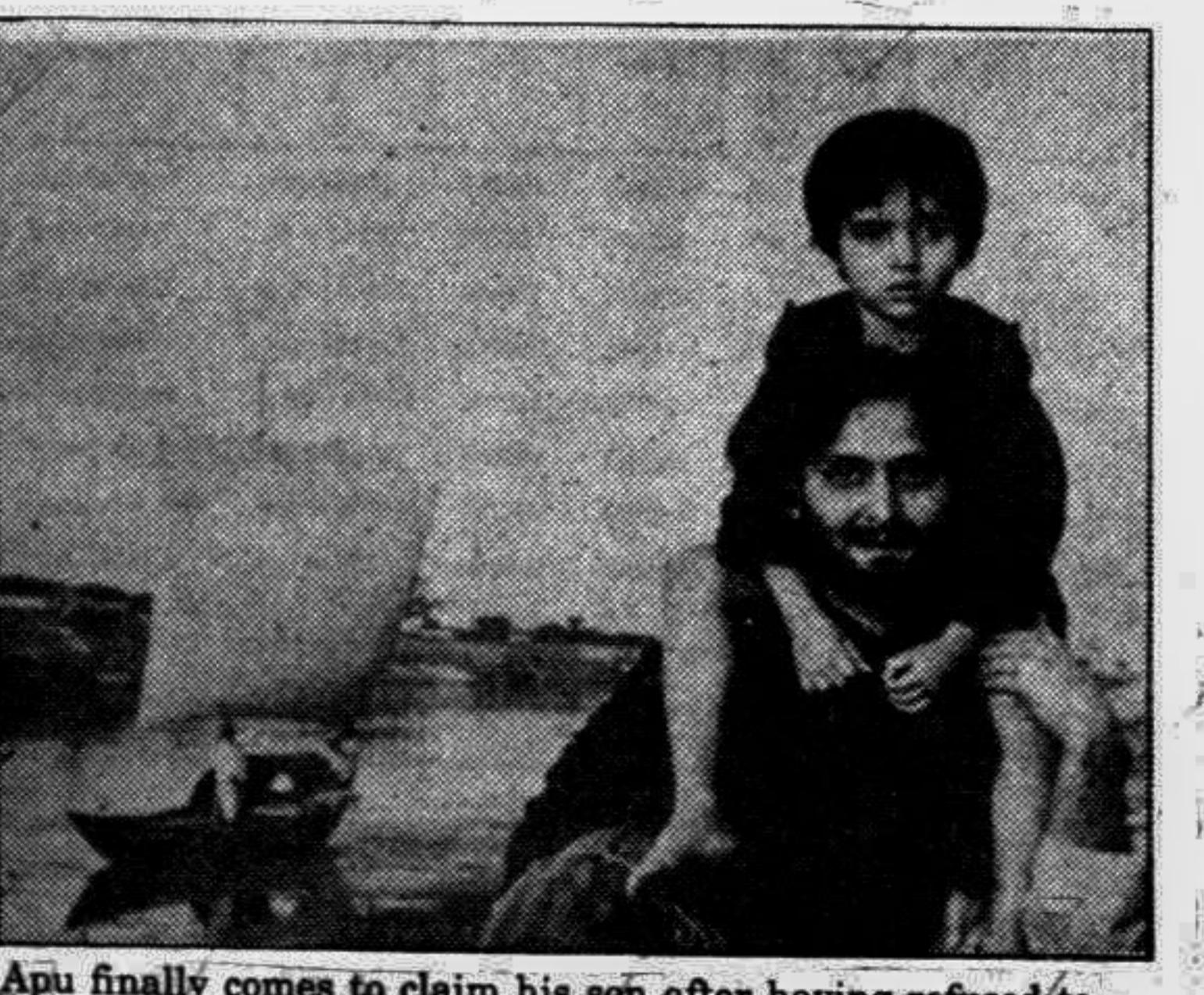
SR: The first film I made with children in mind was *The Adventures of Goopy and Bagha*, when my son was eight years old. He has been interested in my work since he was three, four, five and he had been complaining to me that I don't make any films for him and one of the reasons why I made my first children's film was because of my son. I wanted to make something for him; and for other reasons also. There are no films made for the young in India — no good films ever.

I suppose it requires a certain kind of flair and not many people have it. Besides, people tend to think if you make films for children, the adults won't go to them. Well I feel that you could make films for the young which older people would also see. It's possible to make a film which exists on many levels.

AUDIENCE

Q: Do you aim for the international market?

SR: I think of myself as a Bengali and my films are aimed primarily at our own audience. I never know beforehand if the film will click outside India because I don't know what other people are interested in. I haven't found out what parts or what aspects of India are interesting to non-Indians. Generally, I find my period pieces and my rural stories well received outside the country, whereas films relating to contemporary India and the intermingling of Indian and Western ideas haven't been as successful on the international market.



Apu finally comes to claim his son after having refused to see him for a long time since Aparna's death.



Q: Who sees your films?

SR: The educated people. Not necessarily sophisticated as a film audience, but educated people who are familiar with the literary sources of the films. The films don't reach the really suburban places where there is a dominance of the commercial cinema. There are no theatres to play our films, there, but we have the big cities in Bengal.

COMMITMENT

Q: Do you think the artist should stand aloof, or be committed?

SR: Unless one lives completely isolated from the general picture of life, a certain amount of commitment is unavoidable. But as an artist I never want to be a propagandist, because I don't think anybody is in a position to give answers to social problems, definite, final answers. No propaganda works really, because ... I'll tell you something Renoir said to me once: "There are lots of anti-war films being made; I made what is generally considered as the most humane anti-war film, *La Grande Illusion*, in 1938, and in 1939 the war broke out."

Q: The later he made another anti-war film, *Le Caporal Epinglé*.

SR: Yes, more remote. Did it work? It doesn't work. I think I like to present problems and make the public conscious of the presence of certain social problems and let them think for themselves. But a certain taking of sides is unavoidable, if you have strong sympathies of your own. So in a sense you are committing yourself; but I don't think it's necessary, important or right for an artist to provide answers, to say "this is right and this is wrong."

Q: You have been making films for more than twenty years. The subjects have varied widely — the rural poor, commercial urban life, the British presence — but all the films have been set in India. Do you have any interest in directing outside your country — for example, here (in the USA)?

SR: Not really, I have turned down many offers from here (USA), though I wouldn't mind working with American actors. In fact, I came to Hollywood about ten years ago for a project, which would have been filmed in Bengal, that needed an American actor. That is fine. But I wouldn't want to work outside of India. I feel very deeply rooted there. I know my people better than I know the Americans or the British. But it's just that I react more immediately to things Indian. I would like to narrow it down even further and say things Bengali, because I think of India as a continent, and every state has its own topography, language, culture. There is an underlying link of Hinduism perhaps, but on the surface the states are very different. You can move from the Himalayas to a desert. I think there is still too much left that I would like to do in my own country. One film takes so much time and energy and money and thought, and now I am getting on in years.

Q: Do you know you have been criticised for avoiding coming to grips with things? You are accused of being far too contemplative and placid, of turning your face away from strife and struggle, wickedness and violence.

SR: Yes, I know, but I am not clear what the critics mean. Is it that there are no murders in my films or rapes or communal violence? The fact probably is that they do not interest me in the same way as, say, the struggle of an inadequate man trying to be good. Somehow I feel that a common person — an ordinary person whom you meet every day in the street — is a more challenging subject for cinematic exploration than persons in heroic moulds, either good or bad. It is the half shades, the hardly audible notes that I want to capture and explore. There is also the fact that



Shooting Aranya Din Ratri.

violence in our country somehow gathers a debasing quality. An element of pettiness, of crudity, creeps in, which repels me. In the West experience of violence can have a transmuting or ennobling quality. Think of the dimension in which they had it for such a long time. There is also the overburdening Christian sense of guilt.

They can even have a mystique of violence. But we just don't have it. I cannot imagine any Indian raising evil to the level of a work of art as, say, Bunuel does. In any case, and speaking for myself, I find the muted emotions more interesting. It certainly is more challenging for a filmmaker.

PHILOSOPHY

Q: What is your concept of a beautiful woman?

SR: The best thing would be to look for the answer in my films. Well, I like a kind of intellectual beauty, if you know what I mean. Or, maybe it'd be better to say, a kind of intelligent beauty. What I want to say is that for me a woman's beauty is more of an intellectual emanation than physical appeal. What I admire in women is grace, sophistication and intelligence. Not that all my women are educated, or even respectable. Think of Gulabi (Waheed Rehman), in *Abhijan*, for instance, and of that tribal woman (Simi) in *Aranya Din Ratri*. They aren't educated and they lack sophistication but their responses are so genuine. And they have a marked sensibility to kindness, love and hatred. That's what I find beautiful.

A woman's beauty I think, also lies in her patience and endurance in a world where men are generally more vulnerable and in need of guidance.

The beauty of a woman like *Charulata* is largely the beauty of her mind. What I've tried to bring out in the film is the richness of that mind. That comes out through her responses to the world and especially through her growing attachment to Amal, her young brother-in-law. It's an illicit relationship, but it's beautiful, since it reveals the nuances of a sensitive person.

Q: Are you religious? Do you believe that God created Man, or that Man created God?

SR: My own feeling is that Man created God, yes I think so. But you see, there is always this mystery about the beginning of life, and I like to think back and further back and take my mind back right to the beginning of time. But I don't think that God is a useful thing to believe in. I don't see the necessity of that at all. I think it's more important now, in view of what has been happening, to believe in scientific knowledge.

Q: Are you a fatalist?

SR: I'm very optimistic, but I'm slightly fatalistic about India...

What could you do? What can you do? All the political parties have been disappointing, and there isn't one single person that you can look up to, and corruption on all levels of public and private work, and a certain laziness and lack of values and nothing to guide. I think a certain amount of pessimism is. That's why I love to lose myself in my work.

Q: On a political level, your films are strongly critical of the executive class, but it's vital to the films that you still try to understand the members of that class on a human level.

SR: Absolutely. Even the British we had to understand, because the whole intellectual middle-class of India is a product of British rule. Without the colonialism and the British education, there would have been no terrorism. The British gave the Bengalis a liberal education, which ultimately turned them into revolutionaries. And it's ironical that the British really created their own enemies. It took about a hundred years; and the beginning of the development is described in *Charulata*, when they start through newspapers to question the British rule. And in the early twentieth century you have the first terrorist movement against the British. That had no support from the peasants or the working class. It was a small intellectual group, whose leaders had read all the revolutionary literature, Garibaldi and the rest. They wanted to get rid of the British, and they thought why not throw bombs at them? It didn't achieve anything; it was just an emotional gesture. But emotional gestures fascinate me more than ideological gestures.

Q: You nevertheless had to make a final statement about how to break up a political system which distorts people, what would your solution be? You don't seem to have much faith in the revolutionary movement.

SR: I can understand and admire Mao's revolution which has completely changed China and achieved — at a cost — the eradication of poverty and illiteracy. But I don't think I could find a place in China, because I am still too much of an individual and I still believe too strongly in personal expression. Over the years, I have understood art as an expression of a creative personality, and I don't believe in the new theories which hold that art must be destroyed and doesn't need to be permanent. I believe in permanent values. That's my whole mental attitude, and I have to be true to myself. This doesn't mean that I don't sympathise with the young people, because I do... but at the same time I can see that when people grow beyond a certain age, they begin to have their own doubts