

BIRTH CENTENARY OF SATYAJIT RAY

The politics of humanism

An interview with Satyajit Roy

Cineaste: How did *Pather Panchali* change you? Did it help you discover Bengal?

Satyajit Ray: I certainly discovered rural life while making *Pather Panchali*. There's no question of that. I'd been city-born, city-bred, so I didn't know the village firsthand. While hunting locations in rural areas, and, after finding the village and spending some time there, I began to understand. Talking to people, reacting to moods, to the landscape, to the sights and sounds—all these helped. But it's not just people who have been brought up in villages who can make films about village life. An outside view is also able to penetrate.

Cineaste: What have been other influences on your work?

Ray: Bibhuti Bhushan [the author of *The Apu Trilogy*] influenced me very much. In fact, I knew about village life by reading *Pather Panchali*. I felt a rapport with him, with the village and his attitude towards it, which is one of the reasons why I wanted to make *Pather Panchali* in the first place. I was deeply moved by the book.

I have also been moved by Tagore's work, which is not necessarily rural. Of course, our cultural background, our cultural makeup, is a fusion of East and West. This applies to anybody who has been educated in the city in India and who has been exposed to the classics of English literature. After all, our knowledge of the West is deeper than the Westerner's knowledge of our country. We have imbibed Western education. Western music, Western art, Western literature have

Cineaste: What's been your most satisfying film?

Ray: Well, the one film that I would make the same way, if I had to do it again, is *Charulata*. There are other films, such as *Days and Nights in the Forest*, which I also admire. Among the children's films, I like *Joi Baba Felunath* (The Elephant God). It works very well. It's got wit. It's got film eye. It's got a face, a very satisfying face, and some wonderful acting. I also enjoy making the musical films because they give me a chance to compose music. And they're commercially successful, which gives you a certain kind of satisfaction. I like *Kanchenjunga*, too. That's probably because it was my first original screenplay and a very personal film. It was a good ten to fifteen years ahead of its time.

Cineaste: It has a fragmented narrative.

Ray: Yes. Our audience likes a central character, or a couple of central characters with whom they can identify, and a story with a straight narrative line. *Kanchenjunga* told the story of several groups of characters and it went back and forth. You know, between group one, group two, group three, group four, then back to group one, group two, and so on. It's a very musical form, but it wasn't liked. The reaction was stupid. Even the reviews were not interesting. But, looking back now, I find that it is a very interesting film.

Cineaste: The women in your films tend to be much stronger, more determined, more adaptable and resilient than the men in your films. Is that a reflection of Bengali social history?



22-year-old Ray at Santiniketan.

who don't realize why they're being wiped out. There's a quality of pathos in that which interests me.

Cineaste: Most Western critics feel that your vision of India is a bleak and despairing one.

Ray: The *Middleman* is really the only film of which that sort of remark can be made.

Cineaste: But others have found *Days and Nights in the Forest* despairing.

Ray: I wouldn't call it such a despairing vision. Certain unpleasant truths are expressed in it, but that is part of drama, it applies to all kinds of films. You can analyze a Western film and find a very despairing statement about Western values. You can't make happy films all the time. If you're making a film about problems, but you don't have a solution, there's bound to be a despairing quality. In *The Big City*, both husband and wife lose their jobs. There are no jobs around. They drift apart, there is misunderstanding, and they come together again. But they still don't have any jobs, and they may not have any for quite some time, but that doesn't make it despairing.

The only bleak film I have made is *The Middleman*. There's no question about that. I felt corruption, rampant corruption, all around. Everyone talks about it in Calcutta. Everyone knows, for instance, that the cement allotted to the roads and underground railroad is going to the contractors who are building their own homes with it. The *Middleman* is a film about that kind of corruption and I don't think there is any solution.

Cineaste: You've often said that you don't think it's right, important, or necessary for an artist to provide answers or make judgments, to say that this is right and this is wrong. You've stayed away from major political statements.

Ray: I have made political statements more clearly than anyone else, including Mrinal Sen. In *Middleman* I included a long conversation in which a Congressist discusses the tasks ahead. He talks nonsense, he tells lies, but his very presence

Story of a Chair and the entire film was destroyed. What can you do? You are aware of the problems and you deal with them, but you also know the limit, the constraints beyond which you just cannot go.

Cineaste: Some people see that as an abdication of the filmmaker's social role. A number of critics, especially those in Bengal, feel that you aren't political enough, that you can go further, but that you just haven't tested your limits.

Ray: No, I don't think I can go any further. It is very easy to attack certain targets like the establishment. You are attacking people who don't care. The establishment will remain totally untouched by what you're saying. So what is the point? Films cannot change society. They

what being Brahma means. I stopped going to Brahma Samaj around the age of fourteen or fifteen. I don't believe in organized religion anyway. Religion can only be on a personal level. I just find that the moral attitude I demonstrate is more interesting than any political attitude I could bring to my films.

Cineaste: Is the moral attitude sometimes too simple? In *Pikoo* you seem to be suggesting that infidelity can lead to a variety of problems, that changing social and sexual values have hurt the social and family fabric.

Ray: *Pikoo* is a very complex film. It is a poetic statement which cannot be reduced to concrete terms. One statement the film tries to make is that, if a woman is to be unfaithful, if she is to have an extramarital affair, she can't afford to have



Satyajit Ray with Ravi Shankar recording for *Pather Panchali*

never have. Show me a film that changed society or brought about any change.

Cineaste: What about filmmakers such as Leni Riefenstahl, who presented the Nazi version of the Aryan myth, or Sergei Eisenstein, who used film as a tool of the revolution?

Ray: Eisenstein aided a revolution that was already taking place. In the midst of a revolution, a filmmaker has a positive role, he can do something for the revolution. But, if there is no revolution, you can do nothing. Riefenstahl was helping a myth, the Nazi ideology, and the Nazis were very strong at the time. In the early days of fascism, even the intellectuals were confused. Tagore was led to believe that Mussolini was doing something wonderful, playing a very positive role, until Romain Rolland told him he was wrong, that he hadn't understood the full implications of fascism.

Cineaste: How do you see your own social role as filmmaker?

Ray: You can see my attitude in *The Adversary* where you have two brothers. The younger brother is a Naxalite. There is no doubt that the elder brother admires the younger brother for his bravery and

soft emotions towards her children, or, in this case, her son. The two just don't go together. You have to be ruthless. Maybe she's not ruthless to that extent. She's being very Bengali. A European in the same circumstances would not behave in the same way.

Cineaste: How did *Charulata* resolve the problem of infidelity? She, as we are led to believe, went back. Was she being unfaithful or just caught between?

Ray: She was unfaithful but she was also confused because the husband was good. He wasn't a rake. *Charulata* probably felt sympathetic and was attempting to patch up the situation. The husband realized too late that he himself was responsible for what had happened. That is why at the end of the film there is the suggestion that they will come together, but that it is too soon for a reconciliation.

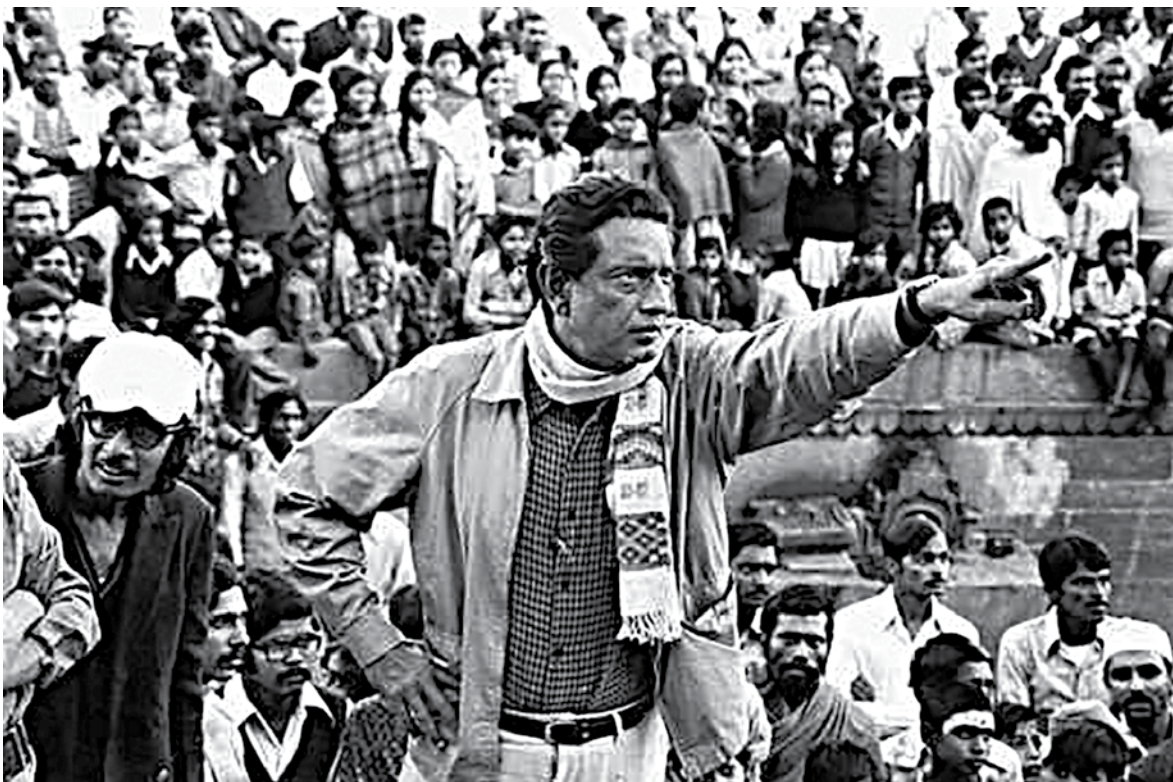
Cineaste: How much of your own sentiments are in your characters? Reviewing *Distant Thunder*, Pauline Kael wrote, 'Ray has put something of himself into *Gangacharan*, something of his own guilt, of weakness, of commitment.' Is that accurate?

Ray: Critics forget that I'm basing the film on someone else's work that already exists in another form. In *Distant Thunder*, *Gangacharan* is very close to Bibhuti Bhushan's concept. The real question should be whether the author himself had this feeling of guilt and weakness. I'm not the originator of the story. Why drag me into it? It's true, the fact that I have chosen to portray a character in a certain way does imply a sense of identity and understanding. I understand *Gangacharan*, his motivations, his behavior, his reactions. For me, he is a believable, fully-rounded character, and his transformation at the end is very moving, but he is not my reflection.

Cineaste: Are you suggesting that people who don't read the books from which your films are made may have a difficult time understanding or interpreting your films?

Ray: Yes, in the sense that they tend to ignore the original author completely. They're thinking of the narrative as a total creation, from beginning to end, by the filmmaker, and that is usually not true. I choose a story or a novel for certain elements in it which appeal to me. In the process of writing the screenplay, the theme may be modified, but most of the original elements will be retained. Often the screenplay evolves as a criticism of the original. After reading a story many times, you may feel that a certain character would not behave the way the author has described, so some changes are made. Once I have read a story and gotten to know it, I will leave the story behind and start from scratch. At the end, if I find that certain changes are convincing, I'll keep them and forget the original.

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Satyajit Ray (2 May 1921 – 23 April 1992)

PHOTO COURTESY: NEMAI GHOSH

all been very influential in India.

Film, as a purely technological medium of expression, developed in the West. The concept of an art form existing in time is a Western concept, not an Indian one. So, in order to understand cinema as a medium, it helps if one is familiar with the West and Western art forms. A Bengali folk artist, or a primitive artist, will not be able to understand the cinema as an art form. Someone who has had a Western education is definitely at an advantage.

Cineaste: Are you surprised that your films have been so well received outside of India?

Ray: I never imagined that any of my films, especially *Pather Panchali*, would be seen throughout this country or in other countries. The fact that they have is an indication that, if you're able to portray universal feelings, universal relations, emotions, and characters, you can cross certain barriers and reach out to others, even non-Bengalis.

Cineaste: What is the most unsatisfying film you've ever made?

Ray: The most unsatisfying film, *Chiriakhana* (The Zoo), is not being shown in my current retrospective. For one thing, it was not a subject of my choice. I was forced by circumstances to do it. Some of my assistants were supposed to do the film, but they suddenly lost confidence and asked me to take it on. *Chiriakhana* is a whodunit, and whodunits just don't make good films. I prefer the thriller form where you more or less know the villain from the beginning. The whodunit always has this ritual concluding scene where the detective goes into a rigmarole of how everything happened, and how he found the clues which led him to the criminal. It's a form that doesn't interest me very much.

Ray: That is often a reflection of what the author has written, a confirmation of the author's point of view expressed in the books on which the films are based. There have been many strong women characters in Tagore and in Bankimchandra. But it also reflects my own attitudes and personal experience of women.

Cineaste: Which is?

Ray: Although they're physically not as strong as men, nature gave women qualities which compensate for that fact. They're more honest, more direct, and by and large they're stronger characters. I'm not talking about every woman, but the type of woman which fascinates me. The woman I like to put in my films is better able to cope with situations than men.

Cineaste: Is *Charulata* the archetypal Ray woman?

Ray: Yes, she is.

Cineaste: Starting from *The Music Room* and continuing on to *The Chess Players*, you go back and forth between old culture and new culture, tradition and progress. Sometimes I get the feeling that you are leaning toward tradition and the old culture and are somewhat disapproving of what is new.

Ray: I don't disapprove of what is new in *The Chess Players*. There is a very clear attitude expressed in the fact that the feudals are not involved in what is happening around them. Although I am sympathetic to the characters, there's also a clear suggestion that these people are no good. But I am more interested in a way of life that is passing and the representatives of that way of life. You can find the same thing in Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* and it fascinates me. Of course, you risk flogging a dead horse in saying that feudalism is stupid and wrong. But you also feel for the characters in those films. They're pathetic, like dinosaurs



Satyajit Ray became the first Indian to receive an Honorary Academy Award in 1992.

is significant. If any other director had made that film, that scene would not have been allowed. But there are definitely restrictions on what a director can say. You know that certain statements and portrayals will never get past the censors. So why make them?

Cineaste: Given the political climate in India, is the filmmaker's role one of passive observer or activist?

Ray: Have you seen *Hirak Rajar Deshe* (The Kingdom of Diamonds)? There is a scene of the great clean-up where all the poor people are driven away. That is a direct reflection of what happened in Delhi and other cities during Indira Gandhi's Emergency. In a fantasy like *The Kingdom of Diamonds*, you can be forthright, but if you're dealing with contemporary characters, you can be articulate only up to a point, because of censorship. You simply cannot attack the party in power. It was tried in *The*

convictions. The film is not ambiguous about that. As a filmmaker, however, I was more interested in the elder brother because he is the vacillating character. As a psychological entity, as a human being with doubts, he is a more interesting character to me. The younger brother has already identified himself with a cause. That makes him part of a total attitude and makes him unimportant. The Naxalite movement takes over. He, as a person, becomes insignificant.

Cineaste: I am not the only one who feels that you emphasize emotion. Robin Wood has written that you are more interested in communicating emotional experiences than in expressing ideas.

Ray: That's just not correct. One thing that should be clearly discernible in my films is a strong moral attitude.

Cineaste: Is that a product of your religious upbringing, of being Brahma?

Ray: I don't think so. I don't even know