

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## SATYAJIT RAY (1921 – 1992)

### Life

Satyajit Ray was born into a family of writers and visual artists. His grandfather wrote poetry and illustrated books, and his father, who died when Ray was only two years old, did the same. They were part of a highly sophisticated, English-educated Bengali elite in colonial Calcutta. Ray's early schooling was in Bengali, but he then studied at the prestigious Presidency College where the medium was English. In 1940, he studied at Shantiniketan, the rural university established by Rabindranath Tagore and dedicated to Indian arts and aesthetics. When Ray left that unusual institution, he had gained a creative balance of western and Indian cultural influences.

In 1943, he took his first job with a British-owned advertising company in Calcutta and later worked as an illustrator for a publisher. Significantly, one of the books he illustrated was *Pather Panchali*, which would adapt as his first film. He already had a deep interest film and had been trying his hand at writing scripts. In 1947, he became co-founder of the Calcutta Film Society, and two years later he worked with Jean Renoir on the Frenchman's film *The River*. A year later, in 1950, Ray embarked on a half-year tour of Europe, during which he managed to see (he claimed) 100 films. One of them was De Sica's *The Bicycle Thieves*, which was a great inspiration for the travelling Bengali.

That experience encouraged him to embark on making his own film. At first, *Pather Panchali* had little financial backing and shooting was delayed for several years. When it was finally released in 1955, the film won several awards, including Best Human Document at Cannes, and was praised by critics across the globe. Now a star on the international film festival circuit, Ray never looked back. One of the remarkable features of his work is its range of genres, from family dramas to historical narratives, from crime stories to children's stories. There is also a remarkable breadth of topics, ranging from religion to political corruption.

Rather than a career marked by one or two big hits, Ray's output is a series of excellent films, right from the first to the last. Nonetheless, the decade of the 1960s saw him make several of the films for which he is most remembered today: *The Goddess*, *Kanchenjunga*, *The Big City*, *The Lonely Wife* and *Days and Nights in the Forest*.

In the 1970s, he made his so-called 'Calcutta Trilogy' (*The Adversary*, *Company Limited* and *The Middleman*), which highlight social and political issues in modern-day India. In the mid 1980s, he suffered a heart attack, which left him unable to do location work, and he shot his later films only in the studio.

When not behind the camera, Ray wrote short stories and illustrated books, mostly for young adults. He also revived a children's magazine that his grandfather had established in 1913. Some of his most memorable writings are about cinema and his own life. Ray married Bijoya Ray (one of his cousins, who was a singer) in 1949 and they had one son, Sandip Ray, who also became a film-maker.

### FILMOGRAPHY (feature films only)

*Song of the Road (Pather Panchali)* 1955  
*The Unvanquished (Aparajito)* 1956  
*Parash Pathar (The Philosopher's Stone)* 1958  
*The Music Room (Jalsaghar)*, 1958  
*The World of Apu (Apu Sansar)* 1959  
*The Goddess (Devi)* 1960  
*Three Daughters (Teen Kanya)* 1961  
*Kanchenjunga*, 1962  
*The Expedition (Abhijan)* 1962  
*The Big City (Mahanagar)* 1963

*The Lonely Wife (Charulata)* 1964  
*The Coward and The Holy Man (Kapurush O Mahapurush)* 1965  
*The Hero (Nayak)* 1966  
*The Zoo (Chiriakhana)* 1967  
*The Adventures of Goopy and Bagha (Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne)* 1968  
*Days and Nights in the Forest (Aranyer Din Ratri)* 1969  
*The Adversary (Pratidwandi)* 1970  
*Company Limited (Seemabaddha)* 1971  
*Distant Thunder (Ashani Sanket)* 1973  
*The Golden Fortress (Sonar Kella)* 1974  
*The Middleman (Jana Aranya)* 1975  
*The Chess Players (Shatranj Ke Khilari)* 1977  
*The Elephant God (Joi Baba Felunath)* 1978  
*The Kingdom of Diamonds (Hirak Rajar Dese)* 1980  
*The Home and the World (Ghare Baire)* 1984  
*An Enemy of the People (Ganashatru)* 1989  
*Branches of a Tree (Shakha Proshakha)* 1990  
*The Stranger (Agantuk)* 1991

## ACHIEVEMENTS

Satyajit Ray is the most acclaimed film director in the history of Indian cinema and one of the best-loved directors in world cinema. He is only one of four men ever to win more than one Silver Bear for best director at the Berlin International Film Festival. He also won more Golden Bear nominations (7) for best film at the Berlin Film Festival than anyone else. In 1957, he won the Golden Lion at Venice for best film (*The Unvanquished*). In addition, he was given honorary lifetime awards at both the Cannes and the Venice film festivals. In 1992, the year of his death, Satyajit Ray was given an Honorary Oscar by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

## CHARACTERS

1. *Modern woman* The wife in *The Big City* (1963) is only one of many Ray heroines who embody the character of the 'modern woman.' That film, set in 1960s Calcutta, was followed a year later by *The Lonely Wife* (1964), which tells a similar story of how a woman struggles against gender restrictions, but this time the drama is set in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The film opens with shots of the wife wandering through a large, upper-class family house in Calcutta, looking for something to amuse herself with. She reads a lot, but she is not happy. Her husband is so preoccupied with his newspaper business and its social reform agenda that he scarcely registers his wife's presence. Eventually, she finds emotional intimacy with her husband's cousin, who shares her interest in poetry and the natural world. Their rapport teeters on the edge of infidelity but never falls over the cliff. When the cousin realises how close he has come to betraying the husband, he leaves the house and the wife is distraught. Her husband wakes up to the problem of his bored wife and tries to win back her affection. The ending is ambiguous about whether or not she takes him back. *The Lonely Wife* is a complex examination of the modern woman, exposing the problems faced by intelligent and sensitive wives who are not content with their assigned role of housewife.

### 2. *Compromised man*

a) *The Hero* Among Ray's male characters, a common type is a man compromised by his own flaws, whether it be overweening ambition, moral cowardice or greed. A good example of the first type is Arindam, the lead character in *The Hero* (1966), who is a very popular actor (the film's title *nayak* means 'hero' in the sense of a cinema star). He is the classic case of a man who has achieved his ambition to succeed but has failed as a person. Arindam is lonely not because he is arrogant but because everyone around him treats him a hero and not a normal man. His isolation is finally relieved by a feminist reporter, who is not prepared to regard him as a media star, and that deflation of his image allows him to share his deepest fears with her. However, he sloughs off his iconic image only for the duration of a train ride, after which he puts on his sunglasses and is met by an adoring crowd at the station.

b) *The Middleman* Another compromised character is Somnath (in *The Middleman*, 1975). He is an honest young man who did not (like everyone else) cheat on his university exams and fails

as a result. He then loses his girlfriend and endures hours of useless interviews for non-existent jobs. His fortune changes when he is hired as a 'middleman', or a broker who earns money by commission. It is not as respectable as a 'salary man' (a bank clerk or government office worker), but it pays well. The moral crisis arrives when Somnath needs to seal a big contract and follows an advisor who recommends that he hire a prostitute to satisfy his client. Reluctantly, Somnath agrees but is shocked when he discovers that the girl he has hired is his friend's sister. The girl insists on going through with it (she, too, has to earn money), and Somnath escorts her to his client's hotel room. Reaching home, his father praises him for 'closing the deal,' but Somnath hangs his head in shame.

c) *Company Limited* A different sort of crisis leads to the corruption of Shyamal, a businessman with no obvious vices in *Company Limited* (1971). He is unable to fulfil a large order of fans because of a defect in their manufacture. Again, advised by others, Shyamal colludes in a plan to provoke a disturbance in the factory that will force its closure and thus provide Shyamal with a legitimate reason for missing the shipment date stipulated in the contract. The ruse works (although a man is badly injured), the factory closes and the company avoids paying compensation to the buyer as stipulated by a penalty clause in the contract. Shyamal's reputation in the company is saved but not in his personal life. His girlfriend, who knows what happened, leaves him and the final shot is Shyamal ashamed, with his head in his hands (just like Somnath in *The Middleman*).

### 3. Alienated young man

a) *The Adversary* A third common character in Ray's films, especially in the 1960s, is an alienated young man, a figure also prominent in the work of his fellow Bengali director Mrinal Sen. The best example is Siddhartha, the protagonist of *The Adversary* (1970), a young student whose life is overturned when his father dies and he must quit medical school in order to make money for his family. The problem is that he is a thinker and a searcher, who is out of step with everything and everyone around him. He is too honest for job interviews, too intellectual for the revolutionary cause, too chivalrous to have sex with a prostitute, too prudish to accept his sister's 'modern' ways and too blinded by his love of science to understand others. He is plagued with doubts about most things, and drifts around a huge city without a plan. In the end, he takes a job with a pharmaceutical company (which he dislikes) and is sent out to the provinces for his first post. In the final scene, he watches the funeral of a stranger from a distance. Critics have debated the meaning of the film's title, which seems to suggest that Siddhartha has an adversarial relationship with life. He is certainly alienated.

b) *The Expedition* The protagonist of *The Expedition* (1962) comes from a different background but has a similarly antagonistic approach to the world. Nar Singh is a large man, a masculine figure, misogynistic, short-tempered and quick to blame others for his misfortunes. He also has a chip on his shoulder because, though he is a high-caste Rajput, he is a mere taxi driver. He complains about women, about rich men and about government officials who won't show him respect. In the end, he displays compassion and bravery in rescuing a woman from prostitution and in turning down a deal to transport opium. But when he drives off in his battered 1930s Chrysler, we cannot be confident that he will not renew his argument with the world.

## THEMES

### SOCIETY :

*Tradition and modernity* If we had to identify one overriding theme in Ray's diverse films, it would be the conflict between traditional and modern values in Indian life. That struggle on a personal and cultural level is what the film-maker observed, as a creative artist living through most of the twentieth century in Calcutta. Once the capital of British India, Calcutta had been the centre of an influential 19<sup>th</sup>-century movement that reformed Hinduism and accommodated western ideas in literature, science and society more broadly. In Ray's masterpiece, the Apu Trilogy (*Pather Panchali*, *The Unvanquished* and *Apu's World*), Apu learns to adapt to a changing world when he leaves the village for the unknown world of the big city (Calcutta). It is significant that he travels by train, studies science at university and works in a printer's shop. These are three icons of modernity: the railroad, western education and the printed word. A moment of pure joy comes when Apu is delighted by another symbol of progress: the glow of an electric light bulb. Once settled, though, he is torn by his bond to his aging mother in the village. He should, as a dutiful son, look after her, but he doesn't want to interrupt his studies. He does return to the village several times, but only perfunctorily, and he is not there when she dies.

**Social Change** The theme of social change is also key to another major film (*The Goddess*, 1960), where it is dramatised in the realm of religion. When a young wife (Daya) is believed by her father-in-law to be the living incarnation of the goddess (a composite term for Hindu female deities), her husband is shocked and condemns his father's supernatural belief. As the story unfolds, and everyone treats Daya as a true goddess, she begins to accept that role. Fearing for her sanity, her husband seeks the advice of a professor and argues vehemently with his father about the evils of religion and the cure of rationalism. But the cult of the goddess has taken firm roots, and, in the end, Daya goes mad. In presenting an unambiguous picture of the dangers of traditional religious practice, this film departs from Ray's usual more balanced approach to the issue.

**Women** Many of Ray's films explore the theme of change through the lens of a woman's experience. The issue might be child marriage, arranged marriage or a working wife, but the approach is always sympathetic to the trials and tribulations of the woman. And, rather than a polemic against a misogynistic society, the story examines the issue through the inner struggle of the heroine. A good example is *The Home and the World* (1984), set in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Bimala is married while still a girl and is then confined not only inside the house but also to the most interior parts of the house. She enjoys luxury and an English tutor, but she is cut off from the outside world of men. Fortunately, she has a liberal-minded husband, who encourages her to step over the physical threshold into the public areas of the house, where she meets a political radical and spreads her wings. Her apparent freedom, however, is a chimera as the radical leader deceives and betrays her. While the story clearly criticises the traditional practice of child-brides, it also portrays the potential dangers when a woman, who has been a child-bride confined to the home, ventures out into the world.

**Marriage** The psychological pressure of an arranged marriage is likewise at the heart of *Kanchenjunga* (1962). While on holiday in the Himalayas, nineteen-year old Monisha learns that her businessman father has discreetly arranged for her to meet a prospective groom. Mr Bannerjee is affable but older and looks like a junior version of her father. Their introduction and subsequent conversations, which take place as they walk along foggy mountain paths, are charged with unspoken expectations and fear. The two are obviously not compatible since Monisha responds to the beauty of the snowy peaks, while Bannerjee speaks about the importance of 'getting results.' Crucially, though, he is sensitive enough to realise that Monisha is having second thoughts and, at the very end, releases her from any obligation. When they part, they agree that, when they all return to Calcutta, she can contact him if she wishes. Overall, the film is sceptical about the wisdom of arranged marriages but does not condemn them.

**Gender** In *The Big City* (1963), Ray tackles another dimension of women in a changing India. What are the problems that occur when both husband and wife work to maintain the family? The family in this film (the favourite of many critics) are very ordinary. The wife and her mother-in-law work at home; the husband is a bank clerk; his father is a retired school teacher. Husband and wife have two children. However, this traditional household is thrown into chaos when the wife gets a job selling vacuum cleaners door to door. At first, the extra money is welcomed by her husband, but when he loses his job and his wife finds self-satisfaction in her work, tensions emerge. The husband doesn't like being replaced as the bread-winner, and things become worse when the wife is fired for showing loyalty to a fellow female employee. Now, instead of both working, both are unemployed. But the film ends on a hopeful note. When the wife says that one of them will surely find a job in 'this big city,' her reformed husband says, 'No. I believe that both of us will.' With this conclusion, the film exposes the limitations of a male-dominated society and the advantages of liberating women from gender stereotypes.



(Ray at Shantiniketan, aged 22)



(Satyajit Ray, kneeling, during the filming of *Kanchenjunga* in 1962)