

Art without Frontiers? Satyajit Ray and the Constraints of Universality

CHANDAK SENGOPTA

In one of his last television interviews, Satyajit Ray declared: "Without my being aware of it I have done quite a few important things and in a way created a bridge between Bengal and the rest of the world. That's how I wish to be remembered"¹. After his death, the London *Times* observed: "He made the lives of Bengalis into something universal, and was able to project the joys and travails of his native land into the hearts and minds of the West. For this he will be permanently remembered"².

Ray, of course, had received such accolades from Western critics from the very beginning of his career. In his well-known monograph on the Apu trilogy, Robin Wood asserted that it was "remarkable how *seldom* in Ray's films the spectator is pulled up by any specific obstacle arising from cultural differences... Ray's films usually deal with human fundamentals that undercut all cultural distinctions"³. The review in *Time* of *Teen Kanya* (in the abbreviated version known in the West as *Two Daughters*) declared that "the magic of India's Satyajit Ray" lay in his ability to convey Bengali tales in terms that the whole world could comprehend. "*Two Daughters*", the reviewer remarked, was "so filled with the basic stuff of humanity that with minor changes of script it could have been made in rural Louisiana"⁴. Writing about *Ashani Sanket* (*Distant Thunder*, 1973), the British critic David Robinson observed, "Ray's unequalled gift is to give a total sense of a way of life which is strange and remote and contained, yet to discover in it the qualities that are universal"⁵. When Ray died, the *Boston Globe* went even farther, asserting that his films "were not Indian movies... Their message was universal and their essence was 'the human element'"⁶.

Today, more than 15 years after Ray's final film, Indian cinema has come to mean little more than Bollywood. "What the heck is Bollywood? Well, it's not your uncle's Satyajit Ray movies – stately pace, unknown actors, Ravi Shankar sitar music", remarked Richard Corliss in *Time*. In an article hailing Ray's commitment to realism, Salil Tripathi admitted that despite the greatness of his films, it was Bollywood that symbolised the "resurgent, assertive, aggressive and prospering mosaic" of modern India, "the India of a large middle class and nuclear weapons, of software engineers and diamond merchants"⁷. Accepting that the world's fascination with Bollywood had pushed Ray out of the limelight, Philip Kemp declared: "Ray will never be anything but a minority taste, but then, he never was nor wanted to be, not even in his native Bengal"⁸.

Ray, of course, is far from forgotten. In 2005, *Pather Panchali* got enthusiastic reviews on its 50th-anniversary re-release in London, and the 2002 retrospective of Ray's films at London's National Film Theatre was quite a success.⁹ Books continue to be published on Ray's life and work, and at least in the US, many of his films are available on video or DVD.¹⁰ But although most critics consider him to be an important film-maker – and some, like film historian James Chapman, still regard him as “India's one indisputable *auteur*” – few today would agree with Penelope Houston's 1963 statement that “until someone else comes along to change it, Satyajit Ray's Bengal will be the cinema's India”¹¹. In this exploratory essay I would like to reflect on responses to Ray's work in the English-speaking world, and the broader contexts that influenced those reactions. What made some Ray films Indian *and* universal while others failed to reach that level? Such issues cannot, of course, be explored at any depth in a short text; my aim here is to raise questions rather than proffer final answers.

Ray's reputation abroad rests largely on the Apu trilogy (especially *Pather Panchali*, 1955) although *Aranyer Din Ratri* (Days and Nights in the Forest, 1969) has also received enormous praise. Critics greeted some of his other films – such as *Ashani Sanket* or *Jalsaghar* (The Music Room, 1958) – with enthusiasm, but interest in those films does not seem to have endured in Britain or America. Even the film Ray himself considered to be his best – *Charulata* (1964) – has never found too many devotees; and his greatest hit in Bengal, *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne* (The Adventures of Goopy and Bagha, 1968) is barely known in the West. *Shatranj ke Khilari* (The Chess Players, 1977), with a storyline involving British imperialism and featuring Richard Attenborough in a big role, received mixed reviews everywhere.¹² Ray's place in the pantheon of world cinema, then, rests on a very small sample of his work.¹³ “Satyajit Ray, whatever some superficial or ignorant critics may say, is *not* primarily the maker of the Apu Trilogy”, Andrew Robinson asserts; he immediately adds, however, that “his range may never be fully understood”¹⁴.

Numbers, of course, aren't everything. The real question is why certain films appealed to overseas audiences while others did not. Take the urban films of the 1970s – *Pratidwandi* (The Adversary, 1970), *Seemabaddha* (Company Limited, 1971), or *Jana Aranya* (The Middleman, 1975). They feature characters who are moderately Westernised, they are set in locales far less alien than Nischindipur (the fictional village where *Pather Panchali* was set), and they are faster in pace than his earlier films. On the face of it, one would expect Western audiences to find them more accessible than *Pather Panchali* or *Ashani Sanket*, but they never have. Even the portrayal of Apu's life in Calcutta in *Apur Sansar* (The World of Apu, 1959) was found unsatisfactory by some. Dwight Macdonald wrote in *Esquire*: “*Pather Panchali* was about a family in a village. *Apu* is about a young writer in a city, a more complex theme, and I'm not sure Ray is up to it”¹⁵. “Paradoxically”, remarks Andrew Robinson, “it may be that the closer Ray's characters and settings get to those of Western films, the less universal they seem to a Western viewer”¹⁶.

This paradox is not easy to explain, but one should at least consider whether images and stereotypes of India might have modulated the international response to Ray's films. Western ideas about India, of course, are diverse and complex, but the one thing almost

every Westerner has known about India for centuries is that it is primarily a rural country with vast numbers of very poor people. Subsidiary themes cluster around this central notion – the importance of religious tradition, the rigidity of caste distinctions, or the contemplative habits of the Indian mind.¹⁷ Celebrated Bollywood star Nargis Dutt made the notorious claim that Ray had achieved his worldwide reputation by emphasising India's grinding poverty and ignoring the new industrial India that she would have preferred him to depict. As far as Ray's corpus is concerned, Nargis, of course, was talking absolute nonsense. Ray covered a wide range of themes and social strata – it takes a lot of ignorance to portray the maker of *Jalsaghar*, *Charulata* and *Shatranj ke Khilari* as a pornographer of poverty.

Nevertheless, Nargis' comment may contain an unexpected truth pertaining to Western *perceptions* of Ray's films. Of the many films Ray made on the middle and upper classes, only two ever received any sustained acclaim abroad – *Jalsaghar* (mostly in France, which falls outside the Anglo-American focus of this essay) and *Aranyer Din Ratri*. Of course, any Indian viewer would know that even *Pather Panchali* was about the rural middle class, not about peasants. To this day, however, many in the West (including Ray's longstanding champion Derek Malcolm) simply do not appreciate this.¹⁸ When the film was first shown outside India, negative as well as positive reactions emphasised the poverty of its subjects. Concerned about the delay in releasing the film in Manhattan, *Time* investigated why New York exhibitors were reluctant to screen the film. "These peasants live in huts. My customers live on Park Avenue", was one brutally frank answer.¹⁹

The film was, of course, released and ran for months in Manhattan. Its success, however, was intimately associated with poverty. "Chief among the delicate revelations that emerge from its loosely formed account of the pathetic little joys and sorrows of a poor Indian family in Bengal is the touching indication that poverty does not always nullify love and that even the most afflicted people can find some modest pleasures in their worlds", remarked Bosley Crowther in the *New York Times*.²⁰ Ray never liked Crowther's review, but I would argue that Crowther had identified the film's unique selling point.²¹ It was about the lives of the poor, but those lives were not devoid of joy, love or humanity. Nor did these poor villagers harbour any dreams of revolution – as a recent admirer has observed, "Ray's genius lay in understanding one crucial aspect of the Indian ethos – of accepting misfortune and trying to make the best of it... Ray's ultimate triumph was that he understood that India was not a revolutionary kind of place"²². Such 'orientalist' responses were not uncommon at the time. In a review of *Aparajito* in *Time*, emphasis was laid on "the profoundly Asiatic quality of the moviemaker's genius. He suffers passionately with his characters, and yet all the while remains curiously calm and almost indifferent, as though he understood that life must ultimately find its meaning and its peace in something larger than life"²³.

When Ray began to depict the rich, his work seemed far less universal to some American critics. *Jalsaghar*, warned *Time*, was only for "people with a tolerance for the bizarre". Although a "subtle and poignant tragedy of pride... movies about fat old men who don't even know what month it is are clearly not for everybody, especially if the old man

speaks Bengali"²⁴. *Devi*, too, was disconcerting – “instead of dealing with the struggles and ordeals of a poor-but-proud lower-class family *Devi* moves through the silk and saffron world of a rich household”²⁵. “It is a commentary on the values of *our* society that those who saw truth and greatness in... the mother’s struggle to feed the family [in *Pather Panchali*], are not drawn to a film in which Ray shows the landowning class and its collapse of beliefs”, wrote Pauline Kael. “It is part of *our* heritage from the thirties that the poor still seem ‘real’ and the rich ‘trivial’”²⁶. For a few, Ray would never be anything more than a portrayer of India’s poverty. When he died after almost 40 years of filmmaking, the *Los Angeles Times* observed that his “stark portrayals of the desperately poor were appreciated around the world but not in his homeland”. *Pather Panchali*, according to the obituarist, “gave the West a cataclysmic introduction to the daily tragedy that is India”²⁷.

These few quotations cannot, of course, sum up all Western reactions to Ray’s films, and there are plenty of counter-examples. The review in *Time* of *Mahanagar* (The Big City, 1963), Penelope Houston’s review of *Charulata* or just about any review of *Aranyer Din Ratri* would prove that Western critics could admire Ray’s work even when it had nothing to do with the poor or the miserable.²⁸ (For further proof, one need only point to the two biographies by Marie Seton and Andrew Robinson.) Western responses to Ray’s work varied widely and different critics emphasised different themes. Any objective exploration of that diverse body of opinion, however, should recognise that Ray’s international image was shaped significantly – although not exclusively – by his depiction of poverty in his first film.

My larger point, however, is that only a few of Ray’s films definitively crossed the cultural frontier between the West and the East. Alan Ross, the editor of *London Magazine*, wrote in 1973: “... the fact remains that Ray’s films – arguably the most considerable achievement in the art of our time – have made only a modest impact in relation to their quality. What the curious but weary West has wanted from India has been its peripheral and largely discarded mysticism, not its human problems and statistics of defeat”²⁹. And even this restricted impact was not felt outside the arthouse. “From the poverty of Calcutta, [Ray] could only break into the cultural art ghetto abroad”, wrote Desson Howe. “His success was almost entirely among the Western film-going elite. For a man who grew up on Billy Wilder, Astaire and Rogers, and other classic Hollywood fare, this was a great source of disappointment”³⁰.

What can we conclude from all this? The obvious, pessimistic interpretation would be that although artists can sometimes cross the frontiers of language, culture and psychology, the channels of communication are narrow and transient. Ray himself, although appreciative of Western interest in his films, never imagined that they were fully accessible to the West.³¹ Andrew Robinson, in his perceptive analysis of *Charulata*, emphasises that the situation may be far more complex – the film “conceals almost as much from the Bengali who is unfamiliar with Western civilisation, as it does, in other ways, from the Westerner who does not know Bengal”³². There obviously are individuals who can cross this double frontier, but how many?

Such an analysis, although accurate, is not sufficient in itself. We need to set Ray’s individual story in broader contexts. Ray’s international career coincided with the boom in

what, for the want of a better phrase, we must call 'art cinema'. He shared the limelight with the likes of Bergman, Fellini and Kurosawa.³³ As *Time* opined in a 1963 piece that identified Ray as the potential "Shakespeare of the screen", cinema had "suddenly and powerfully emerged as... the central and characteristic art of the age"³⁴. Ray was simply one prominent name in world cinema, albeit the only Indian. This, we should also recall, was a period when the prosperous and consumerist Indian diaspora, which has established Bollywood as a cultural force in the big cities of the West, was not very numerous or particularly prosperous. So, there was no substantial ethnic market for Indian cinema in the West, and although interest in India was often high among the *sahibs* in the 1960s – think of Mahesh Yogi and the Beatles – it was rarely a well-informed interest.

It was the combination of high interest in 'art cinema' and a relative lack of interest in *Indian* cinema that shaped the reception of Ray's films. Ray, clearly, was an authentically Indian filmmaker, but his best films were never so Indian as to be incomprehensible to Westerners. Whenever he failed to strike this balance, much of his Western audience deserted him. And when, at the close of the 20th century, the golden age of 'art cinema' came to an end, the arthouses closed, film festivals became less rarefied, critics acquired deeper knowledge of the diversity of Indian films, and the children of the Indian diaspora grew into consumers with economic clout, the conjuncture that had made Ray the international symbol of Indian cinema gradually unravelled.

Again, however, we must resist the temptation to focus only on Ray's fate. We should at least consider whether the Bergmans, Mizoguchis and Godards have fared very differently. No doubt their work is better known to critics than Ray's – but do they really have a mass audience today? They are all old classics now, but their works are rarely released in commercial venues. Ray's relative obscurity in the West today, in other words, may well be one sign of the end of a specific phase in the history of film culture.

So, did Ray bridge Bengal and the world? Yes – but within limits and only for a limited period. Paraphrasing Karl Marx and mixing metaphors, one might say that people who cross cultural frontiers build their own bridges, but they do not build them just as they please in circumstances they choose for themselves; they build them in present circumstances, given and inherited.³⁵ This is not to say that Ray was simply and exclusively a product of his time and place, but only to emphasise that his success in the English-speaking world resulted from a fortuitous convergence of individual talent and cultural circumstances.

In any case, the frontiers Ray began to cross more than 50 years ago have now changed their contours. The art-cinema marketplace that his bridge led to has vanished; today's bridge-builders must carry new commodities to new markets and these, of course, are protected by new frontiers. Meanwhile, Ray's old bridge, like some disused trade route, awaits the cultural historian. Its twists and turns have much to teach us – not only about Ray's career, but about the history of 20th-century film culture and, more generally, about the technological, social and ideological forces that define (and redefine) cultural frontiers over time.

Acknowledgements

My thanks to the Sarai Reader editorial collective for their interest in this text, and to the Leverhulme Trust for their support of the larger project to which this essay is a preamble. Andrew Robinson, Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, Ian Christie, Nemai Ghosh, David Arnold, Sunil Amrith, Partha Chatterjee, Jane Henderson, Rudrangshu Mukherjee, Indira Chowdhury, Ashish Rajadhyaksha, Philip French, Gaston Roberge, Julian Swann and Punam Zutshi provided much encouragement, help and support – my warmest thanks to them all.

Notes

1. "I Created a Bridge between Bengal and the World". In *The Pioneer*, 3 January 1992.
2. "Satyajit Ray". In *The Times*, 24 April 1992, p. 13.
3. Robin Wood. *The Apu Trilogy* (Praeger, 1971, New York), p. 7.
4. *Time*, 10 May 1963. See <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,830317,00.html>.
5. David Robinson. "Two Great Eastern Masters". In *The Times*, 11 April 1975, p. 15. For Ray's reaction, see Andrew Robinson, "A Conversation with Satyajit Ray", in *Films and Filming*, No. 335 (August 1982), pp. 12-22, at 19; reprinted in (ed.) Bert Cardullo, *Satyajit Ray: Interviews* (University Press of Mississippi, 2007, Jackson), pp. 142-64.
6. Santosh Basak. "Satyajit Ray, World-Acclaimed Film Maker of Life in India". In *Boston Globe*, 24 April 1992, p. 47. For the complicated question of Ray's importance in Indian cinema, see Ashish Rajadhyaksha, "Satyajit Ray, Ray's Films, and Ray-Movie", in *Journal of Arts and Ideas*, No. 23-24, pp. 7-17 (1993).
7. See Richard Corliss, "Going Bollywood", in *Time*, 15 July 2002; <http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,320814,00.html>
See also Salil Tripathi, "Better than Bollywood", in *New Statesman*, 3 June 2002, pp. 38-39.
8. Philip Kemp. "Mitra Man". In *Sight and Sound* 12, No. 8, pp. 4-5 (August 2002).
9. See Xan Brooks, "Pathar Panchali", in *The Guardian*, 26 August 2005; <http://arts.guardian.co.uk/fridayreview/story/0,,1556351,00.html>
See also G[eoff] A[ndrew], "Pathar Panchali", in *Time Out* (London), 24-31 August 2005. <http://www.timeout.com/film/70860.html> The 2002 retrospective was not extensively covered, although some films received rave reviews. The *Guardian* critic was ecstatic over *Aranyer Din Ratri*: "Ray's language of cinema is a kind of miraculous vernacular, all his own. It has mystery, eroticism and delight... The phrase 'must see' is bandied about very casually – but this deserves it. Run, don't walk, to the N[ational] F[ilm] T[heatre]". See Peter Bradshaw, "This Week's Films", *The Guardian*, 26 July 2002. http://www.guardian.co.uk/friday_review/story/0,,762902,00.html.
10. In Britain, Andrew Robinson's biography, *Satyajit Ray: The Inner Eye*, first published in 1989, came out in a revised edition (Tauris, 2004, London). More recently, Robinson and photographer Nemai Ghosh have published *Satyajit Ray: A Vision of Cinema* (Tauris, 2005, London), a lavishly illustrated overview of Ray's life and work. For two fairly recent American studies, see Darius Cooper, *The Cinema of Satyajit Ray: Between Tradition and Modernity* (Cambridge University Press, 2000, Cambridge); and Suranjan Ganguly, *Satyajit Ray: In Search of the Modern* (Scarecrow Press, 2000, Lanham). Many of his major films are available in videocassettes or DVDs in the United States. In Britain, only the Apu Trilogy, *Abhijan* (The Expedition, 1962) and *Shatranj ke Khilari* are available on DVD.
11. See James Chapman, *Cinemas of the World: Film and Society from 1895 to the Present* (Reaktion, 2003,

- London), p. 339; and Penelope Houston, *The Contemporary Cinema* (Penguin, 1963, Harmondsworth), p. 153.
12. See Andrew Robinson's discussion in *Satyajit Ray: The Inner Eye*, op. cit., pp. 250-51.
 13. For a comprehensive analysis of Western reviews of Ray's films, see Gaston Roberge, "Humanism in Ray's Cinema", to be included in Roberge's collection of essays on Ray (Manohar, Delhi, forthcoming). My thanks to Fr. Roberge for sharing his manuscript with me.
 14. Andrew Robinson, op. cit., 2nd edn. (Tauris, 2004, London), p. viii.
 15. Dwight MacDonald. "A Masterpiece – and Some Others". In *Esquire* 53, No. 5, pp. 36-42 (1960), quoted in Keya Ganguly, "Cinema and Universality: Satyajit Ray's *Apur Sansar*", in *Race and Class* 44, No. 2, pp. 57-70, at 62 (2002).
 16. Andrew Robinson, op. cit., p. 176.
 17. For an interesting discussion of these issues, see Amartya Sen, "Indian Traditions and the Western Imagination", in *The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian History, Culture, and Identity* (Picador, 2005, New York), pp. 139-60.
 18. For a fairly recent reference to Apu as a "peasant", see Derek Malcolm, "Satyajit Ray: The Music Room", in *The Guardian*, 14 January 1999.
http://film.guardian.co.uk/Century_Of_Films/Story/0,4135,36064,00.html
 19. "The Gold Standard". In *Time*, 17 February 1958.
<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,862942,00.html>.
 20. See Bosley Crowther, "Exotic Import: 'Pathar Panchali' from India Opens Here", in *The New York Times*, 23 September 1958. <http://movies2.nytimes.com/>.
 21. See Satyajit Ray, "Parichalaker Dristite Samalochak" [The Critic in the Eyes of a Director] (1965), in *Bishay Chalacchitra* (Ananda, 1982, Calcutta), pp. 72-74, at 74; and "Under Western Eyes", in *Sight and Sound* 51, No. 4, pp. 268-74, at 271 (Autumn 1982).
 22. Salil Tripathi. "Better than Bollywood", op. cit., p. 38, 39.
 23. "The New Pictures". In *Time*, 16 February 1959.
<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,894226-1,00.html>.
 24. "A Tragedy of Pride". In *Time*, 13 September 1963.
<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,896979,00.html>.
 25. "Goddess in the Flesh". In *Time*, 26 October 1962.
<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,874567,00.html>.
 26. Pauline Kael. "Devi". In *I Lost It at the Movies: Film Writings, 1954-1965* (Marion Boyars, 1994, London), pp. 245-55, at 248.
 27. Burt A. Folkart. "Satyajit Ray: Film Director Depicted India's Tragedy". In *Los Angeles Times*, 24 April 1992, A25.
 28. "An Epic of Eavesdropping". In *Time*, 25 August 1967,
<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,841079,00.html>.
See also Penelope Houston, "Ray's *Charulata*", in *Sight and Sound* 35, No. 1, pp. 31-33 (Winter 1965-66); Tom Milne, "Days and Nights in the Forest", in *Sight and Sound* 41, No. 1, pp. 48-49 (Winter 1971-72); and Pauline Kael, "Lost and Found", in *Reeling* (Marion Boyars, 1977, London), pp. 137-43.
 29. Alan Ross. "A Postscript in Bengal". In *London Magazine*, new series, 13, No. 1, pp. 149-51, at 150 (April-May 1973).

30. Desson Howe. "Ray's Elusive Renown: A Stranger at Home and Abroad". In *The Washington Post*, 24 April 1992, D1-2, at D2. See also Richard Schickel, "Days and Nights in the Arthouse", in *Film Comment* 28, No. 3, pp. 32-35 (May-June 1992). For other examples, see Chandak Sengoopta, "Satyajit Ray: The Plight of the Third-World Artist", in *American Scholar* 62, pp. 247-54 (1993).
31. For Ray's early views on foreign critics, see the last pages of the 1963 essay "Calm Without, Fire Within", in *Our Films, Their Films* (Orient Longman, 1976, Calcutta), pp. 152-61. For a far more trenchant statement, see "Under Western Eyes" (see note 21, above).
32. Andrew Robinson, op. cit., p. 157.
33. For an exciting account of this era, see Peter Cowie, *Revolution! The Explosion of World Cinema in the Sixties* (Faber and Faber, 2004, New York).
34. See "A Religion of Film", in *Time*, 20 September 1963.
<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,870556,00.html>.
35. The original sentence is from Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1851-52): "Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please in circumstances they choose for themselves; rather they make it in present circumstances, given and inherited". See *Karl Marx: Later Political Writings*, trans. and ed. Terrell Carver (Cambridge University Press, 1996, Cambridge), p. 32.