

## NOTES

### DISPLACEMENT IN *ARANYER DIN RATRI*

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*Aranyer Din Ratri* can be considered a turning point in Satyajit Ray's career. It acts as a hyphen between his earlier works from *Pather Panchali* to *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne* and the phase from *Pratidwandi* to *Agantuk*. It is the transitional film where we observe the optimism present in his earlier films giving way to a darker vision. The city trilogy which comes after this does reveal what some critics have called a 'spiritual exhaustion'.

When *Aranyer Din Ratri* was released in 1970 there was a strong disapproval in Bengal of what seemed to be its 'trivial' content. Even to this day critics like Iraban Basu Roy seem quite uneasy with the kind of films Ray made in the 1970s.

The 70's audience reaction seems logical when we consider the issue of displacement. People were in no mood to appreciate the adventure of four youths in the forests of Palamau when their real life counterparts were being slaughtered. It was felt that the flight to the forests was a flight from reality. People expected Ray to be more of a socially tuned artist. He had earlier said:

'Can a serious filmmaker working in India afford to shut his eyes to the reality around him, the reality that that is so poignant and so urgently in need of interpretation in terms of the cinema? I don't think so. For the truly serious, socially conscious filmmaker there can be no prolonged withdrawal into fantasy. He must face the challenge the contemporary reality... I say this with all the conviction because I myself have been in my own humble way trying to do this.' ('Problems of a Bengali Film Maker', 1958)

The previous film was *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne*, a combination of fantasy and musical. The film after *Pratidwandi*, also evoked serious reservations. On the whole, the reaction was mixed. Some objected to Siddhartha's removal from the city in the end. There it appeared to be the displacement of the protagonist from the troubled waters of Calcutta to the mofussil town of Baluswar. Andrew Robinson in his book the *Inner Eye* refers to Dhritiman Chatterjee narrating of the incident when the film was shown to the students (friends of Chatterjee) from the most radical campus in Calcutta, the audience shouted it down. He says it raised a whole lot of emotions.

I would like to make a few comments on the question of displacement in *Aranyer Din Ratri* and *Pratidwandi*. I would accept the fact that a spiritual exhaustion is in evidence in these films and would argue that this comes from the disintegration of a vision of plenitude surrounding the birth of a new nation.

I would follow the familiar characterisation of Ray's work against neo-realist standards. It is pertinent since *Pather Panchali* and Ray's seminal article 'What is wrong with Indian Films?' published in *The Statesman* in 1948 which reveal his affinity with the aspects that Cesare Zavattini outlined for neo-realism. Zavattini's views are summarized by Simona Monticelli in her article 'Italian Post-War Cinema and Neo-Realism'. She says, 'Zavattini maintained that the greatest achievement of Neo-Realist cinema was that it brought on to the screen the lives of ordinary people... For Zavattini the aim of Neo-Realism had to be to rediscover, without embellishment or dramatisation, the 'dailiness' of people's lives'. He thought that the most minute and apparently insignificant details of these lives are full of poetry; as well as the echoes and reverberations of the human condition.'

With this aim of neo-realism I would compare Ray's views on Indian cinema. What Zavattini derides as dramatisation Ray has described as the 'queer process of reasoning where movement was equated with action and action with melodrama'. In the same article Ray stresses on the need to introduce a film language, which being modern will at the same time depict the true picture of India. The narrative has to be unidirectional and must keep away from the 'convolutions of plots and counter-plots'. The camera has to be discerning enough to explore the poetry that is enmeshed in the landscape.

Looking at *Pather Panchali* the words of that article seems to fall in place. For both Italian neo-realism and Ray's films, the project was to help define a cultural identity for the nation in question. Geeta Kapur takes the same cue to comment that Ray actually took up the task of 'bourgeois cultural transformation after the national movement demobilised itself'. She locates Ray within the domain of state institutions busy in their task of homogenising the national culture — 'to carry out overall mandate of modernisation'. ('Cultural Creativity in the First Decade: The Example of Satyajit Ray') I would look at Ray's position as a filmmaker somewhat differently. It would be a reduction to pin down *Pather Panchali* as carrying the mandate of modernisation. Some of his early films like *Charulata* revolve around the question of modernity, but they are definitely not conduits for its programmes.

In the same essay Kapur says that Ray's emphasis is on the individual, and through the individual, on relating of a bigger story *Pather Panchali* represents, I would agree, the very passage of the nation from tradition to modernity via the character of Apu. Here Apu's journey through life and his sense of loss and death parallels the painful journey of the nation from a colonial past into a sovereign country. The process of modernisation is painful and is marked at the object level by death. Yet it is inevitable. The rhythm of life, the cycle of life and death has been worked out to bring forward sustaining truth of the historical motif of survival. Kapur maintains that *Pather Panchali* provided a gloss over civilisational trauma caused by progress. It sublimated the threat of modernization into a dream of autonomy. She thinks *Pather Panchali* is akin to a national allegory.

Kapur, in a broad stroke, links Ray's ideology to the Bengal School of art and to Tagorean humanism and the rationalist progressive project of the Brahma Samaj. This argument will help us to illuminate the issue of displacement.

Ray's Apu Trilogy is described almost always as a humanist statement. We can take the case of T.G. Vaidyanathan who has devoted two chapters to Ray's humanism in his book *Hours in the Dark*. It seems to Vaidyanathan that the West has completely ignored the question of individual death. The threat of mass-destruction has somehow displaced the pathos of individual death. He cites Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove* as an example. According to him, individual destruction and death have always been the basis for humanist art. The deaths in Apu Trilogy characterises it as humanistic. He writes, 'Ray is a humanist in the truest sense of the term' since 'he believes in the human spirit, chiefly in its capacity to change and renew itself'. This is also to be found in his treatment of nature. There seem to be two traits that come into focus in discussions — the importance of the individual in Ray's films, and the making sense of history; culture and life itself through the individual consciousness that these films present. I wish to elaborate the second point.

Utpal Dutt, in a presentation at the Sahitya Akademi, made comments upon the individualistic orientation of Ray's humanism. He maintains that Ray is a humanist insofar as he would portray the sorrow misery, wretchedness of human life and express his conviction in the centrality of the human consciousness in the universe. Man is his own destiny here. Ray, he thinks, believed in the individual's endurance in the face of historical change. Dutt cites the example of *Pather Panchali* and *Devi*: 'Satyajit Ray has shown the characters in *Pather Panchali* are made to suffer not under the wrath of God, but their suffering is inflicted by man himself.' *Devi*, says Dutt, is a revolutionary film since it vindicates religious rituals as irrational.

Geeta Kapur, in an earlier essay ('Revelation and Doubt: *Sant Tukaram* and *Devi*'), confirms Dutt's description even as she differs from Dutt's position. The protagonist of *Devi*, Daya, is tragic because she is human, and Ray, Kapur thinks, has purposely refrained from giving Daya an 'iconic aspect'. She is reduced to the purely symbolic by the patriarch, a tragic sign. Ray's humanism can be read as a world-view which is based on the autonomy of the human consciousness which is secular and guided by rationality. This has driven Ray to sometimes fetishising the individual through his realism.

This individual has been recognised in social science as the historical figure of the bourgeois, termed as the 'bhadralok' in the Bengali/ Indian context. Ray's friend and film critic Chidananda Das Gupta once observed that his work traces the social evolution of the middle class in modern India. Ray's probing of society via the individual has actually been the probing into the life of the 'bhadralok'. Kapur notes that Ray is commenting on the confrontation of the two phases of this identity — the feudal and the bourgeois — in *Devi*. And he is 'obviously in favour of the bourgeois class. If there is a sympathy for the dying order (in *Jalsaghar*, of course, it is the very motif) it is only as much as is necessary to maintain the balance of realism'.

This position is necessary for Ray to launch his social commentary. I would propose that the history of the 'self' that emerges in Ray's films is the history of the emergence of the 'bhadralok'. It is also the history of individualism. The historical task of modernisation appears as the work of survival of the individual in the face of historical changes. Utpal Dutt's argument must be viewed from this perspective. This portrayal serves the purpose of narrativising history as the biography of the 'self'. This narrativising project was well in place as long it invented its own past. Anomalies began to grow when one sought to probe the contemporary. With the rise of the radical left movement in West Bengal from the mid-1960s Ray's problematic engagement with of the contemporary began.

Kapur says that Ray cannot work directly with historical change. She thinks Ray does not introduce any disjuncture within the narrative whereby the unconscious may find its manifestation in language in order to interrogate history. The contemporary for Ray is not the site for historical forces to act in. But Kapur's observations seem partial. Both in *Aranyer Din Ratri* and *Pratidwandi* there are occasional disjunctures. It comes as a dream for Hari and as a hallucination for Ashim under the influence of country hooch. They help to bring out the subtext of corruption of the middle class in India, as Pauline Kael observed in her review in *New Yorker* of *Aranyer Din Ratri*. What I call displacement is manifest in dialogues like 'Thank God for corruption'. And there is also the drunkard's version of the patriotic song 'Sare jahan Se Achha'. There is also ironic mention of political figures like Mao and Atulya Ghosh which can only occur in a game, i.e. through displacement.

Ray does not go into the political context that these names would arise from. This time he returns to the contemporary to record his cynicism of the middle class. The quartet Hari, Ashim, Sanjoy and Sekhar are critiqued from a number of angles. None of them are like Apu or any of the previous heroes of Ray. These are from a middle class fallen into the throes of moral crisis. The displacement of these youths into the forests of Palamau gives Ray the scope to examine the 'bhadralok' from a moral point of view. The presence of the Tripathys alongside provides a conduit for joining two periods of the 'bhadralok' formation and two phases of his history. The Tripathys set off the moral decadence of the present. The picture is pessimistic, but the Tripathys still represent the positive values of the past, albeit under siege. The earlier optimism of *Mahanagar*, one of the first contemporary plots in Ray, has faded by now.

Ray's distrust of politics, as expressed in an interview with *Sight and Sound* (Winter, 1973), does not erase politics from his films. At the time of *Aranyer Din Ratri*, with the Naxalbari movement at its peak, the attempt to critique the middle class in the context of the city would have brought in more direct political references. *Pratidwandi* is set against the writings on the wall. The displacement in *Aranyer Din Ratri* helps Ray continue his engagement with the past and perennial, but this time through a darker prism. Here the contemporary is brought in as the possibility of that past and universal convictions opening out into an unforeseen present. This should be considered the specific political statement of the film.

In *Pratidwandi* it becomes even more difficult to sustain the unidirectional narrative, and the larger narrative of the individual. Ray was uneasy with the Marxist axiomatics of the day. But as he tries to engage with the contemporary the decadence of humanist ideals appears increasingly as class decadence. The individual journey is ruptured. Slogans burst into the screen in the latter film from the streets and walls of the city. The freeze shots break the flow of narration. Siddharatha's position is similar to Ray's, neither can they join the ongoing 'revolution', nor accept the society as it is. But the solitude that ensues from this non-attachment marks the onset of a deeper individualism at another level. Displacement becomes the only option in the character centred art that Ray believes in.

Towards the very end, in *Ganashatru*, *Shakha Prashakha* and *Agantuk*, the individual takes on a tragic hue, the lonely tighter, the mentally retarded, the maverick outsider.

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