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## THE FATHER FIGURES IN RAY'S FILMS

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In the 1950s Nehru preached the doctrine that factories and dams were the new temples of India. And if the base was to be an industrialised economy the superstructure must be a secular, democratic and urbanised society established on enlightened humanism. If the temples stood for the old feudal or colonised order then the factories were to stand for modern India<sup>1</sup>. The 1950s was a decade of transition from the old to the new.

Ray's early realism reflects this transition of Indian society. In most of Ray's films up to the mid-1960s we find the tension of the old and the new social orders, and this is most pronounced in the father figures. In *Apu Trilogy*, Harihar is a village priest representing the old, agrarian order. Apu has to transcend that stage to become a bourgeois intellectual. He knows the world, he reads and writes novels, he is romantic and enlightened, he is an individual — the citizen of modern India<sup>2</sup>. A similar project can be traced through *Devi*, *Kanchenjunga* and *Mahanagar*. In *Devi* there is a feudal, authoritarian and superstitious father. His son, who studies in Calcutta, is his rational foil. The son believes in 'Reason' more than in the sanctity of beliefs. He supports his friend's marriage to a widow; promises to follow the legacy of Rammohun Roy, and musters up the courage to protest against his father's superstitions. He provides a model of the emerging individual<sup>3</sup>. In *Kanchenjunga*, Manisha breaks out of the dominance of her colonial patriarch of a father and finds her own independent voice. In *Mahanagar* the father is a retired, old school teacher living in a world of values under attack. He believes that a woman should not go out to work. Arati, his daughter-in-law, and then Subrata, his son, have to transcend this barrier of ideas. The father keeps posing the limit against which the protagonists in these early films have to struggle.

But the project becomes complicated later. This is when we find a second generation of fathers in Ray. Apu is also a father to Kajol; Umaprasad, the son in *Devi*, is

a potential father, Arati and Subrata are the parents of a new generation. It is interesting to surmise what they would be like as fathers/ parents. The enlightened fathers are expected to be different, not patriarchal so much as paternal, people who would nurture the citizens of a new nation. Their position would resemble the new state insofar as the state is supposed to treat the citizen like its child<sup>4</sup>. But the way their incarnations appear in the later films throws that projection into doubt.

In the urban trilogy we find the crisis of the youth who cannot identify with the Indian nation-state which is allegorized through a certain 'fatherlessness'. *Pratidwandi* starts with the death of the hero's father. In *Simabadhha* the turn in Shyamalendu's career comes with his giving up of his father's profession, a lectureship, and taking up the job of a company executive. His moral crisis is in a sense due to his detachment from his father. Ray makes this clear through the character of Tutul, Shyamalendu's sister-in-law who is nostalgic about his older profession and the life he has left behind. In *Jana Aranya*, the crisis of Somnath and his friends is partly due to the fact that the fathers are compelled into passivity and silence. The film opens with a scene of the examination hall, the walls of the room are painted with revolutionary slogans to flout the ruling order, the students are found cheating, the teacher is a passive observer. Somnath's father is an anxious, helpless man whose moral detachment from his elder son and then from the younger is a major narrative thread in the film. He laments: ' I don't believe the father's opinion counts any more.' He tries to understand the compulsion of the new youth, their courage and frustration, he is open-minded, loving and rational. But his sons have come to face a reality which holds no promise. Shyamalendu , Siddhartha and Somnath suffer because they are segregated from their fathers.

The theme of fatherlessness is suggested for the first time in *Aranyer Din Ratri*. The film was made when the radical student and peasants' movements have made the dis-identification with the nation-state among a large number of people quite clear. The dream of modern India had become a bitter irony for many. The group of youths who come to the forests to have fun and adventure do not hold the promise of being good sons or future fathers. The irresponsible behaviour, the desperate liaisons, the lack of regard

for law, even for others' rights — all these signal a lack of authority and an ensuing disintegration. The old Mr. Tripathy provides a contrast with his fatherly position in place in his own family.

I have brought two periods from Ray's oeuvre into discussion so far, but have not touched upon the intermediary films. *Charulata* presents a complex mutation of the theme. The celebration of modernity is already complicated in that film. Bhupati, the enlightened, secular man is in some ways a pathetic figure; his naivete generates the great irony of the story. He belongs to the class which lived off the revenue from land, his anglicised habits are supported by a feudal system of exploitation, his open-mindedness becoming a mimicry rather than an invention. Charu's loneliness is emphasised by the couple's childlessness. Bhupati cannot contribute to the flow of life Ray believes in, the flow from the old to the new through fathers and sons that he portrays in his great trilogy. It would also be interesting to look at a third phase — the last trio of films — *Ganashutra*, *Shakha-Proshakha* and *Aguntuk*. It is an embattled optimism, an optimism in tatters that one finds in these films. They betray a desperate attempt to revive a belief in reformist, modernist humanism. So desperate that Ray takes recourse to the melodramatic form. The father figure is resurrected, and his crisis becomes the crisis of the society. In the urban trilogy ( *Pratidwandi*, *Seemabadhha*, *Jana Aranya*) the sons were in crisis, the fathers had access to a certainty of ideals. But in these films it is the father figure who is in crisis. Ashok Gupta (*Ganashutra*), Anandamohan (*Shakha-Proshakha*) and Manmohan (*Aguntuk*) are trying to fight the degeneration of ideals with a tragic exhaustion in their faces. It is no accident that they are a doctor, an industrialist and an academic pioneer — the pillars of the modern bourgeois project of nation building. The last figure, Manmohan is an omnibus of characteristics of the progressive bourgeoisie in that sense — he is a renaissance personality much in the model of Ray himself. Chandipur in *Ganashutra* and Anandanagar in *Shakha-Proshakha* are microcosms of the Indian society, an allegorical move that is unusual in Ray's realist practice. Bigotry, corruption, selfishness, profiteering — the decline of the world is captured in broad strokes, didacticism is apparent. Ray feels compelled to speak in terms of universals, at almost an epochal level. This reveals an urge to come to terms with the grand design of modernity itself, and with

the project of nation-building. It is as if Ray has become aware of his own earlier enterprise and has begun to speak in terms of social inquiry and history, rather than through the 'individual' and the 'human'.

Sudipta Kaviraj argues that the great enterprise called the 'Enlightenment' has met three historical frontiers, separated from each other in space and time.<sup>5</sup> It has the internal frontier between the feudal elite and the productive, modernist class. A second frontier is there between the victorious power and the people it subjugated. A final frontier is reached today when civilisation itself feels exhausted. Kaviraj proposes this model to explain colonial power. But if the process of modernization is itself seen as a process of 'colonising' other cultures and other voices, then this model of reading can be extended to various phases of modernity in India. The voices of conscience in the last films of Ray is the voice of an exhausted modernity.

What is disturbing is that Ray does not acknowledge the great failure of the logos and law that emanates from figures like Manmohan, the most articulate of these seniors. And the naivete of these characters y they don't know that there exist things called bribes and rackets — is not held up to a serious critique. The damage that this class had done to the Indian society, never doubting their own great knowledge and belief while throwing millions of lives into experimental destruction of 'development', is nowhere acknowledged. Are they not to be blamed for the things they bemoan? Ray tries hard to avoid this ambiguity of characterisation. Referring to Freud, we may suggest that in the last trilogy, Ray shows us the story of the child being beaten, but he obscures the discourse : 'my father is beating me'.<sup>16</sup>

Notes :

1. The factories and technologies invoke a moral economy for Nehru with regard to the growing citizenship in a modern nation-state. He wrote: ' we have to grow young again, in tune with our present time, with the irrepressible spirit and joy of youth in the present

and its faith in future.’ *Discovery of India*, Ch X (Religion, Philosophy and Science’), Oxford University Press, 1946.

2. Ravi S. Vasudevan explains that in the 50s the Indian art cinema projected the picture of then ideal citizen based on ‘individualism’. He writes, ‘ This art cinema discourse was instituted by figures such as Satyajit Ray and Chidananda Das Gupta in the film society movement that started in 1947. Implicit in their agenda was the desire not only to make films but to cultivate spectators who were attentive to the drama of the individual, the type so memorably incarnated in the Apu character of Ray’s great trilogy.’ Ravi. S. Vasudevan, ‘Addressing the Spectator of the’ ‘Third World’. *National Cinema: The Bombay Social Film of the 1940’s and 1950’s*. *Screen*, 36/4, 1995.

3. ‘The difference is not just that of old age and youth but of the way images are formed and positioned the young man riding with a friend in a horse-cab in Calcutta has a poise that signals the making of a self-conscious, perhaps imitative but also optimistic middle class in 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengal.’ See Geeta Kapur, ‘Revelation and Doubt : Sant Tukaram and Devi’, in V Dhareshwar, T Niranjana, P Sudhir (eds) *Interrogating Mordernity*, Seagull Books ,Calcutta, 1993.

4. In his essay ‘Who’s Looking ? Viewership and Democracy in the Cinema’ (*Cultural Dynamics* 10/2, 1998) Ashish Rajadhyaksha explains the ‘modernist pedagogical mission of the state in the field of realist cinema which involves ‘tutoring people through a well-defined narrative contract.’

5. Kaviraj, Sudipta, ‘The Imaginary Institution of India’ in *Subaltern Studies*, Vol VII, Partha Chatterjee and Gyan Pandey (eds) Oxford University, Press, Delhi, 1992

6. Sigmund Freud, *Interpretation of Dreams*, Penguin Freud Library, vol 2, 1991.

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