

Paper

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Ray's Interpretation of the Socio-Political Diaspora in Contrast with Tagore



Abstract:

Bengal was never foreign to dissent and debates throughout the history of revolution and resistance. The power and intellect of the Bengali youth to question is the hallmark of their identity. So even when Ray was at his apex of global accreditation and acclaim, he met with staunch critics from his contemporaries. Ray has always worked with understated humanistic tenets much similar to Rabindranath Tagore's universal humanism as portrayed in his works. We must understand that this paper aims not to assess the works of Satyajit Ray and compare that to Tagore's oeuvre. Rather it is to analyse the underlying portrayal of the socio-political reality often peeking on to a distant or not-so-distant dystopia and how Tagore has influenced and inspired this outlook of his. Ray was a product of his socio-political and cultural backgrounds, as was Tagore, set in two different eras but yet too similar conflicted times, each carving their way for Bengal Renaissance and their

understanding of resistance. In the current society where the polity is mired in parochial identity politics, political consciousness has become a precursor to a wholesome education of the society. The birth centenary of Ray has brought us with this golden opportunity to look back at his timeless art, which paved the way for the disillusionment of the masses. Politics, especially partisan politics as we understand it, is redefined by Ray, who preached and embraced that politics is the foundation of everything, from conflicted human emotions, education, social crises; his focus encircled real issues and not the ruling party.

The paper will attempt to understand the layers of development in the messaging and expressionism in Ray's art of filmmaking throughout his life. Through his interviews, criticisms, films, and their interpretations, the study is attempted to progress further into how Ray attempted to stand for what he believed in. Elements and themes of confused and invasive 'nationalist zeal,' 'the global and regional identity conflict,' the mundane struggle of ordinary people, who are real and imperfect rather than being 'larger than life' in short, the inimitable characterization further enabled the audience to resonate with Ray's vision. As Sharmila Tagore once commented while talking about 'Ghore Baire,' *'For Nikhilesh, as for Tagore and Ray, the people and their predicament came first and not love for one's country in the abstract.'*

The paper would finally attempt to address the steep binaries of bourgeois and radical artists' ideological diversion in the 1970s and '80s, chipping in to create acrimonious debates and criticisms.

“Not to have seen the Cinema of Ray means existing in the world without seeing the Sun or the Moon” --Akira Kurosawa.

Satyajit Ray has always been described as the 'quintessential Bengali with a global outlook,' much like Tagore, who has been his source of inspiration in more than one instance. Though Ray has continued to be in the cynosure of contemporary criticism of being a mere bourgeois filmmaker restricted in his socio-political expression. Ray has argued in his interview with the Cineaste Magazine, 'I have made political statements more clearly than anyone else, including Mrinal Sen... But there are definitely restrictions on what a director can say. You know certain statements and portrayals will never get past the censors. So why make them?'

Unlike Ray, Tagore was more expressive of his opinions, ideologies, and clearer expressions through his work. A universal humanist, Tagore inspired Ray to be spiritual rather than religious and helped him break free from socially enforced dogmas. In Tagore's *Gora* (1909), much like Ray's *Devi* and *Ganashatru*, the artist questions orthodoxy and blind faith; it revolves around individual conflicts zooming out to depict how society is sick of the same disease.

Ray never wore politics on his sleeves and did not limit himself to street politics, but his way of filmmaking preached the subtleties and imagery through symbolism for the intellectually stirred. Ray, one of the most prominent artists of the Bengali Renaissance, much like his grandfather Maharshi Upendrakishore and father Sukumar Ray, walked on their paths to culturally progress literature and modernist art. The latter created an oeuvre of limericks and satire, also known as 'nonsense literature' whose parallel can only be drawn with the works of Lewis Carroll, which influenced Ray's use of metaphors, hints, and irony in his art. As Ray commented, 'the lousiest of films are made on the loftiest of themes.' Satyajit Ray can be described as an artist whose subtle depiction of complex, vast human emotions are visualized with the tiniest of symbols, the minimalist drama often leaving a deep aftertaste in the minds of the audience.

Rabindranath Tagore, the poet, philosopher, and educator, wove threads of utopia and dystopia in his works that resonate even today. Tagore's political ideology is marked with a global outlook and ambivalence; he dreamt of a culturally united one-

world devoid of man-made parochialism strengthened with knowledge and tolerance. One thing central to understanding the art of both Ray and Tagore is the vastness of their thought. Ray walked on the similar path that Shakespeare and Tagore carved to create art for every age and mood. Cinemas like *Hirak Rajar Deshe*, *Gupi Gayn Bagha Bayn* are equally pleasing to a child's heart and the intellectual's mind.

Around that time, 20th Century poet Sukanta Bhattacharya who believed in hard prose, wrote about hunger and poverty. He says, 'Purnima chaand jeno jholshaano rooti,' the full moon appears to be a burnt flat bread. If romanticism of adversaries and cruel human and nature was blamed on Ray, it could most certainly be argued as a realist's imagery rather than a sugar-coated utopia. In films like *Pather Panchali* and *Ashani Shanket*, the beautiful setting is just amplifying the cruelties of how poverty affected human behaviour in an animalistic way and how the lush green rural beauty fails to soften the blow of real struggles. Ray's view on feminism was also influenced by Tagore; his depiction of women characters went against the tide of conventional 'Bollywood women.' Ray's women were emboldened with the struggle of the socio-political hierarchy in a patriarchal setting. However, these women had struggles ranging from religious to individual conflict, highlighting their grit to survive against all odds.

To name a few, the timeless dystopian novels of Orwell and Huxley are similar to the works of auteur Ray. Now more than ever, his works resonate amidst our generation. Exclusivist identities and sectarian constituencies are what polarise the country. The rhyming couplets from the movie *'Hirak Rajar Deshe*,' to name one, 'Era joto beshi pore/ toto beshi jaane/ toto kom mane,' translates to, the more they know, the less they obey. It did not just seem relevant during the tumultuous emergency under Indira Gandhi's rule but even during this pandemic with protests of 'Unlock Campus' being echoed from every corner of the country. The not-too-distant dystopian chaos in the present time was woven by Ray decades ago, when his beliefs did not eschew 'on

the face' politics but enough to call out the squalor of majoritarian bigotry.

When we look at songs and poems of Tagore set around the Swadeshi and Bengal Partition, we realize that he did not shy away from resisting the oppressive imperial forces and their advances of weakening India by creating chaotic divisions within the society. The world poet envisioned what now seems to be a utopian idealist world of rural reconstruction through education and self-reliance. His brutal critiques of imperial rule and the importance of the Swadeshi movement are clearly evident through his works. *'Byadhi O Protikar'* and *'Ghore Baire'*

'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.' - Ray in an interview.

Both Ray and Tagore were the products of their time. Ray being the amalgamation of cultural influences of his family, Tagore, and the post-independence Nehruvian thought too influenced him, as did the turmoil of the emergency under the Indira Gandhi regime and socio-economic devastation of the Bengal famine. While Tagore's works were shaped by the freedom struggle, swadeshi movement, Bengal partition, and the World Wars. Tagore and Ray, for their love and faith in humanism, were critiqued to lack a strong ideological foothold for harnessing revolutionary sentiments. As a result, Ray has been nothing short of a bete noire of the then-contemporary critics for being indifferent and even considered apolitical, blind to the tumultuous political scenario in Bengal and the country.

Ray and Tagore have been amalgamations of both east and the west for their familial backgrounds, education, and access to western thought. Unlike his contemporaries like Mrinal Sen and Ritwick Ghatak, whose overtly expressive socio-political statements echoed during that period, Ray clarified that it was not his metier to portray political messages so as to stir and transform the society. He believed, 'Films cannot change society. They never have.'

His comparison to his contemporary global directors like Bergman Kurosawa is, however,

refuted by Ray himself; in one of his interviews, he contends with the diverse situation and audiences that he makes and directs his cinema for. He regards that the slowly progressing then-contemporary Bengal had a 'dross' movie-loving audience, which ensured that he made innocuous art inflected with psychological messages that the audience would resonate with. It was not the global that Ray chose, but the national, more specifically Bengal-bound audience. In a recent interview (2009), Javed Akhtar analysed that the state of our diverse audience can be due to the fact that vernacular and English medium schools coexist in our country in an idiosyncratic manner. While one creates roots deprived of a worldview, the other churn out branches way away from their cultural and traditional roots. The western nations have historically gutted out the traditional and cultural modernity of the other civilizations to imbibe somehow a set idea of modernity and unilinear development of realism and neorealism perspectives.

In Ray's *Pather Panchali* (The Song of the Little Road) 1955, he has attempted to sculpt characters that define the miseries of his microcosmic poverty-stricken post-independent rural Bengal. The Calcutta Trilogy's strife between human psychology and his own morale is what even Ray is intrigued about. In *The Adversary* (*Pratidwandi*), human beings are depicted as vacillating psychological entities. In contrast with the younger brother, whose identity as a Naxalite fades away as soon as the Naxalite movement takes over, and he becomes insignificant and loses his individuality.

In many of his works, Ray has pulled out the flip side of development and captured the alienation

and restlessness of the youth. This was the time when Nehruvian utopia and glamour were fading away. The state of Bengal was subjected to ruthless struggles of corruption, conflict, breeding urban poverty, socio-economic inequalities, and cultural gaps.

Ray is never overtly political in most of his earlier films; his form of messaging and imagery is rather subtle and cerebral. Though the element of social criticism has always been in his works, politics does not arise from thin air but from these social criticisms and observations.

When Aristotle said, 'Man by nature is a political animal,' I believe Ray's work reinforced the meaning of this statement. Human beings living in a political society with a structure disables their privilege to remain aloof from politics of life and society; hence being 'apolitical' is a myth. So, when Ray commented, 'One of Ray's great works, *Ganashatru*, based on Henrik Ibsen's *Enemy of the People*, released in 1989, is one of his works that continues to be socio-politically relevant even in today's India.

I would like to conclude by saying that in my most futile attempt to analyse Ray's works under a socio-political light is all but a shallow gauge to highlight the enormity of Ray's layered works and his inspiration drawn from Shiwakoti Rabindranath Tagore; it is, of course only the beginning of mapping their ideologies and philosophies that resonate through generations and socio-political superstructures but surely that is not to be encompassed in a week's paper.

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