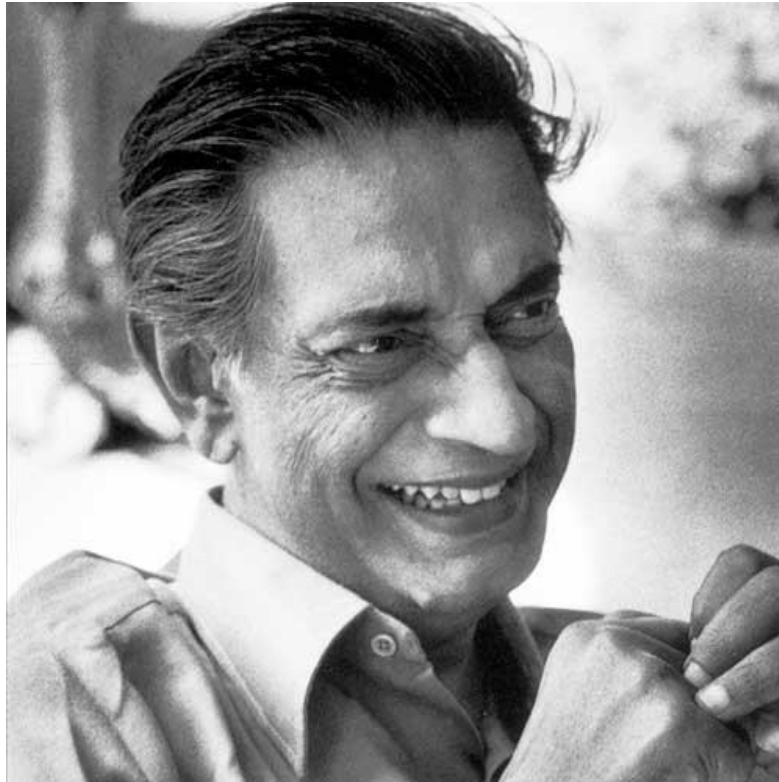


Article

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**Satyajit Ray and Tamil Cinema:
Mahendran and Balu Mahendra**



Unfortunately, Tamil cinema does not have somebody like the Kannada arthouse icon Girish Kasaravalli to argue for Ray's rich and continuing legacy. As far as Malayalam cinema is concerned, critics have sought to draw parallels between some of Ray's tendencies and the aesthetics of Adoor Gopalakrishnan. Depending on Adoor's films, one could agree or disagree. Telugu cinema, just like Tamil, cannot claim to have a visible inheritor of Ray's legacy. However, one could point to films made by outsiders like Shyam Benegal and Gautam Ghosh and, to some extent, the local filmmaker Narasinga

Rao as offering possibilities to study the influence of Ray or the art cinema movement or the New Indian Cinema of the 1970s.

Tamil cinema, however, is characterised by its lack of a distinct art cinema movement. Nonetheless, the 1970s marked a watershed period when experiments took place in Tamil cinema, wherein filmmakers pushed the limit in terms of narration and style. If we must tease out traces of Ray's influence, albeit more in terms of the love of Tamil filmmakers for one of the giants of Indian and World cinema than in terms of their films themselves, the 1970s Tamil

cinema might be helpful. I am so overwhelmed even to think of writing on *Apu Trilogy*— *Pather Panchali* (1955), *Aparajito* (1956), *Apur Sansar* (1959)—*Jalsaghar* (1958) or *Devi* (1960), *Charulatha* (1964), or *the Calcutta trilogy*—(*Pratidwandi* (1970), *Seema Baddha* (1971) and *Jana Aranya*, (1976)—*Mahanagar* (1963) or *Nayak* (1966), among others, as so much has been written on them by scholars inside and outside academia. Nevertheless, I feel the painstaking writings have not exhausted Ray's masterpieces. Maybe I can share a lot of wonderful anecdotes, particularly the responses of my filmmaker friends to these films and the way Ray's films have continued to haunt them over the last four decades. But that would not make me happy as a cinephile writing a piece on Ray's centennial, which immediately evokes many colourful memories of his films and the deep bond many significant Tamil filmmakers always felt with him. Although one cannot deny Ray's influence is conspicuous by its absence and hard to trace in Tamil cinema, I want to suggest a loose link and tie an impossible knot between Ray and Tamil cinema through the works of two renowned Tamil filmmakers who have passed away in recent years, Mahendran (2019) and Balu Mahendra (2014). However, one could argue that director-cinematographer Chezhiyan, with his realism-driven and critically acclaimed film, *To Let* (2018), is the true inheritor of Ray's legacy in Tamil. However, my endeavour here is to foreground two iconic Tamil filmmakers of the last century who are no more and who were eloquent in their extolling of Ray.

Ray was overwhelmed when he could watch Vittorio De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves*

(1948) in London. He watched the film repeatedly, among many other classics. *Bicycle Thieves* and neo-realism inspired him and his aesthetics in *Pather Panchali*. It shaped his ideas regarding cinema to a large extent and helped him forge a style specific to the kind of narratives he was invested in. But it is crucial that we also know his divergences from the Italian screenwriter Cesare Zavattini's ideas and formulations regarding neorealism as an aesthetic movement in cinema. While Zavattini advocated for drawing inspiration from life and actual events for the narrative, Ray relied on adaptation (of classics) throughout his career, including for his debut film *Pather Panchali*, based on Bibhutibhusan Bandhyopadhyay's famous novel. Ray has worked with iconic writers like Sunil Gangopadhyay, drawing from the legendary Premchand's works for his Hindi films.

Similarly, Zavattini's manifesto precludes working with established actors and advocates for non (professional) actors. Ray had the predilection of working with veterans from the stage like Chhabi Biswas and famous actresses from the past like Chunibala Devi. One could argue Ray, though inspired by neorealism, retooled its aesthetics for the specificity of what he believed is good cinema in the Indian context. Similarly, Mahendran and Balu Mahendra were invested in reimagining the narrative in a realistic mode in the context of mainstream-driven Tamil cinema. Of course, one of the significant and visible influences of Ray and their intervention is through the relaxed pacing and the cinematography inspired by the style of Subrata Mitra's bounce lighting, where the contrast of harsh key lights was replaced by

bouncing lights through available material with white surfaces like the soft *dhotis/veshtis* framed with huge boards. Mitra's penchant for backlighting inspired and marked Balu Mahendra's uniqueness as a cinematographer/director. Therefore, Mahendran and Balu Mahendra offer a space to engage with Ray regarding Tamil cinema.

Towards this end, therefore, I would focus on some of the significant films of Mahendran and his collaboration with Balu Mahendra, as they have been vocal in singing the praises of the master and have expressed their investment in his aesthetics in many of their interviews, and detail why their films differed even if they were invested in realism after being inspired by Ray. The differing cultural backgrounds of Ray and Mahendran and Balu Mahendra and their dissimilar preoccupations are essential factors for us to appreciate the subtle presence of Ray in Tamil cinema. I am focusing on Mahendran and Balu Mahendra as they have repeatedly acknowledged Ray's films, particularly *Pather Panchali*, as the singular influence that changed their views about cinema in their significant interviews for popular magazines like *Ananda Vikatan* and serious Tamil cinema journals like *Nizhal* and *Padachurul*. While Mahendran acknowledged his indebtedness to Ray by painting a portrait of the master on a ten feet wall at his home, Balu Mahendra has referred to Ray's films as unparalleled inspirations while discussing the way they impacted his award-winning and critically acclaimed films like *Veedu* (1988) and *Sandhya Ragam* (1989). Therefore, it is in order here to briefly discuss some of the landmark films of Mahendran and his collaboration with Balu Mahendra, mainly in

the context of Ray's lesser written/discussed influence on Tamil cinema.

Mahendran's Intervention in the 1970s and 1980s Tamil Cinema:

Mahendran's film *Mullum Malarum* (1978), where he made his debut as a director after having worked in the industry as a writer for more than a decade, was based on Uma Chandran's novel serialised in the Tamil popular magazine *Kalki*. *Mullum Malarum's* narrative revolves around the lives and times of Kaali and Valli, the orphan children who survive through their acrobatic street performances. The affectionate Kaali, who deeply cares for his sister Valli is emotional and fiery. When they grow up, Kaali (Rajnikanth) works for a power station as the winch operator for their cable trolley, which mainly transports the employees from their residences in the villages on the hill to the plant in the valley. Kaali's habit of giving free rides to his friends and acquaintances is questioned by the new divisional engineer, the conscientious and honest Kumaran (Sarath Babu), who falls in love with Valli (Shobha) at first sight. Manga (Jayalakshmi), the other central woman character who comes in search of livelihood with her mother from the nearby drought-prone town, becomes a friend of Valli. Manga gets to know and ultimately marries Kaali. Still, only after he had been thrown out of his job because he lost his (winch-operating) hand - a truck had run over it when he was imprudently lying on the road, heavily drunk and passed out. When Kumaran, the officer responsible for the dismissal from the job, attends Kaali's marriage, he is insulted by Kaali, who

disregards the gift of cash he offers. However, Manga accepts the present, as she understands the levelheaded Kumaran's empathetic and humane gesture. After that, when Kumaran expresses his interest in marrying Valli, Kaali hastily tries to arrange for Valli's marriage to the local grocer, who is notorious for his flirtatious nature and womanising ways. Despite being deeply in love with Kumaran, Valli abides by the wishes of her possessive brother, who relents seeing how much she will go to make him happy. Kaali, thus, feels his ego is assuaged and respect redeemed by his sister's act of obedience, as he finally agrees to his sister's marriage with Kumaran, his arch-enemy.

At the outset, the above synopsis recalls the mainstream films in Tamil rather than an arthouse film or Satyajit Ray's aesthetics. Nonetheless, the treatment was different, particularly regarding the pacing and the scenes staged outdoor, from much Tamil cinema of the last century. One could explain the difference in the visuals at first glance and argue that *Mullum Malarum* is, therefore, as much Mahendran's film as its cinematographer Balu Mahendra's, who had his training at the Pune film school. His backlit shots, including those during the songs, consider, for instance, the song *Senthazham Poovil* (Music. Ilayaraja, Lyrics. Kannadasan, Singer. Yesudas), and the use of available light, and focus on retaining the dark-brownness of the skin of its leading characters, Kaali and Valli, without artificially whitening them with an overt makeup, as in much Tamil cinema, were strikingly different for the Tamil audience. In Mahendran's *Intervention*, one could argue that even if *Mullum Malarum* openly

acknowledged its inheritance of the legacy of iconic Tamil films like *Pasamalar* (1961), wherein the narrative revolves around the profound affection between a brother and sister right from their childhood onwards, his style of the narration had privileged a relative sense of realism in the fictive universe he created around the brother and sister through his leisurely pacing and the way he offered the space for characters to develop not only through dialogues but also visually by punctuating their environment through the detailing of the quotidian reality of their lives. It underscored Kaali and Valli's socioeconomic struggle as orphans and later as people on the fringes without a steady income, particularly when Kaali loses his hand because of his indiscretion and, consequently, his job through its focus on everyday objects. Most important, Mahendran and Balu Mahendra prioritised nature in terms of the surrounding flora and fauna that engulfed the fictive universe of their characters, thereby adding a layer of realism to the narrative posited in an uneven, hilly terrain where the protagonist was a winch operator of a cable trolley.

Nevertheless, *Mullum Malarum* cannot be read as a film directly influenced by Ray. We can only allude to thin traces as a loose connection predicated on the open acknowledgement of its director and cinematographer. Besides, Balu Mahendra has often invoked the way Subrato Mitra's seminal style of "bounce lighting" has influenced him while talking about his cinematography, particularly in films like *Mullum Malarum*, *Veedu*, and *Sandhya Ragam*.

Mahendran's Iconic *Uthirippookkal* (Strewn Flowers, 1979)

I have earlier categorised *Uthirippookkal* as emblematising post-classical Tamil cinema, which was “marked by weak and ambiguous protagonists, the ambivalence of traditions, realism in dialogues, new subjectivity, avoidance of clichéd and cathartic closures, shooting on locations and subtler melodramas.”

Mahendran “adapted Tamil’s seminal writer Pudhumaipittan’s short story ‘Citrannai.’ (‘Stepmother’) for his second film as a director. The film revolves around the family of the administrator of a local school, Sundaravadivelu (Vijayan), his wife, Lakshmi (Ashvini), and their two kids, his sister-in-law Senbagam (Madhu Malini) and father-in-law (Charuhasan). Sundaravadivelu’s character is complex and dark: he is a caring father but a misogynist who lusts after his sister-in-law. His patient wife and her helpless father put up with his schizophrenic persona of dignified calm and threatening turbulence. A new teacher (Sunder) and a health officer (Sarathbabu) arrive at the village, and Sundaravadivelu, growing suspicious about his wife’s friendship with the health officer tortures her. He decides to divorce her and marry his sister-in-law, who has already fallen in love with the new teacher. When Sundaravadivelu’s sick wife dies, he remarries another woman. Later, when his sister-in-law goes to invite him for her marriage with

the teacher, he disrobes and molests her. When the village comes to know about this, he is forced to walk – followed by the entire village – to the pond and commit suicide by entering it. His children wait for him, hoping he would swim back.”

Uthirippookkal entrenched Mahendran’s status in Tamil cinema as a unique director who can visually tell a story. The protagonist Sundaravadivalu was portrayed as an affectionate father while simultaneously a misogynist and a sadist regarding his inhumane treatment of his wife and her family. The climax was also new to Tamil cinema due to its silent long shots, wherein Mahendran, with the help of his cinematographer Ashok Kumar, framed the protagonist as his village community forcibly led him to enter the flowing river and end his life. Unlike the usually verbose Tamil cinema, *Uthirippookkal*’s ending, through its contemplative longer shots, provided the space for the audience to reflect on the conscience-less protagonist and the villagers around him. They had taken the law into their hands in giving him an unusual but inhumane capital punishment. It echoes the protagonist Sundaravadivelu’s final words that he is sorry for having turned the entire village not only against but (evil) like him. As Sundar Kaali astutely observes, the protagonist of *Uthirippookkal*, Sundaravadivelu, is not the self-sacrificing hero of an earlier period, particularly of the studio era in Tamil cinema, when the native hero in a village milieu, who fought for justice, was emblematic of sacrifice.

In contrast, the hero of the “neo-nativity” film, as convincingly labelled by Kaali, is darker. The verisimilitude of the village milieu, as privileged by Mahendran’s narration and Balu Mahendra’s cinematography, also marks *Uthirippookkal* as having some of the significant features of a neo-nativity film. Mahendran’s next film *Poottadha Poottukkal* (1980), could be read as an exemplification of the neo-nativity film, as detailed by Kaali, wherein the protagonist is rendered weak and impotent and, therefore, has to rely on the woman by his side, in a reversal of the trope in earlier nativity films, where the hero often tamed the spirit of the independent, educated, modern, or affluent heroine.

In the special issue on Mahendran in the Tamil cinema journal *Padachurul*, Tamil cinema scholar Yamuna Rajendran argues that *Uthirippookkal* is predominantly inspired by Shyam Bengal’s *Nishant* (*Night’s End*, 1976), which was released two years earlier. Rajendran’s detailed critique of Mahendran’s oeuvre foregrounds how the spectre of a dark male character, as an extension of *Mullum Malarum*’s Kaali and *Uthirippookkal*’s Sundaravadivelu, either in the form of a cruel or drunkard father (*Nandu* [1981] and *Metti* [1983]) haunts Mahendran’s films. Generally, the women characters in Mahendran’s films are left helpless and dependent on men or forced to submit to the patriarchal society. Rajendran, thus, justifiably questions reading Mahendran’s films, even those like *Mullum Malarum* or *Uthirippookkal*, which are markedly different from many of his mainstream films, as progressive. While such criticisms are valid and convincing, my interest in engaging with Mahendran’s films

here is due to the absence of any significant effort to challenge the form and content of mainstream films. Such a trend has resulted in *Uthirippookkal* being considered a watershed film in the history of Tamil cinema by most critics and fans. For instance, look at the obituaries on Mahendran on the web. Many directors of repute in Tamil cinema, including the iconic Mani Ratnam, consider *Uthirippookkal* and Mahendran’s intervention as unparalleled in the historical context of mainstream-driven Tamil cinema.

However, Sandipan Deb, in his poignant essay, points to Ray’s aversion for villains or characters like Kaali or Sundaravadivelu: “In his book, *Our Films, Their Films*, Ray said famously: ‘Villains bore me.’ All the characters in almost all of Ray’s films are real human beings, with their natural flaws and proclivity to sin. From Narsingh, the cuckolded alcoholic taxi driver in *Abhijan* (*The Expedition*, 1962) to the enraged but impotent Siddhartha in *Pratidwandi* (*The Adversary*, 1970) to the weak-hearted lover in *Kapurush* (*The Coward*, 1965), you can disapprove, but can’t dislike any of them. Because Ray invariably explains (or hints at) their weaknesses or circumstances.” Unlike Ray, Mahendran does not give us an insight into the provenance of Sundaravadiveu’s darkness and cruelty. Though the trope of the benevolent hero of Tamil cinema is subverted by Mahendran’s darkening of his protagonists in *Mullum Malarum* and *Uthirippookkal*, he still relies on the binary of good and evil for structuring his narratives, unlike Ray. Except for the last phase of his career, the latter remained true to his strong aversion to evil or villains.

The impact of Ray's work on Mahendran is, thus, indirect and inconspicuous. It is easier to infer some parallels in the shots of the flowing river and the hilly terrains and Mahendran and Balu Mahendra's investment in the darker-skinned people for their primary and secondary characters. In one of his last interviews (on video) with my late friend and filmmaker S. Arunmozhi, Mahendran talks about how Ray affected him as a filmmaker and how seeing *Pather Panchali* made him happy regarding the possibilities of cinema as an art form and simultaneously sad and lost his sleep, pondering at the predicament of Tamil cinema. He details how his deep introspection enabled him to change his earlier melodramatic and sentimental style as a writer, as exemplified by Tamil cinema milestones like *Thanga Pathakkam* (Gold Medal, dir. P. Madhavan, 1974) when he ventured into film direction with *Mullum Malarum*. Even if Mahendran's output as a director of off-mainstream films was scarce or sporadic, the five years of his career from 1978 to 1983 still propels animated discussions about the remarkable attempts at pushing the limits of Tamil cinema in the past. In the video interview, Mahendran and Arunmozhi discuss the then-recent article by Sandipan Deb, "Remembering Satyajit Ray, India's most renowned filmmaker" (Sandipan Deb, "Remembering Satyajit Ray, India's most renowned filmmaker," Livemint.com, 27 Sept. 2015). Mahendran is moved by the "poetic homage." His eyes become moist as he reads Deb's reminiscences of his father's experience of having watched *Pather Panchali* as one among the privileged hundred viewers during its inaugural

screening: "My father would never forget the experience of that evening spent in the half-empty Basusree cinema hall in Bhowanipur in Calcutta. He often recalled the sheer amazement as he saw the black and white images flicker on the screen. He had never seen an Indian film like this before. Needless to say, my father was not alone. The late Sham Lal, the legendary editor of The Times of India and one of the most erudite and cultured men I have ever met, watched the film in February 1956 and was moved enough to devote almost the entire edit page of his paper to his essay on the film, perhaps the only time The Times of India has done so in its 177 years of existence. *Pather Panchali*, he wrote, would 'rewrite the history of Indian cinema'." Yes. It did in many different ways.

Deb also gives us insight into why Ray's films differed from those of Mahendran, who toiled hard as a writer in the Tamil film industry before wielding the megaphone: "Satyajit Ray was born in 1921 in a Bengali Brahmo family that boasted almost incredible amounts of talent. His grandfather, Upendra Kishore Ray Chaudhuri, was as much a Renaissance man as his close friend Rabindranath Tagore. Straddling the worlds of science and arts, he was a printing technologist and inventor, an extremely gifted painter and violinist, and possibly the greatest children's writer Bengal has ever produced (the only competition comes from his son Sukumar, Satyajit's father)." Ray's background, thus, provided the space for him, despite the tragedy of his father's early demise, to spend a few years at Shantiniketan and learn Western classical music, and hone the skills he had inherited as a writer/illustrator. Rest is history, as we

know of Ray's illustrious career, wherein he could write, illustrate, and compose for his films, that began from his working for an ad agency, his visit to the UK, and the way *The Bicycle Thief* overwhelmed him, just as *Pather Panchali* overwhelmed Mahendran and led to films like *Uthirippookkal* that has a special place in the heart of Tamil cinephiles

and which in turn inspired a filmmaker like Mani Ratnam and his initial hit, the critically acclaimed *Mouna Ragam* (1986), by imbuing him with confidence regarding leisurely pacing and narration and inspiring him to provide the space for his characters to breathe by not drowning them in dialogues, as was the norm in Tamil cinema.

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