

Article

Darya Elena Dashunina

Three Encounters with Satyajit Ray*



Satyajit Ray and Ali Khamraev in Calcutta (Kolkata) in 1975

**Written by Darya Elena Dashunina On the basis of an interview with Ali Khamraev*

Ali Khamraev (born May 19, 1937) is an Uzbek and Soviet actor, film director, screenwriter, and film producer. Since 1988 he has been living in Italy. He has made over 30 documentary and over 20 feature films, received many honorary titles and awards. Recently his last film *Parazhdanov's Lilac Wind* premiered at the Rotterdam Festival 2025.

THE FIRST ENCOUNTER

In 1974, Tashkent hosted the International Film Festival of Asian and African Countries under the banner “For Peace, Social Progress, and the Freedom of Peoples.” Forty-six countries from Asia and Africa took part, along with eight from Latin America, several European socialist nations, representation

from the UN and UNESCO, and even the United States, the United Kingdom, Italy, and France. Nine Soviet socialist republics also participated. Around seventy foreign correspondents from thirty-three countries covered the event.

From India, Satyajit Ray’s film *Distant Thunder* was submitted. The delegation included a young Bangladeshi actress Farida

Akhtar Babita, who played the main female character Anagi, the wife of Brahmin Gangacharan—who serves as a teacher, doctor, and priest. This talented and charismatic young woman quickly attracted attention and soon became a festival darling. I had the pleasure of meeting her. We crossed paths at events and traveled with other participants to Samarkand. Farida was always warm and engaging, genuinely curious, and I enjoyed her company immensely.

We already knew that *Distant Thunder* had won the Golden Bear in Berlin. We knew Satyajit Ray was a titan of world cinema, and we deeply regretted that he couldn't attend the festival in person. But I must admit: before the festival, I had never seen any of his films. I expected a good film—but one in line with what we then understood as typical Indian cinema—the kind of cinema Ray himself once described as: “Often by queer process of reasoning, movement was equated with action and action with melodrama.” (What's Wrong with Indian Films? — Satyajit Ray, 1948)

I should say that for Uzbek audiences, this kind of cinema felt very familiar. Uzbek viewers adored Indian films. The theaters were always packed during screenings.

At the Tashkent premiere of *Distant Thunder*, the hall was full, more than two thousand eager viewers—many expecting music, comedy, vibrant costumes, lively dances: everything that fit the stereotype. Instead, they saw a serious, deeply dramatic film. It was not what we considered “Indian cinema.” Though made by an Indian director, using Indian themes, it transcended all national boundaries, universal in scope and executed at the highest cinematic level—even on a limited budget.

Suddenly, to viewers in Tashkent, a distant land with its own traditions and challenges came alive on screen. Even if the lives of Ray's characters were unique and far removed from Soviet Uzbekistan reality, from the very first minutes of the film they became close and understandable to us. Thanks to the craftsmanship in depicting daily life, the precision of observation, the truthful character portrayal, and the filmmaker's sincere love for people, a kind of miracle occurred: the film's simple, universal, and deeply human essence drew us in, made us believe, and kept us intently focused on everything unfolding on screen. It felt like an encounter with real life. We empathized. And at the same time, we were struck by the grace and harmony of Ray's cinematic world, despite its deeply dramatic events.

As a VGIK (Russian State University of Cinematography)-trained director myself, many of Satyajit Ray's formal decisions resonated instantly with me, creating a bond. For example, certain editing choices, or what one might call “a compassionate nature”—a technique embodied by the great Sergei Eisenstein in *Battleship Potemkin* and widely adopted afterward. I truly admired the subtlety and mastery with which Ray, as a true artist, employed these devices. Because in this film, nature is an important part of the dramaturgy and, one could say, works alongside the main characters.

The film made a strong impression on me with the richness of its symbolism. These symbols, I believe, are close and comprehensible to the people of India because they are rooted in the culture—but at the same time, Ray selected and used them in such a way that they became universal, understood

not only by me as a filmmaker, but also by the least prepared viewers.

The film tells the story of a married couple living through one of the darkest periods in India's history—a time of devastating famine brought on by war, a famine that claimed five million lives. Gangacharan, a Brahmin, and his wife Ananga hold a special status by birth and education, respected by those around them. But how does one live through a time when survival depends on a handful of rice—and in the fight for that handful, traditions collapse, the foundations of society are shaken, and every moral boundary is crossed? How can one preserve dignity, uphold the codes prescribed to Brahmins, and still act with compassion? Should one help others—or let everyone fend for themselves? Do you turn away the hungry arriving from other villages, or do you share your food with them, even if it puts your own survival at risk? This story moved us—Soviet viewers—deeply. Why? Because we had not long ago lived through a war ourselves. We knew what hunger and deprivation felt like. In the USSR, it was natural to feel sympathy for the poor and the starving—those whose lives depended on a piece of bread, a handful of rice. And it was just as natural to support nations that were suffering under colonialism or fighting for their freedom and independence, especially across Asia and Africa. This wasn't just propaganda—we genuinely lived by these values and feelings.

Babita's performance was astonishing: suddenly a young, charming girl revealed herself as a serious actress capable of great depth. Indian cinema had opened to us a new horizon. From that moment, I longed to meet

Ray in person, to express my admiration and reverence for his artistry. Recently, I revisited *The Distant Thunder*, and even fifty years later it feels entirely fresh. Ray's cinematic language remains modern yet universally accessible. There was the charming Indian landscape, the people, their kindness and hospitality—and those women in traditional dress, each more beautiful than the last...

Once again, I found myself immersed in the artistry of his actors, director, cinematographer, and composer—Ray composed the film's music himself.

That was how my first encounter with Satyajit Ray—as both director and author—took place.

THE SECOND ENCOUNTER

It was deep into the autumn of 1975. Snow had already fallen in Moscow. I was urgently summoned by Filip Ermash, the USSR's Minister of Cinema. A plane, then a car, was ready at the aircraft steps to take me straight to Goskino. The Minister got straight to the point: things weren't going well with film distribution. The revenue was underwhelming. Our budget always had three reliable sources of income: wheat exports, alcohol sales, and movie ticket sales... The task had been set — to increase state revenue through cinema. "We're sending you to India," the Minister told me. "You need to select at least ten strong, popular films that would draw large audiences. You know how much the whole country loves Indian cinema. Sovexportfilm will start the negotiations and purchase them quickly." And so, there I was — already on a plane. Flying through Delhi, then Madras, Bombay, and finally Calcutta.

Watching films in every city. Both my ears were stuffed with cotton — the studio sound levels were unbearable. I was watching two-part features, several films a day, fighting off sleep. Producers and directors kept glancing into my eyes — checking if I was still awake. At every studio, they tried to keep me going with fruit, food, and whisky. Somehow, word had already spread that a major film purchase was underway. The stop in Calcutta was brief, but I had insisted on it. After seeing *The Distant Thunder*, I dreamed of meeting Satyajit Ray in person.

I was staying in the apartment of Sergei Kuzmenko, Sovexportfilm's local representative — sleeping on a couch, eating homemade borscht his wife prepared. But time passed, and Ray still wouldn't see me. He was either busy, unwell, or otherwise unavailable. Eventually, Kuzmenko said to me: "He just doesn't want to meet with anyone from the Soviet side. I've noticed it before." I replied, "Sergei, call his assistant and tell him this: I'm not a diplomat, not a spy, not a bureaucrat. I'm a film director — his colleague — and I admire his films, his work." That message was passed on to Ray. And he agreed to meet. I arrived at the studio — he was in the middle of a shoot. We went into a soundstage and greeted each other. He saw me and smiled warmly. I told him I had been sent to officially invite him to the Moscow International Film Festival as an honored guest. He smiled again, though less warmly this time. He said, "The Moscow festival brings back an unpleasant memory." And then he told the story.

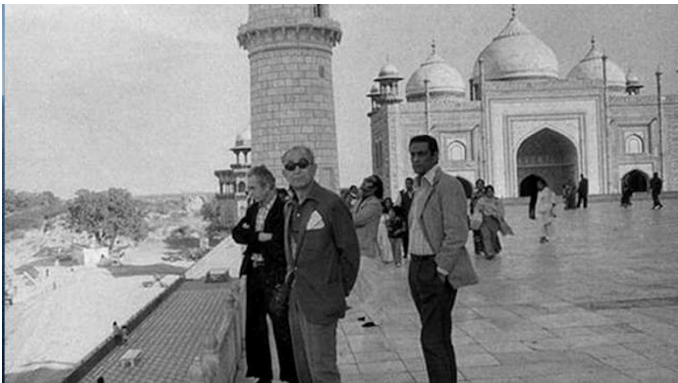
In 1963, Ray was a member of the jury of the Moscow International Film Festival, chaired by Grigori Chukhrai. At that time, the

jury was ready to award the Grand Prix to Federico Fellini's *8½*. "During deliberations," Ray said, "Chukhrai kept getting nervous, stepping out, making phone calls, and returning with vague talk of 'another opinion' regarding the top prize — even though he liked *8½*. "We kept trying to convince him. But again, he'd leave and make a call. Probably to the Kremlin," Ray recalled. "We had breaks, and I stepped out to smoke. During one of those breaks, a man came up to me. I remember him vividly. He reeked of alcohol and had one eye covered with a black patch. He stepped very close, grabbed me by the lapels, breathing heavily, and raised his index finger to my face. This turned out to be a very senior official. And he said: 'Fellini — NO!' — and made the 'no' gesture with his finger. "I pushed him away, went back to the jury room, filed a protest, and announced: 'If *8½* doesn't win the Grand Prix, I will resign from the jury!' And I described the disgraceful conduct of that man. Later, I found out he was Vasily Mikhailovich Mak-Maevsky — head of Soviet film distribution. He ran the system that brought in huge state revenue, because Soviet audiences loved going to the movies." Let me remind you that Fellini's film did receive the Grand Prix at the Moscow Film Festival.

I tried to convince Satyajit Ray that things had changed, that he would be treated with great respect. I urged him to come, speaking not as an official, but as a fellow filmmaker — and assuring him how deeply he was loved in our country. Ray replied: "All right, but I have one condition. I will travel with my wife, my cinematographer, the lead actor, and a few others..." I'll say it straight — the trip never happened. The list he sent

included around ten people, and Moscow decided not to invite him after all. I believe this was a political mistake on the part of the festival organizers. A director of his caliber would have greatly enhanced the festival's significance.

After that, we had lunch together and talked about cinema, the profession, and the fate of the filmmaker. I remember very clearly, and I'm grateful to Ray for the feeling that emerged during that conversation — that all of us, regardless of country, nationality, beliefs, or personal artistic style, are members of one brotherhood: servants of Cinema. That sense of unity supports us in difficult moments (and there are many — filmmaking is no easy profession), and helps us find the strength to take the next step.



Antonioni, Kurosawa, Satyajit Ray at Taj Mahal India, 1976

We spoke a great deal about Sergei Eisenstein — Satyajit Ray's favorite director, as it turned out. He was genuinely interested in every detail of Eisenstein's life and work. That curiosity and deep respect stayed with me.

My film selection mission was coming to an end. I nearly lost my hearing and was completely exhausted, but I chose ten films. Among them was *Seeta Aur Geeta*, which went on to become a legend in Soviet

distribution — more than 56 million viewers in a single year. Other titles included *Impostor*, *Young Wife/Balika Badhu*, *Fakira*, and some others I no longer remember... All the films performed well in release. The trip turned out to be a real financial success.

But for me, personally, the greatest success was meeting the great director I had dreamed of ever since seeing *The Distant Thunder* at the Tashkent festival.

THE THIRD ENCOUNTER

Just two weeks after my return from India, in late December 1975, I learned that I would be going back. From December 30 to January 12, the 5th International Film Festival of India was to be held in New Delhi. That year, the festival officially adopted its emblem for the first time—a peacock, the national bird of India—and the motto: “The whole world is one family.” Satyajit Ray was appointed chairman of the jury.

The Minister told me: “The USSR supports the film festival in India and participates actively in it. A delegation of filmmakers will be going—you're included.”

Later, I learned that our famous actor Oleg Tabakov would serve on the jury, and the Soviet Union's official entry was the debut film by a young director, Nikita Mikhalkov: *At Home Among Strangers*, a *Stranger Among His Own*.

“By the way, you know Satyajit Ray,” the minister added. I was excited and moved—fate was giving me another chance to meet the great director, the recognized master of world cinema, and to continue our conversation. I began thinking about a gift for Ray.

I managed to get two newly published, large-format albums of drawings by Sergei Eisenstein, straight from Grigory Maryamov, the secretary of the Filmmakers' Union. They have just been published.



Ali Khamraev

We arrived, and the festival whirlwind began. I spotted Ray in the hotel bar—he saw me from afar, smiled warmly, and we embraced. But there was no time to talk. The festival swept us along like a mountain river—meetings, screenings, negotiations. We were staying in the same hotel, and one evening, quite late after the program, I knocked on his door. He came to the door and asked, “Who is it?” I said my name. The door opened, and there stood Ray, finger to his lips: “Shh, my wife is sleeping...”

We tiptoed through the hallway, and sat at a small table in the corner.

“How are you? How have you been?” he asked. “All is well, thank you. I have something for you...” I replied, placing the two heavy albums on the table.

“Oh! Eisenstein!” Ray exclaimed. His sleepiness vanished; his eyes lit up. Right there, in the hotel hallway at night, he began flipping through the albums. Once again, we talked about Eisenstein. You had to see how delighted he was.

The next day in the bar, I saw Ray again. He was in the middle of a conversation with someone. I raised my glass of wine in his direction—he raised his glass in return and gave me a wink and a smile.

In 1977, I was supposed to return to Delhi. My film *The Man Follows the Birds* had been selected for the competition at the 6th International Film Festival of India. I was already looking forward to seeing Ray again.

But at that time, all decisions about international travel—including to film festivals—were made by bureaucrats and government administrators. Boris Pavlyonok, Deputy Chairman of Goskino USSR, yelled at me during the film's review: “This is all Paradzhanov nonsense! I won't allow it!”

(At the time, Sergei Paradzhanov was serving a prison sentence on false, politically motivated charges. To say that a film showed signs of “Paradzhanovism” was extremely damaging to its fate. Pavlyonok opposed the film's approval by the review commission, a mandatory step for all films produced in the USSR.)

Nevertheless, *The Man Follows the Birds* was sent to several international festivals. When an official invitation and

letter of congratulations arrived from Delhi, the decision was made that the director should stay home—and that Pavlyonok himself would take the film to the festival. I was not included in the delegation.

The film received the Silver Peacock award for directing. Actress Anastasiya Vertinskaya, beloved by audiences across the Soviet Union, was part of the delegation. After the ceremony, she joked: “We received the Silver Pavlyonok!”

(A play on words: peacock in Russian is pavlin, while Pavlyonok—the name of the Deputy Chairman—sounds like baby peacock.)

And so, for reasons far removed from the art of cinema, one more meeting with Satyajit Ray never happened.

Translated from Russian to English by Rimma Pivtorypavlo



Tashkent Film Festival 1974: Samarkand railway station. Farida Akhtar Babita and Ali Khamraev.

Reference material and pictures: from the personal archive of Ali Khamraev.

Darya Elena Dashunina is a filmmaker and film educator based in Moscow.