

6th Chidananda Dasgupta Memorial Competition 2025: Certificate of Merit

B. Geetha

Ray Dasan in Tamil Cinema: Camera, Humanism, and the Counter-Archive in *Jigarthanda: DoubleX* (2023)



Fig 1. The Archiving Machine

“Because the camera is literally an archiving machine, every photograph, every film is a priori an archival object.” - Okwui Enwezor, 2008, p. 12

“In cinema, we must select everything for the camera according to the richness of its power to reveal.” - Satyajit Ray, 1981, p. 15

In *Jigarthanda: DoubleX* (2023, dir. Kartik Subbaraj), Kirubakaran Arokiaraj, a wrongfully imprisoned police officer, is drawn into a covert state operation to assassinate a gangster, Allius Caesar, in Madurai in the 1970s. His chosen alias, “Ray Dasan” (literally translated as “Ray Devotee”) is not incidental. By naming himself after Satyajit Ray, he places himself,

however fraudulently, within a cinematic genealogy associated with humanism and the New Indian Cinema Movement.¹ This act of naming inaugurates a layered meta-cinema filled with cinephiliac citations and cross-regional intimacies that fold Ray’s humanist ethics into the political grammar of Tamil cinema. *DoubleX* resonates with the Tamil gangster film lineage, where moral

¹ For the aesthetic and political experiments of New Indian Cinema in the 1960s and 1970s, see Bhaskar 2013.

ambiguity, local power structures, performance of masculinity, and negotiations with the nation-state are central to the film genre (Gopalan 2002; Kailasam 2017). As I show, it also makes visible the ways in which the camera becomes a contested object: a weapon of the state, a tool of myth-making, and finally, an instrument of insurgent practice. Developed in 1964, the Canon Super 8mm camera, with its compact body, pistol-grip handle, and trigger, carries the tactile experience of image-making that transforms filming into a mobile, embodied act (Fig 1).

Ray's writings repeatedly return to the *materiality* of the camera, its capacity to see beyond the human eye, and its political potential. In "Aspects of Art in Bengali Cinema," Ray writes, "A camera can certainly see as much as the human eye, sometimes a bit more. It has the ability and power to enlarge what is small, bring closer what is far, make an unattractive object look beautiful, and even turn day into night. That is why the camera is a director's biggest weapon" (2023, pp. 500–501). This understanding of the camera as a prosthetic extension of the body and as an aesthetic weapon creates a critical lens through which the figure of Ray Dasan can be read.

Ray Dasan is a cinematic impostor. Unlike Satyajit Ray, he is not an auteur with a commitment to humanist storytelling. His invocation of Ray is purely instrumental, constructed as a fabricated persona to gain Caesar's trust. By presenting himself as a student of Ray and his assistant director in the film *Pather Panchali* (1955), Kiruban embeds himself into a transregional cinematic circuit associated with visual sophistication, verisimilitude, and authorial gravity (Fig 2).



Fig 2. Ray Dasan

This fabrication creates an alibi by displacing attention from his actual role as a state agent. It also produces a parallel cinematic fiction inside the film: the gangster Caesar's biopic, as a "pan-India" film, in which a dark-complexioned man becomes the central heroic figure in Tamil cinema's history, shot in real time as Caesar lives his own life. Kiruban appropriates this very authorial grammar not to produce a "good" film, but to *perform* legitimacy. It is a cynical appropriation of cinematic humanism in the service of covert state power. However, this cynicism begins to collapse once the camera is switched on, because the apparatus develops its own ethical gravity.

Ray writes, "The art of telling a story lies in the style that is adopted [...] the language used in cinema is a language of images." (2023, p. 500) For Ray Dasan, this language of images is first a camouflage. Deployed to enter Caesar's world under the cover of filmmaking, the camera eventually turns witness to a state-sanctioned massacre against the tribals of the Kanakal village. It exposes more than Kiruban intends, echoing Ray's observation that "a camera can certainly see as much as the human eye, sometimes a bit more" (2023, p. 501). If for Ray, the camera is the director's "biggest weapon" (2023, p. 501) in bringing human lives closer towards an ethical project of

seeing the invisible, then for Ray Dasan, this weapon oscillates between serving state power and subverting it.

Ray's cinema is often read through the lens of postcolonial humanism, an aesthetic and ideological stance that privileges ordinary life, the everyday, and the ethical encounter between camera and subject. His *Pather Panchali* is described as “an encyclopedia of rural life” (2022, p. 46), its lyrical realism emerging from outdoor shooting, minimal rehearsals, and the ambient engagement with natural light and sound. In the self-portrait sourced from his notebooks, Ray insisted that he felt “no desire to make esoteric or avant-garde films [...] but strongly believe films should be healthy, humanist” (2022, p. 17). The Tamil gangster Caesar, who styles himself as the “Karuppu Clint Eastwood” (Dark Clint Eastwood), and the tribal villagers of Kombai Kaanai are precisely the kind of subjects Ray would have framed with dignity – the marginalised, the outsiders, and the rural poor.

The Tamil cinematic landscape into which Ray Dasan steps is geographically marred with political conspiracy, gang power, and state violence.² If Ray's rural Bengal was framed through the changing light of the seasons and its lyrical poetry, Kanakal forests in Tamil Nadu are framed through the spatial logic of poaching and extraction. However, the dynamic camera still moves through veiled forests, rural communities, and arboreal aesthetics, thus echoing the material conditions of Ray's filmmaking while operating in a far more dangerous political

terrain (Fig 3). As he films, Ray Dasan begins to feel the thrill of the craft in the vocabulary of “roll, camera, action.” The fake auteur gradually begins to transform into a chronicler of truth as he discovers the aesthetic justification of his film being tied to a larger actionable purpose.



Fig 3. *Insurgent Practice*

The tribal community in *Jigarthanda: DoubleX* functions as both a narrative catalyst and a site of erasure. Historically marginalised, the Kanakal locals are tortured by the state when they resist the ivory smuggling networks linked to the Chief Minister. Their visual presence on film, captured by Ray Dasan's camera, becomes the only surviving record of their existence. In this sense, Ray Dasan inadvertently replicates, under radically altered conditions, Ray's political commitment to filming the marginalised subjects. The Ray persona that begins as a mask starts to possess him as a spirit from the historical vaults of cinema. His sensory charge in recording Caesar's world, the tribal forests, and the elephant raids signals a shift from instrumental use of the camera to affective investment in cinematic world-building.

The film visualises the sacrality of the camera through three key instances. The

² Eswaran analyses the deployment of drone cinematography in Vetrimaaran's Tamil films as a manifestation of the omniscient gaze to link

historical acts of state violence with visual regimes of surveillance. See Eswaran 2025.

symbolic prehistory of the camera enters through the Hollywood star Clint Eastwood anecdote. As a child, Caesar saves Eastwood's life when the latter is shooting in his village, and Eastwood rewards him with a hat. When Caesar asks for a gun, Eastwood gives him a handheld Canon Auto-Zoom 518 Super 8 mm camera. This gesture of gifting is allegorical by consecrating Caesar not toward becoming a shooter in the conventional sense but towards being framed, and eventually refigured, through the cinematic apparatus. The camera *precedes* Caesar's agency; he is destined to live through its image. Ray's observation that the camera can "enlarge what is small" (2023, pp. 500–501) explains Caesar's later rise as a local star-gangster that depends on this exact capacity to magnify the subaltern subject through cinematic framing. Eastwood's gift substitutes an instrument of death with one of mediation and afterlife (Fig 4). Caesar's encounter with the camera marks the collision between local histories of the Kanakal village and the cinematic modernity of the imported camera.



Fig 4. Clint Eastwood

In the second instance, Ray Dasan articulates his cinematic talisman when he says, "Nobody can write anything new. You simply need to hold the pen tightly. What is meant to be written will come to life." This statement aligns structurally with Ray's realism but is refracted through a violent

Tamil political landscape. It rejects the romantic myth of the auteur as the originator of stories. Instead, it implies that narratives already exist in the world, *waiting* to be inscribed through the camera. Ray Dasan positions himself less as an auteur and more as a conduit through which the community's knowledge systems unfold in their *otherwise* registers. Therefore, filmmaking becomes an act of bearing witness that demands responsibility of the craft rather than mastery over the cinematic subjects. As Saroj Bandhopadhyay notes in "The Literary Works of Satyajit Ray," the filmmaker's oeuvre achieved its "autonomous significance in the idiom of the camera" (1998, p. 101). Ray Dasan starts to embody this practice, wherein he becomes embedded in the story without exerting control as an omniscient presence.

Finally, the most explicit articulation of the camera's political valence comes through Caesar's wife, Malaïarasi. She asks Ray Dasan why he is making a film on "this piece of crap," as if Caesar were Gandhi. Ray Dasan responds that nobody these days wants to watch the story of a nobleman. Her response is striking: "Your cinema will change him." In another exchange, Malaïarasi makes a sharper commentary: "Many have often used different kinds of weapons to kill our people. But the weapon in your hand does not kill but gives us hope to live for the first time. There is some magic in it." While the tribal clan has been subjected to state guns and police brutality, the camera is the first insurgent instrument that preserves rather than annihilates their image in the annals of history. The 8 mm camera, with its loaded cartridge, operates as a counter-weapon that

focalises collective memories that might otherwise have been lost.

These dialogic encounters force Ray Dasan to confront the ethical weight of his filmmaking as his silences and hesitations incrementally mark his growing awareness of complicity. This structure mirrors Ray's cinema, where women often carry the piercing truths of moral and political articulation. In *Mahanagar* (1963) and *Charulata* (1964), Ray framed female voices as cinematic embodiments of clarity against male ambivalence. In one of Ray's interviews, when he was asked about his conception of a beautiful woman, the filmmaker succinctly explains, "What I want to say is that for me a woman's beauty is more of an intellectual emanation than physical appeal" (1981, p. 67). Disentangling the relationship between education and intelligence, he sharply comments, "A woman's beauty I think, also lies in her patience and endurance in a world where men are generally more vulnerable and in need of guidance" (1981, p. 67). Similarly, Malaiarasi is positioned as a structural agent in shaping Ray Dasan's politics to grapple with the fraught relationship between representation and responsibility in cinema. Her language frames the filmmaker as a political actor, regardless of his self-image.

Prior to Ray Dasan's filming, all official accounts of the forest, the tribal community, and Caesar's life are mediated by police reports, government propaganda, and criminal rumours. Once recorded through the 8 mm camera, their gestures and voices acquire a trace that the state fails to fully suppress. I contend that this filmic gesture constructs a counter-archive. Paula Amad's

understanding of the counter-archive offers a generative frame for conceptualising this argument. Amad locates the counter-archive as a site where images not only mechanically record events but activate alternative ways of inhabiting history. By choosing to cinematically frame a man marked as a criminal rather than a national hero, Ray Dasan destabilises the moral architecture of the biopic. The biopic no longer functions as a commemorative form that glorifies stable figures of moral virtue. Instead, it becomes an unstable ground where subjects historically deemed disposable by the nation-state acquire visibility through community practices. It is not surprising then that Ray Dasan mentions how he wants to focus on a "dark gem, the son of our soil, raw, ruthless, and rustic biopic of a don" inspired by Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* (1972) series. Hence, Ray Dasan's filmmaking praxis does not aim for monumental preservation or institutional legitimacy but rather lies in its capacity to record what exists as a footnote in the national imaginary.

Ray Dasan accepts the clarion call to fulfil a counter-archival mission that leaks into the underground terrains of a tribal community. The Canon camera becomes the aesthetic arsenal that appears fatally drawn to a "different type of unreliable, anonymous, unofficial, and uneventful history" (Amad 2010, p. 4) deliberately misrepresented by the state. The potency of the Canon camera destabilises official archives that maintain the "sacred myths of order, exhaustiveness, and objective neutrality" (Amad 2010, p. 4). Through the historical intervention of Ray Dasan, cinema turns into a political document. The visual inscription of a tribal

community creates an unstable archive that threatens the linearity of the police records through anecdotal testimonies. For example, the myth of Sethukkali Amman who set herself ablaze after a king took the elephants from the forest is narrated by an elderly figure. She proceeds by highlighting how the king, shocked at her sacrifice, announced the girl as his clan deity and bowed down to her with reverence. These continuous encounters generate an affective attachment in Ray Dasan's bodily responses that is counter-intuitive to his mission as a state agent (Fig 5).



Fig 5. *The Humanist*

The camera evokes an alternative mode of knowledge production that ignites the debates on the marginalisation of the community and its displaced archives. The footage percolates into the public sphere through Minister Karmegam's decision to screen it in the theatre run by Caesar. Herein, the site of popular cinema becomes a space where suppressed histories return on screen. *Jigarthanda DoubleX* positions Ray Dasan's footage as an insurgent document that refuses the silencing imposed by a single state-sanctioned version of events. In this sense, the 8 mm camera is indexed as a tool of filmmaking and an instrument of political memory against bureaucratic archives that exercise control over bodies associated with criminality and social deviance.

In "Ray on Ray," the filmmaker comments on the artist's political commitment in making a work of art: "But as an artist I never want to be a propagandist, because I don't think anybody is in a position to give answers to social problems, definite final answers" (1981, p. 135). He adds, "I think I like to present problems and make the public conscious of the present social problems and let them think for themselves" (1981, p. 136). *Jigarthanda DoubleX* problematises the notion that cinema can completely suspend violence, despite its humane aesthetic vision. The camera gives the community a form of visibility, but visibility does not always equate to justice and may further expose the community to vulnerability. This stance aligns with Ray's belief in the filmmaker's role as witness rather than saviour. His cinema relied on aesthetic precision, moral clarity, and ethical responsibility without necessarily actuating a utopian promise with the forgetful pleasures of a happy ending.

The camera, as the director's "biggest weapon" in Ray's humanist arsenal, becomes a contentious object that both enables state violence and records its undoing. Ray Dasan emerges as a figure of humanism in crisis, wherein the traces of Ray's cinematic ethics resurface in an ambiguous moral universe. However, even in ruins, this humanism radiates through the potency of the camera and its fragile frames. The intermission tableau provocatively captures a two-shot of Ray Dasan and Caesar pointing their weapons at each other. This punctuating moment encapsulates the tension where the objects – camera and the gun – become aesthetic appendages by enacting the leitmotif of the

“encounter” in its ethical valence and violence (Fig 6).



Fig 6. Tableau Shot

The counter-archive constructed in *Jigarthanda: DoubleX* affirms the enduring ethical charge of the camera even when

wielded by a reluctant chronicler. Tamil cinema becomes a site of historical relay with Bengali cinema through the unstable afterlives of cinematic ethics. The film stages a confrontation between image, power, and memory in which Tamil cinema becomes a crucial terrain for rethinking the archive. Ray Dasan is the shadowy double of Satyajit Ray, and his camera inherits the debris of Ray’s humanism within a parallel diegetic universe. Through this inheritance, *Jigarthanda DoubleX* writes a counter-history of insurgent image-making in Tamil cinema.

Image Source: YouTube

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B. Geetha is an Assistant Professor of English and Cinema Studies at the Department of Liberal Arts, Humanities & Social Sciences, Manipal Academy of Higher Education, Manipal.

