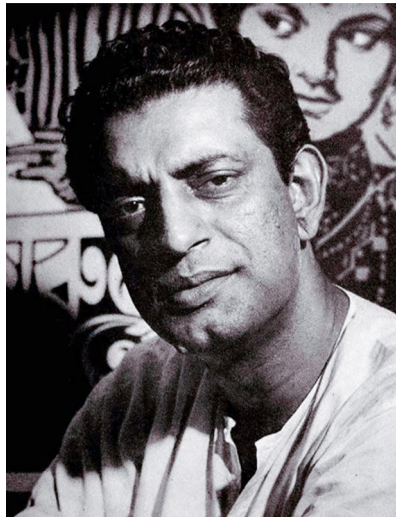


Satyajit Ray Centenary Tribute

Ujjal Chakraborty

*The essay is dedicated to Professor Suranjan Ganguly, University of Colorado Boulder***Satyajit Ray: Understanding Him through the Films He Abandoned***(Based on the social and political reasons of Satyajit Ray abandoning numbers of film-projects)***Prologue**

Why did Ray chose the Mahabharata

In 1957/58, Satyajit Ray started contemplating his own film version of The Mahabharata. He began writing the script on Friday, 13 February 1959, even before the completion of the Apu trilogy.

According to his personal notes, Ray was planning to confine the film into the 18-day-span of the battle of Kurukshetra. He divided the battle into seven parts starting with Lord Krishna persuading Arjuna by reciting the Geeta. And Ray's film would possibly have ended showing Gandhari, a queen suffering from misery beyond normal human comprehension, searching for the corpses of her sons in the mountains of carcasses and dead bodies. In Ray's film, she would have accompanied by her widowed daughters in law.

One question arises naturally at this point. During the time, Ray was engrossed in essaying the growth of Apu, his dream boy, whom

he was following with love for more than a decade through his drawings (for the book) and later through his films – Pather Panchali and Aparajito. It was Ray's epic journey to create an eternal saga of the growth of a human being since the day of his birth. Therefore, we can logically conclude that Ray at the time was in an optimistic frame of mind.

If so, what suddenly compelled him to envisage a scene depicting an old lady searching for the mutilated corpses of her 100 sons? And why did Ray at all contemplate a film which would almost surely have ended by showing the mountains of rotting corpses smeared with their own blood and shit. [Kurosawa tried to do the same after 20 years in 'Kagemusha' (1980)]

One of the probable answers could be found in the events occurring in India at the time.

How?

After a decade of independence, common people of India started facing an acute shortage

of food. Since 1957 a rampant famine started engulfing the entire north east of India, though



1A. Halla Rajar Sena

the centre was reluctant to officially endorse it.

The crisis became so intense in the next couple of years that the central government started importing rice, wheat and cotton from the USA. Even an unparalleled import of 4 million tons of food grains could not diminish people's hunger. The rising price reminded Indians of the Bengal Famine of 1943 which had claimed the lives of 5 million people. In spite of the unbearable plight being faced by common people, the government miserably failed to detain the hoarders of grains.

Thus the stage of a civil unrest – nearly a civil war – was set in 1958, for the first time after independence.

The events occurred between 1957 and 1959 caused irreversible changes in Satyajit Ray's mind. Precisely during the period Ray started contemplating his anti war film (Goopy Gyne & Bagha Byne) and his famine film (Ashani Sanket). He even officially declared, in 1958, his plan of making the anti war film.

Meanwhile, China was fuming over India's stand on the issue of Tibet. Consequently, a war between India and China was hovering over people's head.

The heartrending combination of famine, civil war and a looming global war compelled Satyajit Ray to express the human conditions in his own oblique and symbolic style. That's

exactly what he did later through his political fables TWO (1965), Goopy Gyne & Bagha Byne (1969) and Heerak Rajar Deshe (1980).

Had it happened, 'The Mahabharata' would surely have been Ray's first symbolic expression of contemporary politics in India.

Toshiro Mifune of Macbeth fame, a Kurosawa favourite, was to portray Duryadhana, the prince who nearly committed suicide to promote his pride while Nikolay Cherkasov, an Eisenstein favourite, was to essay Dhritarashtra, the king who jeopardized his family due to his sightless fondness for his reckless sons.

But, the India China war of 1962 suddenly made the avowals of the film project overtly direct and too obvious. It was one of the significant and profound reasons of his postponing the Kurukshetra film. Later Ray decided to confine his proposed film on Mahabharata into the dice game which would be occasionally observed by the son of the palace gardener.

It was made outmoded by Ray's 'Shatranj Ke Khiladi' (1977). The avatar of the gardener's son was reincarnated as Kallu, the village boy who was very fond of watching the red uniform of the English army deployed by the East India Company in India.

The entire incidents regarding Ray's The Mahabharata suggest that Ray's choices and denials of various subjects was often dictated – either overtly or discreetly – by the contemporary human conditions prevailed mainly in India.

I propose to understand Ray's mind afresh by studying the socio political reasons of his abandoning a number of film projects.

1.

The Aim of our Quest

One can feel an artiste's compassions by the selection of her themes. The notion is evident.

But one can trace her gradual transformation – from a compassionate person, for instance,

to a cynical one – through her rejections.

What an artiste rejects in the course of her creative life are distinct signs of her evolution. (Very much like the way the fossils of the extinct species are the telling signs of the evolution of creatures.) The abandoned themes express the changes occurred every so often in her consciousness.

We will attempt to search, in the first half of the present book, how the changing world – in the second half of the 20th century – changed the international artistes who were aware of the changes. It can be a significant lesson of the cultural history of the last century.

Rejections reveal the growth of an evolving artiste; because, the rejection of the cherished themes is actually a negation of her own past: of her own identity, in essence. Therefore, this kind of negation is often painful for an artiste.

That's why, in the present book, we will follow the trail of abandonment. And the trail – like the discreet path created by the pugmarks of a wandering tiger – secretly exists in the manuscripts of an artiste. The artiste's 'pugmarks' are usually covered with the dense shrubs of her scribbles in the pages of her first drafts (like Leonardo's in the dense writings in the pages of his notebooks).

The pugmarks should be discovered and evaluated by a trained eye to know the tiger's mind – long before the tiger itself is dead, and the species extinct. Thus we will be able to 'see' the elusive border line of its entire territory that's so cautiously guarded by it till its death. (For tigers as well artistes, this safeguarding is natural, inevitable and even subconscious. We all are well aware of an artiste's natural inclination towards keeping the 'tangible edge' of the territory of her artistic passions a secret.)

That's why we will follow the paths abandoned by a wandering artiste to know her real territory.

For this, we have to select a bunch of suitable manuscripts that are (1) well preserved and (2) unblemished, till now.

We have chosen Satyajit Ray's manuscripts,

as the same fulfill two of our key requirements. And also because, he is one of the major artistes working close to us, in Calcutta, in the second half of the 20th century.

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1B. Hungry Refugees- Distant Thunder

2

The Concepts Redefined

In the second half of the last century, several vital concepts were redefined. And, the international artistes had to change themselves to cope with the redefinitions and also to understand the historic significance of the same.

Satyajit Ray, being one of them, had to evolve himself following the new meanings of the old issues. Let's decipher the cryptic squiggles that he left in his celebrated notebooks, bound with red and coarse cloth.

May we start by preparing a random directory of redefinitions occurred worldwide in the 20th century? We will also include, in the form of comments included within bracket, the changes occurred in Ray's own worldview – that have been caused, we can logically assume, by those redefinitions.

**In his heart, Satyajit Ray
evidently felt the redefinitions.**

Ray had direct cultural contacts – through the international film festivals – with his contemporary Japan, France, England, Germany, Sweden, Italy, Australia, U.S.A., Canada, Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and even with Egypt.

Ray used to attend the festivals where he got rare opportunities of watching endless inter-

national films reflecting the change of values of 1960s and '70s.

Above all, he had a habit of reading a few international journals. Therefore, he was constantly informed about the cultural changes occurring worldwide – except in central Africa.

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1C. Farmers Rally

The challenges thrown by tides of redefinitions

Satyajit Ray worked for approximately 38 years in the second half of the 20th century (from 1952 to 1991, i.e., from the days of writing the screenplay of 'Pather Panchali' to writing the screenplay of 'Uttoran/The Broken Journey'). Those decades were the decades of redefining major philosophical issues. Ray, like all other foremost artistes of his times, had to steer through the maze of new definitions that might have appeared to be slightly bewildering to the artistes – painters, playwrights, film-makers and authors alike.

Let's cite a concrete example – from our local culture – of the impact characteristically generated by redefinitions.

We required our own Paritosh Sen to digest the rebirth of human faces as redefined by Picasso. Our local departure from the portraits created by Jamini Roy – was certainly inspired by the human faces redefined – through the sieve of cubism – by Picasso. It's a testimony to the changes that are bound to happen even locally by the redefinitions occurred worldwide.

At this juncture, we may remember a few of the concepts that were redefined during Ray's creative life. And we should also examine how the redefinitions changed Satyajit Ray, the person as well as the artiste. How Ray, the person, took great risks to support the artiste residing in his heart.

1. **Redefining Marxism through Maoism** (1967 – 1975 in West Bengal. That was clearly reflected in the depiction of Tunu in 'Pratidwandi' (1970) and of Amulya in 'Ghare-Baire' (1984 in Cannes Film Fest). In the original novel Amulya died. But he survived and was the only positive character in Ray's depiction. Amulya was one of the two nearly spotless characters in the entire oeuvre of Ray.)
2. **...Independence through the Food Movements.** (1958 to 1966 in West Bengal. We may remember here that 'Goopy Gyne & Bagha Byne' (1969) was first conceived just during the first wave of the Food Movement in '58. It couldn't be entirely coincidental, because the film was ultimately made just after the second surge of the Food Movement in 1966.)
3. **...language of cinema through the films made by the directors (auteurs) of the French New Wave – mainly by the films of Godard.** (1960 – 1967, i.e., from 'Breathless' to 'Weekend' by Godard and from 'Apur Sansar' to the screenplay of 'The Alien' by Ray)
4. **...the style of narration prevalent in Indian cinema through the neo-realism born in Italy.** (1948 – 1969, i.e., from 'Bicycle Thieves' by De sica to 'Bhuvan Some' by Mrinal Sen)
5. **...the ideal role of the students as well as the young people through the unique protests – now known in France as 'mai 68' – by the students of the Sorbonne University.** (1968. During and after the movement, in which millions of workers joined the

students – almost all the conventional ideas were disappeared from France in particular, and from Europe in general. The young people featured in the Ray films after ‘May 68’ became fundamentally different from what they were in his previous films. Tunu of ‘Pratidwandi’ (1970), the students of Udayan Pandit of ‘Hirak Rajar Deshe’ (1980), Amulya of ‘Ghare-Baire’ (1984) and Ranen of ‘Ganashatru’ (1989) are four suitable examples of the inspiration that Ray derived from the movement. Had Ray remade ‘Debi’ (1960) after ‘May 68’, Umapada might possibly have rescued Dayamoyee from the clasp of their family temple of ‘Kali’!)

6. **...the new mold of imperialism through the war in Vietnam.** (1959 – 1975. That particular war moved Ray so deeply that he had developed the protagonist’s personality in ‘Pratidwandi’ on the rock-solid plinth of the war in Vietnam : on the podium of the retort of the international youth against that war. Ray wrote an entire scene in ‘Pratidwandi’ explaining his attitude vis-à-vis the Vietnamese people, their extraordinary power of resistance and the triumph of plain human courage over the continuous, **longest** and certainly the cruelest application of the terrible facet of technology the world has ever seen. The war in Vietnam reached its cruelest peak of intensity between 1965 and ’68. It may be remembered here that from contemplation to completion of the final form of ‘Goopy Gyne & Bagha Byne’ was precisely done in those three years. Therefore, the battle looming between two brothers – the kings of ‘Halla’ and ‘Shundi’ – could not have been a mere coincidence, in spite of Ray’s sporadic refusal – during the Berlin Film Festival, for instance, in 1969 – to admit the thrust of Vietnam over the conceptualization of the film. ‘Pratidwandi’ is the key in this regard. Siddhartha, discussing Vietnam during the first interview

of ‘Pratidwandi’, was/is an undeniable key to the spirit of GGBB. ‘Pratidwandi’ was released just after 17 months of the release of GGBB. It was evident that Ray could not disregard, even during the shooting of ‘Pratidwandi’ in May 1970, the emotional state that he was in during writing the ‘1000’-page-long screenplay of GGBB.)

7. **...feminism through the writings of Germaine Greer.** [1970 onwards. ‘The Female Eunuch,’ Greer’s first book, was published in October, 1970. Ray’s ‘Pratidwandi’ was also released in the same month of the same year. After the advent of Greer’s ideas, Ray’s women were changed fundamentally. Ananga of ‘Ashani Sanket’ (1973) and Kauna of ‘Jana-Aranya’ (’75) are the testimony to the changes.]
8. **...fascism through the Indian experience.** (1974 – 1984 in India. An entire film – ‘Hirak Rajar Deshe’ (1980) – was deliberately formed to depict and to analyze the disposition that fascism, in any form and in any scale, generates among the people close to the regime. Having been made mainly for children, the film has an elemental value in the field of generating awareness in the young students.)
9. **...journalism through the new genre of ‘investigative reporting’ – born out of the reaction to the excessive suppression of facts during the Emergency.** (1976 onwards. The stumbling blocks the honest columnists have to overcome were shown in ‘Ganashatru’ (1989, Cannes) through the character of Dr. Ashok Gupta, a physician trying to get an article published in a local newspaper. The doctor clearly reveals in his article the main source of infection of jaundice that was poised to ravage the life in ‘Chondipur’, a small town of West Bengal. The publication of this article was stopped forcibly by the chairman of the municipality. Here

Ray depicts the positive role that can be played by a straightforward article written with complete honesty, sincerity and a total commitment to truth.)

10.... **fidelity and monogamy seen through the new sexual liberation of the social beings on the basis of the movement of 'May 68' and also on the ideas propagated by Germaine Greer and others.** [1968 onwards. In 'Pikoo' (1981) and 'Jana-Aranya' (1975), Ray reexamined the conventional notions of our sexual behavior.]

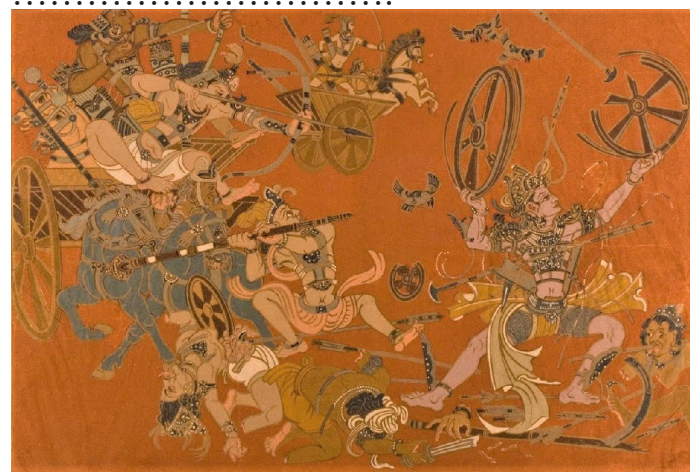
11....**concept of organized religion through the violent clashes between two of the major communities in India.** [1946 onwards. In five of his films, Ray criticized the system of religion as it is (and has been) practiced in our country. In 'Agantuk' (1991), he stated his stand vis-à-vis 'organized religion' in clear terms in a dialogue spoken by the protagonist.... "I can't accept that which creates divisions between people. Religion does this, especially organized religion. For the same reason, I don't believe in cast either... it is getting increasingly difficult these days to have faith in that benevolent almighty! Every day the newspapers – daily – hit out at this faith."

12.... **Modernism through the Post-modernist ideas** [1960 onwards. The sequence of dances of the ghosts in 'Goopy Gyne & Bagha Byne' (1969) can be called an apt example that gained a kind of philosophical support of the Postmodernist ideas. Even the star-like background ('chaalchitro') created with household bulbs – glowing and running – wouldn't have been so daringly created without Ray's acceptance of Postmodernism as an idea valid even for his own art that was primarily said to have been too 'classical' – till then – to embrace postmodernism. My thought should be slightly elaborated at this point. The entire filming

of 'Goopy Gyne & Bagha Byne' was done with 'Kodak' black and white film-stock having the possibility of creating a surprising range of very sensitive middle-tones. On the contrary, the sequence of dances of the ghosts was photographed in stark black and white almost totally devoid of all shades of gray. Apparently the tonal character of that sequence was contradictory to the rest of the film. In other words, the 'look' of that sequence was not apparently befitting with the rest of the film. Yet Ray bravely included the scene in his film. He didn't hesitate a bit to do so, as, meanwhile, 'postmodernism' embraced stylistic contradictions as an essential part of the arts with serious intend.)

(One is free to make her own list of precepts redefined in the 20th century.)

Now we have seen that almost all the waves of redefinitions changed Ray's life as an artiste. The testimonies to the changes have been described just now within brackets.



2. The painting of Kurukshetra

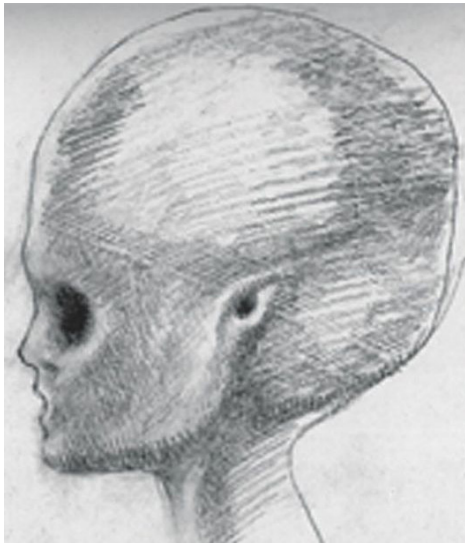
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The Journey towards Particularism

(The Thrust of the Local Colleges/Universities)

Apart from the worldwide redefinitions, was there any pressing local social reason of the changes of Ray's attitude towards the art of cinema which was believed to have been too

‘classical’ in the beginning? If so, what was that?



3. The Alien visiting the Earth

The redefined concepts played very important roles in Satyajit Ray's life, as, the conscious spectators – mainly the university students and teachers – would expect the new definitions to be expressed through his films. In other words, they wanted the Ray films either to survive or to die when examined through the microscopes of the redefinitions. Though the students did not really make the larger chunk of the audience in Bengal, but, what was important was that they were the builders of opinion. The people – more articulate and rather vociferous among them – used to write relentlessly on Ray in the little as well as college magazines. [At this point, one may remember the scathing article on Satyajit Ray printed in the 1969 issue of the 'Presidency College Potrika' (The Journal of the Presidency College) that was often proud, ironically, of bearing the covers designed by Ray himself.] The young writers created immense psychological, philosophical and political pressure on Ray who used to read the articles and often used to preserve the same pasted in big scrap-books maintained meticulously, first, by Suprabha Ray, his mother and, then, by Bijaya, his wife.

The community of teachers and students would always want Ray to be updated with the rest of the world. Ray, like all other artistes of his times, had to respond in his own way to the demands of the redefinitions of the seemingly timeless precepts.

It was the destiny of any creative person who was aware of the contemporary society as well as history.

In every half a century or so, creative people are compelled to face the unavoidable tides of redefinitions. (Like the way physics, for instance, was redefined in the last century after the surge of Quantum Mechanics. And, physics may be redefined further if the 'String Theory' on a larger scale, as well as the existence of the 'Higgs Boson' on a smaller scale, are proven nearly beyond doubt.)



4. Nikolay Cherkasov was to play Dhritarashtra

Unrelenting Particularism

The Influence of the Immediate Social Movements

We tend to evaluate an artiste's worth on the basis of how deeply she is influenced by her immediate socio-political movements (like the Food Movements as well as the Naxalite Movement of West Bengal).

‘Goopy Gyne & Bagha Byne’ was deeply stimulated – apart from the war in Vietnam – by the Food Movements of 1958/59 and of 1966/67 in West Bengal, India.

Since 1958, famished people started gathering on the dusty roads. On the completion of the first decade after winning the freedom, our people were facing a famine, though officially undeclared. On May 3 in 1958, a seven-thousand-strong procession was organized at the small town of Krishnanagar. On June 4,

a huge procession of hungry and worn-down women and small children gathered in front of the Assembly of West Bengal in Kolkata/Calcutta. Only two days after the women's rally, on June 6, a massive procession charged towards the Assembly and organized a meeting in front of that spotless, white building. The rally was summoned by a committee – 'The Committee to prevent Famines' ('Durbhikkho Protirodh Committee'), which was dominated by the members of the Communist Party of India, undivided till then.



5. Toshiro Mifune was suitable as Duryadhana

In 1958, the famished and humiliated people had to endure a terrible reality: an implausibly steep hike in the price of rice, which was artificially created by the black-marketers. The regime was unable to arrest and to punish the crooked and cruel hoarders of rice. All those made the people – horrified and humiliated beyond measure by now – even more fuming.

What was noteworthy and possibly more relevant to the present book is that, Satyajit Ray declared in October in that very year, 1958, that he had decided to make 'Goopy Gyne & Bagha Byne'. If one sees that very declaration of Ray's on the black and bloody background of the massive processions of famished people charging towards the Legislative Assembly, one will obviously be surprised by the relation of 'Goopy Gyne & Bagha Byne' with HUNGER and also with the procession of hungry people whose broken faces with sunken cheeks and deep-set eyes were plainly "quoted" by Ray in the famished soldiers of Halla in 'GGBB'.

The Food Movement became much stronger

in 1959 in which year 80 people died by police firing and more than 200 were missing for ever. And, according to the dates and comments found in Ray's manuscripts, he continued developing, willy-nilly, his free flowing ideas around those rustic characters, Goopy and Bagha. It could not have been a bare coincidence.



6. The brave Naxalite facing the rifles of the police- Pratidwandi

Unable to prevent the processions in 1966, the police started firing down a number of students participating in the demonstrations. Nurul Islam, gunned down at Basirhat, was the first martyr of the Food Movement of 1966 and Ali Hafeez of Badurhia was the second.

After the killings both in 1959 and 66, a number of artistes, authors and academicians protested by taking part in the processions organized by thousands of starving people who were intensely suffering from the famine-like situation in West Bengal. Satyajit Ray participated in one of those demonstrations in September, 1959. One of the several reasons of the state dissuading the police firing was the compelling presence of Ray among the famished people in the huge yet quiet demonstration. The state, for obvious reasons, did not want to draw the attention of the international media towards the Food Movement that was confined mainly to West Bengal – though entire India was suffering from the crisis of food.

We should not forget a noteworthy connection here. Both the war in Vietnam and the Food Movement in West Bengal started in the same year, i.e., 1959. Therefore, their

impact on the Bengali conscience – and on Satyajit Ray as well – was a composite one

Therefore, Ray could see, after 1943, the famished people from a very close quarter and Ray walked on the road with them – in support of them – as one of them. (That's what he could not/did not do in 1943.)



7. Amulyo- Gharey Bairey

The band of famished people was revived by Ray in 'Goopy Gyne & Bagha Byne' as the Halla-army who were apathetic to participate in any of the businesses of the state – from paying taxes to fighting a battle which was, to them, irrelevant and unnecessary.

Through the total denunciation of the administration by the hungry and humiliated people of Halla, Ray started answering to one of the redefinitions. What's that? Let's explain.

On the wake of the independence, a vast number of people were naïve enough to imagine that famines – like the English language – would be eradicated from India in 18/20 years. [In fact it was hoped that English would cease to be an official language in India by 1965. "... the Indian constitution of 1950 did lay down that English would cease to be the official language of India from 1965, but it remains." – quoted from 'Why I mourn for England', (1998), by Nirad C. Choudhuri, page 49]

Yet in the middle of 1960s, even the most unconcerned section of the people felt that hunger, like English, would stay in India – possibly undyingly. That awareness – realized

painfully by a large number of people – was a sort of a redefinition of an optimistic political precept – "The independent nations can solve the problem of hunger on their own". The taut balloon full of an aromatic gas of hopeful buoyancy about an independent nation – was suddenly pricked twice, in 1958/'59 and in '66, by the Food Movements.

So, Ray, leaving the rather contented world of subtle love-stories – played once in duet ('Nayak', 1966) and twice in trio ('Charulata', 1964 and 'Kapurush', 1965) – came down to the dusty roads of hungry people in the guise of a village singer – Goopy – and cautioned the callous administration on behalf of the starving and fuming masses.

GGBB (1969) came as a precursor to the nemesis of the political party that had played an important role in our long struggle for independence. More importantly, the film was addressed mainly to children and to young people who were changed more or less radically after watching the film. We, the first generation of spectators of the film, realized at a very young age that people should stop paying taxes to the government that doesn't feed them properly.



8. Kallu the village boy- Shatranj Ke Khilari

It was actually told – with an ear jarring loudness – in a dialogue spoken by an elderly camel-driver of Halla in GGBB – "**People shouldn't pay taxes to the king who doesn't feed them**". The implication of that dialogue was upsetting for the administration, as most

of the young people could simply connect that specific line with the hungry people of West Bengal between 1958 (the year of conceiving GGBB) and 1969 (the year of its release).

After 'Goopy Gyne & Bagha Byne, Ray never returned – except in 'Pikoo' – to the world of love without sturdy references to politics.

Thus, we see that Ray constantly faced the redefinitions during the three decades of his creative life. And **that was what prompted Ray to drop nearly 50 film projects of his dream.**

But how will we know about the films that were dropped by Satyajit Ray?

Simply by studying the manuscripts of Ray's screenplays.

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9. Moti- Ashani Sanket

4

The major film Ray abandoned between 1967 – 1970

After the amazing success of 'Goopy Gyne & Bagha Byne', Satyajit Ray planned to make 'Raajsingho', the Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay novel. The preparation was almost complete. Even the casting was finalized. Ray planned to make it in Hindi and on a much larger scale than what he usually had done till then.

Yet, Ray discarded the idea, and proceeded to make a couple of 'small' films – two dissections of the contemporary youth – in black and white and obviously in Bengali. Those were 'Aranyer Dinratri' (1969) and 'Pratid-

wandi' (1970).

Now, two pertinent questions are very difficult to evade at this juncture of Ray's creative life.

1. Why did Ray thrust aside the grand 'Raajsingho' for two of the so called 'small' films on the contemporary youth?
2. 'Raajsingho' could have created for Ray a new 'market' throughout India. Ray was mainly a professional film maker. Till then, he didn't have an alternative source of income. His books for children did not start to get published with regular intervals till November, 1969. A few months before that, during the days of making 'Chirhiakhana' – which was thrust upon him – his income became rather uncertain. Consequently, the salary of his assistants became irregular. Therefore, the assistants were compelled to borrow from the money lending Kabuliwallas who were infamous for their ruthless manners. A few of the Kabuliwallas even visited Ray at his residence. Judging from that background, discarding 'Raajsingho' was a kind of a domestic/personal sacrifice on his part. (To touch the truth, we should also reflect on the artiste's familial aspects that often deter the course of the fluent development of a creative artiste). If so, what compelled him to feel more drawn to Siddhartha of 'Pratid-wandi' and Aparna of 'Aranyer Dinratri'? Why Ray, the artiste, could not resist the lure of scrutinizing Siddhartha and Aparna from a close quarter? Ray, the head of a family rearing a son, was defeated by Ray, the artiste.



10. The young editor- Ganashatru

When we venture to search for the so-called ‘matter-of-fact’ as well as ‘reasoned’ answers, we usually come across a set of obvious ones.

What, if Ray himself had given matter-of-fact answers? Should we take his answers for granted? We should not, I believe. My logic is something like this :



11. Ray, directing Mahanagar in 1962

Satyajit Ray, much like John Ford and Kurosawa, would often give matter-of-fact answers, mainly for his characteristic introversion, and partially for discouraging the inquisitive aficionados from pricking him day by day for further ‘fashionably deeper’ i.e., ‘philosophical’ responses which would have spoilt his time. Ray, a person seriously practicing five different professions, was very strict about using every minute of his waking hours. (I know it for sure from my personal observations of Ray for 20 long years.) Therefore, we should not always take Ray’s own answers for correct and complete about his own choices. We, the present generation, should delve into his mind and times by venturing beyond what he had basically said about himself.

Three reasons, ‘matter-of-fact’ and ‘practical’, are usually said among the members of his unit about abandoning ‘Raajsingho’.

- (1) The financier was not affluent enough.
- (2) Ray’s technicians were not deft or groomed enough to toil for such a ‘big’ subject.
- (3) Ray was not ready to leave his dear Calcutta to construct large sets in the stu-

dios of Bombay, and so on and so forth.

All the three answers are predictable and do not hold a candle to the discarding of ‘Raajsingho’. The answers would have been the same in cases of other projects abandoned by other directors. (Like, why did Tarun Majumdar drop the idea of making ‘Chnader Paharh’, a Bibhutibhushan novella? The members of Tarun Majumdar’s film unit would have given the same set of predictable answers. Then what were the answers more suitable in the case of Satyajit Ray, an artiste more conscious of his surrounding reality?)

Why was Ray drawn towards the subjects that were more contemporary, more cynical (‘Aranyer Dinratri’) and decidedly more angry yet, ironically, vulnerable (‘Pratidwadi’)?

In quest of an answer that is more appropriate, we have to ‘read’ the real world surrounding Ray at that time. The reality of the second half of the 1960s almost swallowed up all of Ray’s fellow citizens. Ray, being a very sensitive artiste, was not an exception.



12. Ray in Venice Film Festival 1957

What mental state Ray was in?

Some of us have been told time and again by Shri Ramesh Sen, a longtime assistant director of Satyajit, that between 1969 and ’72, Ray would wait impatiently for his friends and associates to visit his place in the late afternoons. Ray was very keen to listen to the first hand accounts of the en-

counters between the Calcutta Police and the young Naxalites in and around Tollygunj where the film studios were (are) located.

The narrow lanes and by-lanes around the studios were the escape routes through which the young and often injured Naxalites used to flee after having hurled homemade bombs at the police who were the only representatives of the state seen openly on the road. (One could hardly find a minister or an IAS officer under the sky. Therefore, it was rather obvious that the police patrolling on the road would be the valve through which the flowing anger would pass.)

Ray's intense anxiety about the survival of the youth – utterly political (like Tunu, in 'Pratidwandi') as well as sympathetically humanistic (like Siddhartha in the same) – indicated that 'Raajsingho' would have been entirely irrelevant for him between 1968 and '72. Therefore, it was the order of the time that obviously drew him towards Siddhartha and Tunu ('Pratidwandi'); towards Aparna and the chowkider's ailing wife ('Aranyer Dinratri')

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13. The poor boy flying kite -- TWO

Why was the Humanoid coming from the stars discarded

It was also the case with 'The Alien', a failed project that was to be financed by Columbia Pictures, Hollywood. Many tell several reasons of 'The Alien' being discarded. Even Ray himself wrote at length about it in an article called 'The Ordeals of

The Alien'.

But Ray himself got the psycho-sociological truth slightly curtailed when he had written the said article sitting at a temporal break of about 20 years from when 'The Alien' was to be shot in September, 1967, in Birbhum, West Bengal. Ray accused (rightly to a degree) almost entirely one Mike Wilson, a friend of Arthur C. Clarke, the celebrated writer of a number of everlasting science fictions. Wilson mediated between Satyajit Ray and the Columbia Pictures. But Wilson failed to sustain Ray's interest for long enough to get the film created. Satyajit became annoyed with Wilson's deceitful dealings. (Ray's mood in 1967 can somehow be described by a song of Tagore – "Chhaya Ghaunaiichhey bon-ey bon-ey..." (Long shadows are slowly engulfing the forests), which Ray preferred to play in a lone voice in 'Jana-Aranya' (1975) to express nearly the same dark mood he was in during the preparation of 'The Alien'.)



14. The couple waiting- Ashani Sanket

But was it all gone wrong only for Clarke's friend?

On the contrary, the inner truth – conveniently forgotten by now even by the Ray scholars – was somewhat different. It was Ray's inner voice that pulled him back from plunging into doing a science fiction the interiors of which were planned to be shot in a London studio where Stanley Kubrick had shot '2001 : A Space Odyssey.'

Ray was temporarily interested – though **temperamentally unprepared** – in shifting his working ground either to London

or to California for ‘The Alien’.

But why ?

When we set to search for an answer, we come once again to a reality that was relevant to West Bengal in the second half of 1960s.

The reason of discarding ‘Raajsingho’ was same to that of ‘The Alien’. And it’s not a conjecture. One can establish it by quoting Ray’s own comments from a very important interview published first in 1967. It was – and still is – important, as it was the only interview in which Ray discussed solely about the destiny of ‘The Alien’. The interview was published in two installments in ‘Aashchorjo’, a Bengali magazine of science fictions along with other scientific issues (something like a skimpy version of ‘Omni’). Ray was one of the contributors to the magazine and was the president of the Science Fiction Cine Club, Calcutta.

This is a literal translation of what Ray confessed, in 1967, about the future of ‘The Alien’ :

“Mike Wilson wants me to start shooting in September this year, so that the film can be released worldwide next year. But I said that I would not start shooting a science fiction before making ‘Goopy Gyne & Bagha Byne’ and ‘Ashani Sanket’, because my style of film making may undergo a fundamental change after making a science fiction.”



15A. May 68 Student Protest-1

(Satyajit Ray interviewed by Adrish Bardhan, ‘Aashchorjo’, May issue, 1967)

Now what was so special about ‘GGBB’ and ‘Ashani Sanket’ (1973) that swayed Ray against making ‘The Alien’? And what were the similarities between those?



15B. May 68 Student Protest-2

Those two films were centered on hunger in spite of their apparent dissimilarities. What we may remember at this point is that Goopy and Bagha tried to save an entire population – stricken shoddily by a near famine situation created by a callous and incompetent government. Therefore, famished people were at the core of Goopy-Bagha’s concern. And, it’s needless to say that the same people were at the core of Ray’s concern in ‘Ashani Sanket’, too. Therefore, it was the artiste’s concern for the people dying of hunger was what pulled Ray from behind from plunging straight into a sci-fi.

Therefore, it was actually the social reality of West Bengal in the 1960s that was instrumental behind Ray’s rejecting Hollywood. And it was also partially instrumental behind Ray’s disdain for Hollywood which was called a ‘Lewis Carroll World’ by Ray!

Therefore, same drive was felt by the artiste behind dropping a couple of big projects of the scale of ‘Raajsingho’ and of ‘The Alien’.

But was ‘The Alien’ really an out and out sci-fi?

Not at all. The main character of ‘The Alien’ was an orphan who used to beg at the bus terminus of ‘Mongolpur’, a remote

village of West Bengal. The screenplay started depicting one of the main curses of hunger – begging.

Even the humanoid creature coming from the space was somewhat like the beggar boy – “...the face of the Alien : large head, sunken cheeks, small mouth, nose and ears; eyes sunken, with pupil – if they exist at all – lost in the depths of the sockets.” – this was how Ray himself described the alien in his screenplay. [page 130, ‘The Chess Players and other Screenplays’, Satyajit Ray, London (1989)]. The description is now a public property as the screenplay was published by Faber & Faber, UK. So, there can be no denial of the fact that the alien of Ray’s dream nearly represented the unborn child – during the famine of 1943 – of Ananga and Gangacharan in ‘Ashani Sanket’.

(We may remember here that Ananga, the brahmin’s wife, said her husband in the end that she was pregnant. So, she was expecting her first child just before the outbreak of the terrible famine of Bengal in 1943. Had Ray extended the film just a few years beyond where it was ended, we would probably have seen Ananga – if alive at all – with a child that was described so vividly in the screenplay of The Alien.)

Therefore, it was obvious that in the late 1960s, just after the second surge ‘Food Movement of West Bengal’, Ray became obsessed with the effects of the sudden price hike of rice and of the resulting famine on his fellow people. And the fruits of the obsession were ‘Goopy Gyne & Bagha Byne’ and ‘The Alien’, the screenplay. In addition, Ray officially declared in October 1967 that his next film would be ‘Ashani Sanket’. An advertisement, designed and drawn by Ray himself, was published on the last day Durga Puja/Autumn Festival of Bengal – declaring ‘Ashani Sanket’ as Satyajit Ray’s following venture, before GGBB. (Instead of it, ‘Ashani’ was shot in 1972, just after the liberation of Bangladesh.)

Therefore, the three themes – GGBB, The

Alien and Ashani Sanket – in unison was a set of three leaves coming out from the same stem – that reminds us of the formation of the ‘Bel’ leaf.

Therefore, Ray left behind the days of ‘Charulata’ long behind.

The same kind of abandonment was done by Ray several times in his 35-year-long creative life in cinema.

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16. Siddhartha’s protest in Pratidwandi

The Other significant discard in the 60s

In the end of 1961, it was nearly decided that Ray would remake ‘Abhijan’ in Hindi and in colour, with Wahida Rehman in the lead. The news was officially declared in DESH, the celebrated weekly still being published. Nevertheless, Ray characteristically abandoned the Hindi ‘Abhijan’ that might have fortified his personal career. His family might also have prospered. Instead, he started making ‘Mahanagar’, on the plight of the working women and the jobless youth of Calcutta, the city Ray loved most.

We have so far been saying about what Ray did in the 1960s. But that trend could be observed right through his artistic life. The abandoned projects could easily have outnumbered the films that Ray had ultimately made. Some would say that it was a testimony to his very agile mind. But, we would find more important reasons – that

were the socio-political ones.

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Digging up the names of the films

abandoned by Ray

But how will we know the names of the films that were discarded by Ray?

By studying each and every page of his manuscripts.

Ray nurtured a habit of keeping notes of almost all of his thoughts on the prospective films on the pages of his screenplays.

But on which kind of pages one should find Ray's cryptic notes?

One has to scrutinize all the available pages ever written or doodled by Satyajit before the days of 'Pather Panchali'. Here lies the real challenge. One has to be very patient.

The second problem is – the handwriting that Ray would always use for writing his personal notes was nearly illegible. Because, he had a peculiar habit – like Erasmus, for instance – of connecting separate words with a wavy flourish while writing with a smooth fountain pen which he would always prefer. And he seldom lifted up his pen while writing. Consequently his rapid writing still reminds one of the Urdu scripts, instead of the Bengali ones. Therefore, for doing the research, one has to have a long experience of deciphering Ray's hurried writing.

The third challenge is – Ray had a habit of writing the treatment of one or two scenes of his future films – while writing the screenplay of the project he had then undertaken professionally. But those treatments were usually written without separate headings which could have made the task of a researcher much easier. That's why one has to be able to effortlessly identify – just by a cursory glance at a particular page – that a number of the dialogues written on it were not meant for the film which he was writing for.

In this way, once I discovered a couple of scenes of 'Mahanagar' (1962/63) in the screenplay of 'Aparajito' (1956/57) and a few dialogues of 'Goopy Gyne & Bagha Byne' (1969) in the manuscript of 'Mahanagar' (1962/63).

I also discovered the preamble of 'The Alien' in the last page of the manuscript of 'Chiriakhana' (1966/67) and also found more than three scenes of 'Parashpathar' (1957/58) in the manuscript titled 'Mahabharata' which Ray had planned several times to make between 1957 and 1963 (i.e., between 'Aparajito' and 'Mahanagar') – with Toshiro Mifune, a Kurosawa favourite and Nicolay Cherkasov, an Eisenstein favourite. Mifune was to portray Duryadhona, the suicidal prince while Cherkasov to essay Dhritarashtra, the blind king.

But a grand treasure – that can be an essential part of our cultural history – is hidden in thousands of the Ray pages that remain unread till now. Had a researcher read all the pages, the twists and turns of the mind of a major artiste of the 20th Century would have been unveiled.

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The Functioning of the Human Brain

Reading Ray's manuscripts is a very important task, as Satyajit's methods undoubtedly represented (and, still represent) the fundamental structure of the functioning of a highly creative human mind.

Ray's methods in unison will provide us with a Beautiful Model of the functioning of the human brain.

And, his manuscripts also represent how the steady pressure of the constant redefinitions of the major philosophical issues of his times – of his century – can create, for a major artiste, several new paths that he can tread on to discover the new facets of the human existence.

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Here are the eight titles chosen from a long list of 42 films Ray had abandoned for reasons unknown.

Story	Author	Theme
Atithi/ The Guest	Rabindranath Tagore	Story of a fugitive village boy
Zibraier Dana/The Wings of the Angel	Shahed Ali	Dream of a boy whose kite is reaching the seventh sky with the help of an Angel
Bilombito Loy/Slow Tempo	Narendra Nath Mitra	Love once deep but now eroding mysteriously
Aranyer Adhikar/The Right of the Forests	Mahashweta Debi	The Tribal Rebellion of 1890s
Bichhon/The Seeds	Mahashweta Debi	
Sujan Bhagat/Sujan, the old farmer	Munshi Premchand	Story of a retired farmer resuming his hard works to restore his dignity stolen by his reckless sons
Anukul/ The Android	Satyajit Ray	Germination of empathy in a humanoid robot

6

The structure

One chapter should be devoted to each and every abandoned projects.

1. The title of the film imagined by Ray.
2. Name of the author of the original story.
3. The year in which Ray had chosen the story.
4. Important socio-political events – national as well as international – that had taken place in that year.
5. Trying to figure out a specific event that might have caused Ray abandoning the project of his dream.
6. Is there any note specifying any socio-political event? If so, a quotation of what Ray had written about the real event.
7. A scanning of the Ray notes on the unmade film.
8. Prints of the pages on which Ray wrote the names of the films he dreamt about.

If we can thoroughly study Ray's manuscripts and understand the dynamism behind his changes, we hope, we can also apply the same set of principles in the cases of Pablo Picasso, Ritwik Ghatak and so on (one is free to make her own list!).

Therefore, there's a possibility that the book will create a new understanding of the interaction between history and creative minds.

Finally, if Leonardo's notebooks could create sensations worldwide – why shouldn't we dream of creating vibrations with the pages of the notebooks of Satyajit Ray?

Annexure:

FILMS PLANNED BY SATYAJIT RAY

Proposed Films	Authors	Themes
Kichhukkhon (A Few Moments)	Bonophool	A number of characters stranded for four hours in a station
Canvasar	Bonophool	Two men clashing about the supremacy of the tooth powder made in factory and twigs broken from a Neem tree.
Canvasar Krishnolal	Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay	A secret love between canvasar and a sex worker.
Rammohun Roy		Biography
Alaler Ghorer Dulal (A Spoiled Brat of a Rich Family)	Pyarichand Mitra/Tekchand Thakur	How a number of young students got spoiled by the culture propagated by the British Raj.
Mohesh/A Bull	Sharat Chandra Chattopadhyay	A Muslim farmer's deep affection for his pet bull.
Padma Nadir Majhi	Manik Bandyopadhyay	Life of the boatmen of the river Padma in Bangladesh.
Aranyak/About Forests	Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay	A young man's intimate relation with the dense forest of central India. Ironically, he was the supervisor of cutting trees.
Aadab	Samaresh Basu	Friendship between a Muslim and a Hindu fugitive during the riot of 1946
Shahider Maa/Mother of a Martyr	Samaresh Basu	Plight of a mother whose younger child was killed in political clash
Neel Kamal and Laal Kamal/Two Princes (A Fairy Tale)	Dakshina Ranjan Mitra Majumdar	The battle of two princes against an invader who is a demon in disguise of a queen
Jeebito O Mrito/The Alive and The Dead	Rabindranath Tagore	A woman, supposedly dead, trying to prove her identity by returning to her own family.

Sati/The Devoted Wife	Sharat Chandra Chattopadhyay	An intellectual is trapped in the devotion of his old-fashioned wife.
Kalindi	Tara Shankar Bandyopadhyay	A traditional landlord's young son gradually evolving into a communist.
Amrita Kumbher Sandhane/In Search of Nector	Kaalkut/Samaresh Basu	An epic tale of thousands of pilgrims visiting the Ganga on an auspicious day
Antarjali Jatra	Kamal Kumar Majumdar	A 15-year-old girl has been married to a 85-year-old man, ailing and dying to maintain a customary superstition.
Jeeban Je Rakom/That's What Is Life	Sunil Gangopadhyay	A group of young graduates struggling to find jobs and dignity in Calcutta of the early 1970s.
Mrityu Khshudha/The Hunger for Death	Kazi Nazrul Islam	A number of families residing near the idol makers at Krishna Nagar in West Bengal, trying to cope with the famine and death induced by the British government.
Mohakasher Doot/Emissaries visiting from Space	Satyajit Ray	A pyramid shaped spaceship visiting the earth to give five solutions to the five problems of human race.
Bilamson	Manik Bandyopadhyay	Mr. Bilamson, the managing director of a British Company, trying to continue his business in Bengal on a human scale even after the independence of India.
Badshahi Aangti/The Emperor's Ring	Satyajit Ray	Feluda, the private sleuth, trying to retrieve a diamond ring once owned by Emperor Aurangzeb.
Byaghradebota/The Tiger Deity	A Folk Lore	A lore a battle between deities --- A tiger deity and a jungle deity who is the protector of people from the man-eating tigers.
Ghaam/Perspiration	Narendra Nath Mitra	An unimaginably deep affection felt by a childless woman for her neighbour's son that nearly destroys her relationship with her husband.
Akasher Neechey Manush/People under the sky	Prafulla Roy	A poor couple try to remain alive by selling birds to the government officials.
Ram Charit	Prafulla Roy	A local leader on his election campaign.
The Gypsy Guests	Satyajit Ray	A family of gypsies taking shelter beside Calcutta Corporation.
Maila Anchal	Phaniswar Nath Renu	
Documentary on the Kaalbelia Gypsy tribe dwelling near Pakistan		
Documentary on Child Labour		

Debatar Janmo/Birth of a God	Shibram Chakraborty	How a piece of black stone gradually becomes a deity
Beethoven		A biography of the composer
Magic Flute/Opera	Mozart	
Balmiki Pratibha/The Genius of Balmiki (Opera)	Rabindranath Tagore	Following the evolution of a killer into a great poet.
J C BOSE		Biography of the legendary Indian physicist
Mymunsiha Geetika/Ballds of Mymunsiha	Folk lore	Folk love stories narrated via songs
Radha Nath		Biography of Radha Nath Shikdar who calculated the altitude of mount Everest
Nodir Dharey Barhi/House on the River Bank	Bibhuti Bhushan Bandyopadhyay	A family dreams of staying by the bank of a river to get rid of the inevitable humiliation of the urban life.
Ekti Jeebon/Story of a Life	Buddhabeb Bose	Biography of Hari Charan Bandyopadhyay, the greatest lexicographer of Bengal.

Image Index:

1. The hungry people marching towards big cities was an obsession of Ray. Among the three parades, the first one was a real march, while two others are taken from 'Goopy Gyne & Bagha Byne' and 'Ashani Sanket'.
2. The painting of Kurukshetra inspired Ray to envisage a film on the battle. It was painted by Nandalal Bose, the art teacher and the true mentor of Satyajit Ray in Tagore's university. (The Mahabharata project)
3. The alien visiting the earth resembles a famine stricken child (The Alien)
4. Nikolay Cherkasov was to play Dhritarashtra, the blind king, in Ray's Mahabharata
5. Toshiro Mifune was suitable as Duryadhana, the proud prince, in Mahabharata.
6. The brave Naxalite facing the rifles of the police (Pratidwandi)
7. The young rebel in 'The Home and the World'
8. Kallu, the village boy, who is a re-incarnation of the son of the palace gardener in The Mahabharata. (Shatranj Ke Khilari)
9. Moti is watching with weary eyes the last sunset of her life just before her death caused by the famine of 1943 (Ashani Sanket/Distant Thunder)
10. The young editor of a little magazine, Mashal, published from a small town (Ganashatru/An Enemy of the People)
11. Ray, directing Mahanagar, in 1962
12. Ray in Venice Film Festival a few moments before receiving the Golden Lion for Aparajito in 1957.

13. The poor boy flying kite to show the rich boy that his own joy cannot be spoilt. ('Two', a film fable)
14. The couple waiting for the surprise arrival of guests during famine. (Ashani Sanket/Distant Thunder)
15. University Students protesting in Paris in 1968. The spirit of the protest partially inspired Ray to make Pratidwandi.
16. Siddhartha's protest in 'Pratidwandi'

Digital Capture : Snehasish Mistri

Mr. Ujjal Chakraborty is an internationally recognized Ray Scholar and a National Film Award Winner in 2010 for writing The Director's Mind, a book on film making.