

Ray Centenary Tribute

**Siladitya Sen**

**That Indifferent, But Confident Face**



The moment Nikhilesh exposes Sandip by speaking of the latter's various atrocities: setting the houses of poor Muslims on fire, capsizing their boats and so on, Bimala keeps standing near the window, with her back towards the two men her face cannot be seen by either of them. Only once she turns her face slightly, perhaps in reaction to something unexpected in what she heard. She, the same she who had come a little ago to that room with gold coins to help Sandip in the struggle for freedom against the British rule.

When Nikhilesh says Sandip, "In your speeches you are all for the Hindu-Muslim unity but in reality, you inflict torture on the poor Muslims," or "You harm the country in the name of serving it" Bimala appears at a loss of words and unable to trust her own ears.

Almost like a subtext, Swatilekha Sengupta wove the feelings of the inarticulate Bimala throughout the film *Ghare-Baire*. Satyajit Ray revealed to Andrew Robinson, why he had relied on Sengupta. In accordance with Tagore's original text, Ray did not seek a stereotype beauty; rather, he looked for acting skills as well as what can be called the key to the character of Bimala: personality; apart from these two qualities he found in Sengupta "the

intellect to understand what she was doing." (The Inner Eye, 1989).

With the sudden demise of Sengupta in Ray's centenary year, the above-mentioned scene in Ray's film not only comes back to our memory but also, if we follow the threads of Sengupta's acting, brings us home to the fact that the zealotry of Hindu nationalism was prevalent in the Swadeshi movement just like it is in the Indian political scenario now. That is why Nikhilesh had to sensitize the people in the leading position of the Hindu society against indulging in anti-Muslim violence, "Muslims must have the liberty to follow their religious faith... That there are Muslims in India is a historical truth, India cannot be imagined without Muslims." Nikhilesh said in a scene of the film.

Muslims have been pushed to the margin of Indian politics as 'other' and women have been treated likewise in Indian society; Ray created the 'organic unity' of his films with these two otherized groups. The film was released in 1985, within four or five years of which India witnessed an unprecedented rise of the Hindutva politics.

After its release Ray's film was surrounded by an abundance of controversies on how faithful an

adaptation of Tagore's novel it is. In the heat of debate we often tend to overlook what amazing wealth can be generated through the aesthetic symbiosis of one of the best novelists with one of the best filmmakers.

Nikhilesh, Sandip and Bimala: Tagore created the fabric of his novel by putting together the memoirs of these three characters; on the other hand, it was Bimala's individual consciousness within a complex web of actions and reactions that gave Ray the material to base the framework of his art upon; the focus of his film was almost entirely on Bimala's journey from the 'home' to the 'outer world'.

Nikhilesh, however, had in his mind an enlightened 'home' for Bimala; in his leisured everyday life of the East he ended up bringing a number of conflicting influences of the West through an environment of education, music and attire. He drew Bimala out from behind the purdah when he introduced her to a man other than her husband. Confined within the four walls of the home as she was, Bimala's mind responded positively to it; still, she felt that Nikhilesh's efforts to break away from the tradition through her were to some extent 'for his own diversion'.

Nevertheless, when Bimala actually reaches the 'outer world' in Sandip by opening the closed door of the veranda, decorated with colourful panes, she felt that "With the British Government having committed the offence of dividing Bengal, we ought to get involved in the Swadeshi movement if that jolts them awake."

But that 'outer world' of Bimala, that nationalistic enthusiasm shatters into pieces when she realizes that Sandip's politics is based on the principle of 'might is right', so much so that he has no qualms about being intolerant to another religion.

With this sudden awakening Bimala becomes completely silent. When she happens to meet Sandip again, she keeps saying, "The music has fallen out of tune Mr. Sandip...", with such an indifferent expression all over her face that it exhibits rigidity.

That she no longer has any faith on Sandip and his activities, Bimala makes clear by saying "No" with a sway of her head, leading to a decisive moment of separation.

In other words, Sengupta creates the moment. The home, the outer world and the uneven pace, the erosion of feelings of traversing the vacuum of the final phase – all this she spreads on the physical image of Bimala.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to return to an old relationship: in Ray's film Bimala too was unable to return to Nikhilesh, although she came in close contact with him before his death. "But if the audience interprets the act of coming in such close contact as a sign that women's access to the outer world can only result in disaster, a disaster which can be prevented by taking the home and household chores as the whole truth of their lives, it will be a grave error." Ray alerted in an interview with Rushati Sen. (Baromas, March 1985).

Living in a colonized country, Bimala gets neither her home back nor a proper experience of the outer world. Is the problem specific to a colonized country, not to an independent country also? Male dominance, societal structures created by men – are these not equally in force from India's colonized past to its independent present? Otherwise, why would Ray choose a novel published in the 20's of the previous century for making a film in the 80's, with a difference of almost seventy years?

In that interview he said: "After Nikhilesh's death there was nothing left for Bimala save that old home. Regardless of what Nikhilesh had envisioned, he failed to turn that into reality... This is not a question of personal merits and demerits, the reasons for failure are far more complex in a full-fledged system, nobody can step outside it."

Thirty-six years have elapsed since the release of Ray's film, has the 'system' changed at all?

*Translated from Bengali by Sharanya Dutta*