

## Reading the 'Facts' in Satyajit Ray's documentary films: a critical overview

Shyamasri Maji\*

**Resumo:** Este artigo é sobre os filmes documentários de Satyajit Ray (1921-1992). Os seus documentários apresentam uma tapeçaria rica em criatividade, uma cinematografia requintada, uma música expressiva e, acima de tudo, uma maneira extraordinária de contar histórias. Em todos eles, Ray escreve o roteiro, compõe a música e realiza. Neste artigo, tentei analisar o seu estilo de representar os factos em filmes de não-ficção.

Palavras-chave: biografias, filosofia tagoreana, narração, "verdade mais profunda".

**Resumen:** Este artículo trata sobre las películas documentales de Satyajit Ray (1921-1992). Los documentales de Ray presentan un rico tapiz de guión pensativo, cinematografía exquisita, música expresiva y sobre todo una forma extraordinaria de contar historias. En todos ellos, Ray ha escrito el guión, compuesto la música y dado la dirección. En este trabajo, he tratado de analizar su estilo de representar los hechos en películas de no ficción.

Palabras clave: biografías; filosofía tagoreana; voz en *off*; "verdad más profunda".

**Abstract:** This paper is about the documentary films of Satyajit Ray (1921-1992). Ray's documentaries present a rich tapestry of thoughtful script, exquisite cinematography, expressive music and above all an extraordinary way of story-telling. In all of them, Ray has written the script, composed the music and given the direction. In this article, I have tried to analyse his style of representing the facts in non-fiction films.

Keywords: biographies; tagorean philosophy; voiceover; "deeper truth."

**Résumé:** Cet article traite des films documentaires de Satyajit Ray (1921-1992). Les documentaires de Ray présentent une riche tapisserie d'écriture réfléchie, une cinématographie exquise, une musique expressive et surtout une manière extraordinaire de raconter des histoires. Dans tous, Ray a écrit le scénario, a composé la musique et dirigé la réalisation. Dans cet article, j'ai essayé d'analyser son style de représentation des faits dans les films de non-fiction.

Mots-clés: biographies; philosophie tagore; vix *off*; "vérité plus profonde".

---

\* Pursuing PhD. The University of Burdwan, Faculty Council for Post-graduate Studies in Arts, Commerce, Law, Fine Arts & Music, Department of English and Culture Studies. 713104, Burdwan, India. E-mail: shyamasri.2010@gmail.com

Submission of the article: december 15th 2016. Notification of acceptance: february 7th 2017.

The inimitability of Satyajit Ray's artistic vision is reflected in his unique handling of the subject matter in his films. Although his literary adaptations outnumber the ones having his own scripts, the screenplay, the cinematography and the score in both the types reveal his extraordinariness in observing, perceiving and representing the subject matter. The popularity and the critical acclaim of Satyajit Ray's full-length feature films have overshadowed his documentaries, which nonetheless exhibit his individuality in dealing with the genre of non-fiction. He has five documentaries in his repertoire – *Rabindranath Tagore* (1961), *Sikkim* (1971), *The inner eye* (1972), *Bala* (1976) and *Sukumar Ray* (1987). Except *Sikkim* which represents the people and culture of a tiny kingdom in the foothills of the Himalayas, the other four are biographical portrayal of those personalities who have inspired and influenced Ray to see life through art. He had also planned to make a documentary on Ravi Shankar, the sitar maestro who had composed the music for his *Apu trilogy*. Unfortunately, the project was not completed. However, the "visual script" of it, which has been published in book form, unfurls his intricate design of planning scene sequences through cinematographic formulations in sketches.

I would like to begin the discussion with his representation of the biographies on reel. While the painter-cum-sculptor Binode Bihari Mukherjee of *The inner eye* (1972) and the Bharatnatyam dancer Balasaraswati of *Bala* (1976) were less known figures, Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) was by comparison a widely celebrated cult figure in India and abroad. Sukumar Ray, his father whom he had lost in his early childhood is perhaps the brightest star of children's literature in Bengali language. Each of these films dealing with the saga of individual lives highlights certain aspects, traits and thoughts of the character. In his book *The inner eye: biography of a master film-maker* (1989), Andrew Robinson observes that representation of the thoughts of the character on whom the documentary is being made is, according to Ray, more important than what the filmmaker thinks about the character (Robinson, 1989: 274). Ray's penchant for foregrounding the thoughts of the characters is a characteristic feature of realistic cinema in which preference is given to the 'telling' of the story from the perspective of the characters. Whether it is his literary adaptations such as *Pather Panchali* (1955) or *Song of the road, Ghare Baire* (1984) or *Home and the world* or his own scripts such as *Nayak* (1966) or *The hero* and *Agantuk* (1991) or *The stranger*, the story proceeds by framing the reactions of different characters to certain objects, news or situations in the narrative through close-ups, jump cuts and point-of-view shots.



Figure 1. represents the first scene, which begins with the voiceover "On 2nd August, 1941, in the city of Calcutta a man died..."The crowd surrounding the corpse of Tagore reveals his popularity.  
Documentary "Rabindranath Tagore" (1961).



Figure 2. from this documentary communicates the symbolic significance of the dawn, which features as a recurrent image in.  
Documentary "Rabindranath Tagore" (1961).

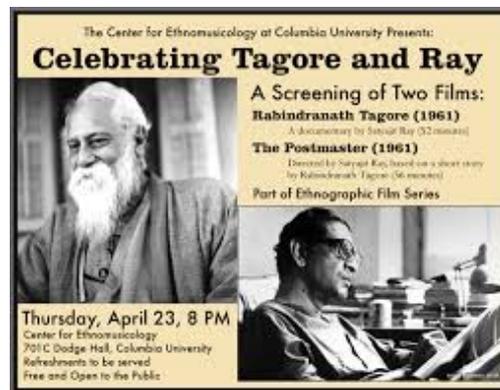


Figure 3. Documentary “Rabindranath Tagore” (1961).

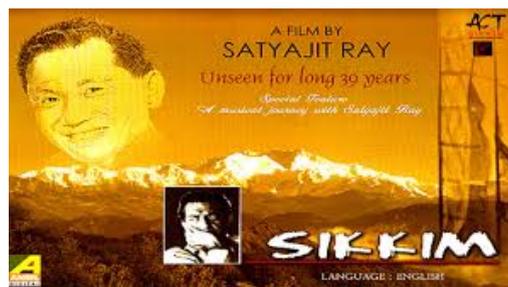


Figure 4.



Figure 5.



Figure 6. shows Ray holding the Honorary Academy Award. He had been very ill at that time. After 24 days of accepting this prestigious award, he died on 23rd April in 1992. He became the first Indian filmmaker to receive this award.



Figure 7.



Figure 7 & 8. represents his unfinished project on Ravi Shankar, the Sitar maestro. The images are the sketches of the sitar maestro that Ray made in his notebook while planning for the scene sequences. These sketches can be studied as visual script.



Figure 9. shows Bala, the dancer, performing different mudras (symbolic gestures in Bharatnatyam dance). These sketches can be studied as visual script.



The title of his documentary on Binode Bihari Mukherjee (1904-1980) – *The inner eye* – is not only a metaphor for 'insight' but also an attitude of the painter-cum-sculptor towards his blindness and art. The narrative of this film is an exploration of Mukherjee's personality from this perspective. The film has very few dialogues. It portrays mostly the activities of Mukherjee in his daily life – his surrogate engagement with the mural that he had been currently working upon, his taking rest in his cottage sipping tea or smoking, visiting places in and around Santiniketan with his daughter and so on. That Ray had organised the moving images in a sequence to narrate the perspective of the maestro whom he looked upon as one of his mentors becomes apparent in his article "*Binodeda*" (written in Bengali) – a chapter in his book *Bishoy Chalachitra* (1976). After a short introduction expressing Ray's awe and admiration for the artist and his art, the article represents verbatim the conversation that Ray had with him during an interview for the documentary. Mukherjee's upbringing had been in a family which was largely influenced by Brahma ideals and Bengali renaissance. Each member of the family had the inborn talent of sketching. The second among his five elder brothers, Bon Bihari, was a renowned cartoonist of that time. Binode Bihari acknowledges Bon Bihari's influence on him. He was blind in one eye from birth. The other one had faint vision but he lost it too during an unsuccessful cataract surgery in his early fifties thus becoming completely blind for the rest of his life. Studies were difficult for him due to his poor eyesight and on the suggestion of a doctor his family had decided to send him to Santiniketan for learning visual art since he had a knack for painting.

The struggle of a purblind person to establish himself as a connoisseur of visual art is epoch making. At the same time, the saga of his life and achievements as a subject for representation is as striking to the viewers as the oxy-

moron “darkness visible” is to the readers of John Milton’s epic *Paradise Lost*, Book I. Milton, who had composed this masterpiece at that phase of his life when he had lost his eyesight, urges the Holy Spirit in his invocation, “What in me is dark/ Illumine...” (*PL* Bk I, 22-23) so that he can succeed in the mammoth task of justifying the ways of God to man. It is well-understood that here Milton is not talking about his physical blindness. He yearns for the insight or the vision that is required for looking into the facts invisible to the human eyes. In other words, he wants to gather knowledge on such a subject that is so grand and complicated that it is beyond the understanding of the common human brain. What I am trying to explain over here is that although the activity of viewing begins with the optical organs in the human body, it is the brain and the psyche that constructs ‘vision.’ In Ray’s article, his Binodeda explains that “deeper truth” (Ray: 1976: 121) in a work of art can be perceived if only the viewer has the insight to see beyond the external objects and the activities of characters in the frame. Certainly, he was someone who could see the “deeper truth” in things which appeared mundane to many learned critics. This becomes evident when he defends a particular scene (in which Apu slaps his brother-in-law, when the latter informs him about his wife’s death after childbirth.) from Ray’s movie *Apur Sansar* (1959) or *The world of Apu* against the accusations of irrationality by scholarly critics. Although he had come to know about the scene and the accusations from others and had never watched it, he could understand that through this rashness Ray had tried to communicate the frustration of the character Apu, who had lost his words after the repeated occurrences of tragic incidents in his life. Watching films (Chaplin’s film) had been a part of his childhood memory. According to him, the capacity to perceive the “deeper truth” in art does not depend on the erudition of the viewer, otherwise, the untutored primitive people in the prehistoric times could not have made artistic engravings on the walls of caves. Although Mukherjee’s opinion on “deeper truth” has not been represented verbatim in the film, Ray’s voiceover has conveyed his thoughts on “deeper truth” by telling that “catching the essence beneath the surface” was a characteristic of Mukherjee’s art. His paintings/murals as they have been shown in the film mostly have human beings, animals, and rural landscape as their subjects. They reflect his love for humanity, humbleness and withdrawal from the artificial sophistication by seeking refuge in the simplicity of primitive culture. Ray has also represented Mukherjee’s precision in observing things by showing how exactly the objects in the sketches of the latter resembled their forms in reality. Not limiting his style to the conventionality of oriental art Mukherjee incorporated in his work a few aspects of Japanese art that he had observed during his visit to Japan in

1937. Being the student of the legendary painter Nandalal Bose (1882-1966), he had mastered the fresco art and was also familiar with a particular fresco of Egyptian style, which showed a pond surrounded by trees. Ray tells us and shows us how Mukherjee had adapted the Egyptian style in his own way by adding to it the flora and fauna he had minutely observed for twenty years in the rural outskirts of Santiniketan. From Ray's article, we come to know that this was the painting that had amazed Ray immensely when he had seen it for the first time as a student of art in the dormitory of a hostel at Kala Bhavana in Santiniketan (Ray, 1976: 118).

Mukherjee had asked Ray to describe the manner in which 'blindness' was represented on the silver screen (Ray, 1976: 122). To this Ray had replied sarcastically that blindness in contemporary cinema had been represented as superficially as the filmmakers had depicted dumbness without showing the futile efforts of the dumb person to communicate his/her frustrations. In *The inner eye* (1972), blindness or visual impairment in the literal sense has been represented from Mukherjee's point of view. Analysing the transition of his experience from having limited vision to having no vision at all, he explains that the latter condition has led him to feel the space around him as a dense entity which has to be walked into by clearing the thick mass with one's hands (Ray, 1976: 122). Now the familiar objects around him make him inquisitive about their form and texture. Tactile contact with the objects of his daily use thrills him in different ways. He perceives a piece of furniture as a chair only after sitting on it. Further he has to touch and understand its shape and the material with which it has been made. If one goes through Ray's article then one will find out that the scenes in which Mukherjee is shown in his cottage either sitting in the cane chair or pouring raw tea from the flask kept on the cane table before him, are exact representation of how Ray had observed him at Santiniketan (Ray, 1976: 119). Through this scene Ray tries to show how much self-sufficient and confident the artist was as an individual. The common belief that salvation of an individual lies in the passionate pursuit of his vocation has been represented in the film by showing the blind artist enjoying his work instead of lamenting the loss that had been knocking his fate since his birth. His indomitable spirit has been made explicit in his stoic resignation to the personal calamity. The imperishable vision of his inner eye which looks at the imparity of the mortal eyes with a new light has been expressed in the form 'written' words on screen:

'Blindness is  
a new feeling,  
a new experience,  
a new state of being.' (Ray, 1961: *Rabindranath Tagore*)

The scripting of these words on the still image of his face in dark glasses together with the background score of Indian classical music suggests rebirth of the artist. Explaining the significance of music in this context, Ray commented later: “The raga that comes after blindness is *Asavari*... ‘A morning raga. Very few morning ragas are optimistic in character because there is something wistful about dawn. This suggests that mood’ ” (Robinson, 1989: 282). The ending of the film conveys the vision of Ray’s inner eye that does not fail to see the pain associated with every birth.

In his book *Introduction to documentary*, Bill Nichols observes that “documentary adds a new dimension to popular memory and social history” (Nichols, 2001: 2). The significance of the remark can be observed in Ray’s *Rabindranath Tagore* (1961), the subject of which like other documentaries on him, was not a paean for the first Nobel laureate of Asia but “to stress Tagore as a human being and patriot” (Seton, 2003: 142). Thus the narrative of this biographical documentary has been constructed in such a manner as to represent the gradual development of Tagore’s attitude towards humanity in general and nationalism in particular. Since development of thoughts and approaches towards different aspects in life are influenced by a person’s family background, society and culture of the milieu to which he/she belongs, Ray uses genealogy as a technique for describing the rich heritage the Tagore family had from the Middle Ages to the modern times.

Although no subtitle or metaphor is provided to elucidate the filmmaker’s approach to the biography, the opening scene acts as the thesis statement of this work. The film begins with a huge crowd following a corpse on its way to the last rites. The background score pitted against this scene is a familiar piece of sound in Ray films, which signifies either a situation of great crisis or grandeur in a noble action. In this context, it signifies both. Before the title of the film is shown or announced, in his own voiceover, Ray begins the story thus:

On 2<sup>nd</sup> of August, 1941, in the city of Calcutta a man died. His mortal remains perished but he left behind him a heritage which no fire could consume. It is the heritage of words and music and poetry, of ideas and of ideals and it has the power to move us and to inspire us today and in the days to come. We who owe him so much salute his memory. (Ray, 1961: *Rabindranath Tagore*).

The crowd surrounding the corpse communicates two ideas: first, death of the poet (1861-1941) is a crisis for his countrymen. Secondly, it shows how much he belonged to the people. This particular video clipping/footage followed by the sequences of Ray’s voiceover (quoted above), the image of a fire burning in darkness, sunrise and the devotional hymn from Tagore’s *Gitan* (Book of Songs) “*Joy hok, jok hok nabo arunodoy/ Purbadiganchal hok*

*gyotirmoy...*" ("Long live the nascent rise of the crimson/ Let the east be radiant..."<sup>1</sup>) justifies what Nichols considers to be an important narrative strategy in non-fiction films:

In documentaries we find stories or arguments, evocations or descriptions that let us see the world anew. The ability of the photographic image to reproduce the likeness of what is set before it compels us to believe that it is reality itself re-presented before us, while the story or argument presents a distinct way of regarding this reality. (Nichols, 2001: 3).

The beginning is grand enough to convince the viewers that either a national hero or a philanthropist can receive such obeisance from the masses after death. The song belonging to the *puja parjay* (category of worship) too has a significant role in this context. On the one hand, it is representative of the faith and reverence that the people had for the octogenarian poet, on the other hand it serves as a prologue to the dramatic representation of Tagore's philanthropic thoughts.

After this the narrative moves into flashback and depicts chronologically certain historical facts such as the year in which Job Charnock founded the city of Calcutta (now Kolkata), flourishing of the city as a metropolis under the British East India Company, coronation of Queen Victoria as the Empress of India, through old sketches and paintings. Narration of the historical facts and the genealogy of the Tagore family begin with the sketch of their palatial residence "*Jorasanko*" (mansion of the Tagore family) in Chitpur, Calcutta. Representation of historical facts through sketches signifies their function as mere socio-political context. Similarly, the still images of his literary publications, the Nobel medal, the newsreels about his foreign tours and views on national/international events are used as contextual evidence to validate on screen the gradual transition of a national figure to an international personality.

Commenting on Ray's effort to encompass the scope of Tagore's life in this documentary, Marie Seton, an eminent researcher on Ray, tells us that "[t]he structure devised by Ray took on the character of a mosaic" (Seton, 2003:143). Further, she explains how Ray had planned extensively for fleshing out a story from this structure:

the authentic but static material, subjected to camera movement wherever possible must be edited in conjunction with a number of reconstructed or invented scenes to bring to life the history of the Tagore family, grandfather Dwarkanath, father Debendranath, together with flashes from the childhood and youth of Rabindranath. (Seton, 2003: 143).

1. This song has been translated by Anjan Ganguly and it features in the website "Green Gitabitan". In: [www.geetabitan.com/lyrics/J/joy-hok-joy-hok.html](http://www.geetabitan.com/lyrics/J/joy-hok-joy-hok.html)

The actor impersonating little Rabi is represented mostly as a lonely child who either observes objects in the claustrophobic ambience of “*Jorasanko*” or broods on the boredom of formal education at school. From Ray’s story-telling the viewers understand that it was his tenacity for keen observation since childhood that had made him so much expressive in his fictions about the lives of the people living in the villages on the banks of the river Padma, where he had spent a few years of his life looking after the affairs of the family estate. It is also apparent that the idea of an alternative system of education must have been latent in his mind since childhood, which he reifies in his middle age by setting up an academic arcadia at Santiniketan. Short reconstructions representing Dwarkanath as an exponent of art, academics, western ideas and Debendranath as the restless youth discovering peace in the words “enjoy by renunciation”, which he had come to read by chance in Raja Rammohan Roy’s English translation of the *Ishoupanishad*, serve well to explain the emergence of Rabindranath as an iconoclast and a philanthropist seeking spiritual bliss in the liberation of art, education and culture from the constraints of narrow-mindedness. He had experienced the bliss of liberation for the first time when his father Debendranath Tagore, the great sage of monotheistic religion called Brahmoism, took him on a tour to different places in northern India. The song “*Ei aakashe aamar mukti aaloy aaloy...*” (“I shall be liberated in the sky, in glorious lustre/I shall be liberated over dust and green pasture”<sup>2</sup>), which has been used as background score in the scene where little Rabi is shown amidst the lofty snow-clad mountains in Dalhousie plays a crucial role in the story-telling. It can be considered as the lyrical summary of his spiritual philosophy, which “while essentially derived from the pantheistic monism of the *Upanishads* ... was of a syncretic kind” (Vallauri, 1961: 120). In his article “The Universal Faith of Rabindranath Tagore”, Mario Vallauri elaborates this point further in the following manner:

Conceiving the universe as an All that is identified with God Himself, as God is the one and whole Being, the Tagorean faith discovers and exalts an eternal and essential harmony in the whole world and feels the law of love to be imperative and dominant: love of God which is one and the same as love of every living being and as love for every form and every infinite beauty of animate and inanimate nature... (Vallauri, 1961: 120).

Even in his experimental ideas of imparting education, he pleaded for syncretism of noble qualities of both East and West. Scene sequences showing video clippings and still images of mechanised warfare in the First World War

2. This song has been translated by Pratik Ghosh in 2003. It features on a web page titled “*amar mukti aloe aloe: Liberation*”. URL: <http://pages.intnet.mu/ghosh/poems/poems/amarmukt.htm>. 18 May 2014.

are followed by the news headlines stating Tagore's condemnation of violence and his appeal for world peace, which according to the poet could be achieved only through intellectual cooperation between nations. The renaming of his academia at Santiniketan as "Visva-Bharati" – a place "where the world becomes a single nest" – has been explained by Ray in relation to his spiritual philosophy – "where man should discover his soul in the spiritual unity of all human beings". However, a person who is familiar with the views of Tagore on nationalism may interpret this idea of Tagore as an expression of his political credo: "I am not against one nation in particular, but against the general idea of all nations" (Tagore, 1917: 111). Ray must have excluded this moot point as it could have appeared contradictory to the image of Tagore as a patriot.

It can be said that by emphasising the philanthropy of Tagore, Ray has tried to revolutionise the stereotyped image of a patriot in contemporary Indian cinema as a man either engaged in warfare against his enemy country or meeting death for fulfilling a nationalist mission. Being an ardent lover of mankind, he could not support violence as a means of achieving freedom against the colonial regime. Without involving himself in active politics, he tried to materialise his ideals of nationalism by devoting himself in rural welfare, teaching, editing journals and literary activities. Uniqueness of his protest against the atrocities of the colonial government has been represented by the footage showing Hindus and Muslims tying bands of friendship on each other's hands on the eve of partition of Bengal in 1905 and the letter he had written to the Viceroy after the Jallianwala Bagh massacre in 1919. When the contents of the letter is read aloud in the documentary, the viewer is left spellbound by his polite outburst of patriotic feelings: "and I for my part wish to stand shorn of all special distinctions by the side of my countrymen who for the so called insignificance are liable to suffer degradation not fit for human beings and these are the reasons which have painfully compelled me to ask your Excellency to relieve me of my title of Knighthood". When the political leaders did not turn up to his clarion call to make a meeting against the Defence Act which had caused the murder of the innocent Sikhs in Jallianwallah Bagh, he decided to "walk alone" on the path of righteousness. Through this Ray has successfully represented the spirit of sovereignty in Tagore's character, which is reflected in his patriotic songs and poems.

However, it is clear from Ray's approach to this biography that Tagore's love for his countrymen was a part of his love for the entire human race. This fellow-feeling did not limit itself to the borders of nationality and political affiliations. This becomes apparent in his anguish for the degradation of humanity as is evident in the violence exhibited in the Second World War. However, his

attitude towards life was optimistic till the last day of his life. It is both striking and inspiring that a man who had experienced immense grief in personal life by witnessing the untimely deaths of his wife and his children, one after the other, did not lose faith in God and humanity. Ray ends the documentary by showing the old and feeble Tagore praying ardently for the welfare of the human race. This video footage is succeeded by the last scene, the image of dawn suggesting the approach of the new era of peace and prosperity that the visionary Tagore had described in his last message to the world – *Crisis in Civilisation*. Sunrise or dawn has been a recurrent image in the film and the last one expresses his belief that the destruction resulting from the clashes of nationalist principles will end some day in near future when a great soul from the East will undertake the responsibility of preaching Oriental philosophy to the West and the world.

A common feature in all the documentaries of Ray is that they end with a note of optimism. As far as the biographical ones are considered, they convey a message that an artist's life can never become static or monotonous. Thus, he shows blind Binode Bihari sketching and sculpting with joy. He covers the last thirteen minutes of *Bala* (1976) with Balasaraswati's (1918-1984) rhythmic steps, and he depicts Tagore's initiation into painting at the age of seventy. The ending of *Sukumar Ray* (1987) is very touching. This documentary representing the life and works of Ray's father traces the inheritance of creative genius in the form of a patrilinear saga. Sukumar's achievements in art, literature and printing technology had been an elaboration of the efforts and aspirations of his father Upendrakishore Ray, an established author of children's literature in Bengali. The latter had set up the printing press "U. Ray & Sons" and had started the renowned magazine *Sandesh* for children. However, the individual genius of Sukumar (1887-1923) was revealed in his inimitable flair for creating humour in the nonsensical play of words and images, most remarkable variety of which can be found in his two immortal creations – *Abol Tabol* (*The Ridiculous*) and *Haw-Jaw-Baw-Raw-Law* (*Absurdity*), the latter work being inspired by Lewis Carrol's masterpiece *Alice in wonderland* (1865).

Although little is known to people about the details of Sukumar Ray's personal life, popularity of his literary creations in the present day Bengali society is the same as it had been during his lifetime almost a century ago. Knowing this well Ray begins the documentary by showing in rapid sequence Sukumar's sketches of the weird creatures, which feature as characters in the books mentioned above. This is soon followed by Soumitra Chattopadhyay's voiceover: "There are very few Bengalis unfamiliar with these pictures" (trans. caption). The story-telling is mostly done by representing static images of Sukumar, his

acquaintances and his works because there was no available video footage of this literary genius who lived for thirty-six years only. Falling ill of an ailment that had no cure, Sukumar was aware of his imminent death. In spite of his deteriorating health he remained engrossed in the frenzied pursuit of creating "humour" out of the absurd. In one of the many dramatic recreations of Sukumar's works in the film, an old man in the *Haw-Jaw-Baw-Raw-Law (Absurdity)* is shown to argue with a little boy regarding the age and the weight of human beings. According to the old man both aging and death can be evaded by calculating "age" in descending order. Although his appearance was that of an old man, he was just thirty-seven years old. He tells the boy that his age has increased and decreased a number of times. When the viewers are informed that the *Haw-Jaw-Baw-Raw-Law (Absurdity)* was created during Sukumar's mortal illness their hearts are ached with pathos generated by the ironical discrepancy lying between the ironical discrepancy lying between the narratives of reality and those of imagination.

Since there was no video footage of Sukumar, Ray could not conclude this biographical documentary by representing the artist in action. However, he uses Tagore's elegiac note on Sukumar's death as the climax of the narrative: "I have seen many deaths. But I have never seen anyone like this young man who facing death, nevertheless sang songs to life. Sitting beside his death bed I have heard that song and my heart is overflowing with it" (trans. caption). The film ends with a portrait of Sukumar followed by the childhood pictures of his only son Satyajit Ray, which suggests the passing over of the creative legacy from the father to the child. The background score towards the end is full of an intensity that is both elegiac and nostalgic. Depiction of the 'childhood' photographs of Ray suggests that there will be a fresh beginning of Sukumar's creative journey through the activities of his growing son. The sequence of photographs can also be studied as the representation of affection and aspirations that the dying father had for his son.

It is needless to say that Satyajit Ray has well-enriched the creative heritage of his family by becoming one of the best filmmakers that world cinema has produced till date. However, filmmakers always do not have the full liberty to treat the subject according to his/her discretion. Cinema as an art form cannot flourish without the encouragement and financial grants from the government of a nation. Therefore, it becomes imperative for the filmmaker to get an approval of the script from the concerned authorities of the government prior to putting the narrative on reels. The facts that the government keeps an eye on the assignment undertaken by the filmmaker and that the filmmaker on his part tries to cope with the priorities set by the government become evident

in the following observation made by Robinson about the making of Ray's *Rabindranath Tagore* (1961):

Efforts were made at that time to establish a committee to monitor his progress...Even so, Ray was conscious that he was making an official portrait of India's National Poet and that his warts should be omitted from it. 'I felt it had to be a film which really praised him, showed the best side of him. I avoided the controversial aspects,' he said frankly. It therefore contains no mention of his sister-in-law Kadambari Devi's suicide, nothing about the fraught relationship between Tagore and the Bengali public, no mention of his ill-advised praise for Mussolini's Italy, hardly any of his criticism of Gandhi, and nothing about the waning of his reputation in the West in his own lifetime. (Robinson, 2004: 277).

Similarly, the documentary on Sikkim, which was commissioned by the government of *Chogyal Palden Thondup Namgyal* (the ruler of Sikkim) had to be scripted and edited in such a manner that it represented one-sidedly an exaltation of the monarchy in the hilly state. Yet, the film was disliked by the royal patrons and they prohibited the public release of the film. In 1975, when Sikkim was made an integral part of the Indian sovereignty, Government of India put a ban on the documentary because on-screen representation of the monarchical rule with people prostrating before the king was regarded by some bureaucrats as contradictory to the ideals of a democratic government. According to Ray this was not "a very logical reason for banning the film because after all it shows Sikkim at a certain point in history" (Robinson, 2004: 276). The film remained banned in India for about forty years. After the ban was lifted by the government in 2010, the film was screened in a film festival in Kolkata. Unfortunately, a Sikkimese court order prevented its screening.

Ray himself was not very satisfied with *Sikkim* (1971). His intention behind making documentaries on places had been to represent the "people in a particular setting" (Robinson, 2004: 275). However, in *Sikkim* (1971), he could not fulfil this aspiration because he was "compelled to make about forty percent of the film into something 'bureaucratic with statistical information'" (Robinson, 2004: 275) representing in detail the infrastructural development – good condition of roads, free education, training centres for learning handicrafts and handloom work, flourishing of cottage industries etc. – that had taken place in Sikkim during the reign of Chogyal Palden Thondup and his father the former Chogyal<sup>3</sup>, Tashi Namgyal. Another such compulsion was to make "a disproportionate emphasis on the Sikkimese population instead of on the Nepalese" (Robinson, 2004: 275). It would have been "more appropriate

3. The royal family in Sikkim owes their lineage to Khye Bumsa, a prince from eastern Tibet. Phuntsog Namgyal, a fifth generation descendant of Khye Bumse had become the first Chogyal of Sikkim in 1642.

given the latter's preponderance in the state" (Robinson, 2004: 275). In spite of these limitations, Ray's effort to represent the *mélange* of hilly tribes becomes apparent in two ways: first, he upholds a panorama of diversity in the appearances, ornaments, dress codes, languages and religions of the people crowding in the Namchi market. Secondly, as has been observed by Suchismita Das in her article "Sikkim the Place and *Sikkim* the Documentary" the "sound-track of the film, composed by Ray himself...uses folk music which implicitly evokes the narrated diversity" (Das, 2014: 46). Das elaborates her view by referring to three songs that have been used in the film:

The opening song invokes "Denjong" (*Bras mo ljongs*), which is a Bhutia way of describing Sikkim, implying "the fruitful valley" or "the valley of rice; and "mayel lyang" a Lepcha phrase meaning 'an earthly paradise'. In taking us through Gangtok, we hear a Nepali song invoking Kangchendzonga, asking one to dance a *maruni* (traditional dance of the Tamang community) and play the *madal* (drum). (Das, 2014: 46).

Further, the information that the local people consider the lofty Kangchendzonga a deity, reveal his effort to trace the local history of primitive culture that prevailed among the Sikkimese people before they were converted to either Buddhism or Christianity. Although the film apparently functions as a text that legitimises monarchy and shows the preponderance of Tibetan culture, these minor aspects emerge as 'fissures' that deconstruct the thematic harmony in the narrative structure of the text.

In spite of the controversies and tensions, this documentary is a specimen of excellent cinematography which is time and again observed in the representation of the flora and fauna of Sikkim and the "shot of parallel ropeway with two carriages advancing towards each other" (Robinson, 2004: 275), which features in the first seven minutes of the film. The film begins with close shots foregrounding scriptures engraved on the stone tablets in a monastery, which is shortly followed after by a scene of young lamas blowing the "Dungchen" – the traditional trumpet played in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition as "sound offering" to God. This is followed by a medium long shot framing the religious flags outside the monasteries. The narrator informs that these flags are a ritualistic measure to drive away evil forces.

On the one hand, these scene sequences along with many other showing the well-maintained monasteries in several parts of Sikkim where the monks chant rites and perform rituals represent Sikkim as a land of piety, on the other hand they suggest the foregrounding of Buddhism, which in spite of being the official religion of the Chogyals is the second largest practised religion in Sikkim. As the Nepali people constitute the majority of Sikkim's population, the

largest practised religion in Sikkim is Hinduism<sup>4</sup>. There has been very little representation of the Nepali people and Nepali culture in the film. This might have been due to the compulsions under which the film was made. However, this aspect in the film, which can be addressed critically as a ‘gap’ in the text, validates to some extent the incidents of political unrest in Sikkim that led not only to the abolition of the rule of Chogyal Palden Thondup and Namgyal monarchy, but also to the incorporation of Sikkim within the Indian territory in 1975.

The documentary films of Satyajit Ray are so sophisticated in their thematic delineations that they can be referred to in the socio-political, artistic and literary discourses of the present day. The excellent combination of skillful camerawork and soulful music in these works authenticates Ray’s genius in the genre of non-fiction films. Besides being informative a Ray documentary has a lot of emotional appeal, which blurs the line between the fiction and the non-fiction. After watching these films one is left to wonder about the grandeur that our eyes would have feasted on in his unfinished documentary on Pundit Ravi Shankar, the legendary Sitar maestro.

### Bibliographical References

- Das, S. (March 2014). Sikkim the place and sikkim the documentary: reading political history the life and after-life of a visual representation. *Himalaya, the Journal for the Association of Nepal and Himalayan Studies*, 33 (1): 42-56. <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1879&context=himalaya>. Accessed on 23 Mar. 2014.
- Milton, J. (2004 [1667]). *Paradise lost*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Nichols, B. (2001). *Introduction to documentary*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Ray, S. (1982 [1976]). *Bishoy chalachitra [Perspectives on cinema]*. Kolkata: Ananda Publishers.
- Robinson, A. (2004 [1989]). *The inner eye: biography of a master filmmaker*. London: I.B. Tauris.
- Seton, M. (2003 [1971]). *Portrait of a director: Satyajit Ray*. New Delhi: Penguin Books.
- Sikkim. *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sikkim>.

4. This statement has been made in accordance with the information provided on Sikkim in *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*. The details can be accessed in the section titled “Demographics” in the article “Sikkim”.

Tagore, R. T. (1917). *Nationalism*. London: Macmillan. Project Gutenberg. [www.gutenberg.org/files/40766/40766-h/40766-h.htm](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/40766/40766-h/40766-h.htm).

Tagore, R. T. (1930). *Gitabitan*. Santiniketan: Visva-Bharati.

Tagore, R. T. (s.d.). Joy hok, jok hok nabo arunodoy. Trans. A. Ganguly. Lyrics of Rabindrasangeet. *Green Gitabitan*. [www.geetabitan.com/lyrics/J/joy-hok-joy-hok.html](http://www.geetabitan.com/lyrics/J/joy-hok-joy-hok.html).

Tagore, R. T. (2003). *Ei aakashe amar mukti aaloy aaloy*. Trans. P. Ghosh. *amar mukti aloe aloe: Liberation*. <http://pages.intnet.mu/ghosh/poems/poems/amarmukt.htm>.

Vallauri, M. (1961). The universal faith of rabindranath tagore. *East and West*, 12 (2/3): 119-121. *JSTOR*. [www.jstor.org/stable/29754391](http://www.jstor.org/stable/29754391)

### **Filmography**

*Bala* (1976) by Satyajit Ray.

*Rabindranath Tagore* (1961) by Satyajit Ray.

*Sikkim* (1971) by Satyajit Ray.

*Sukumar Ray* (1987) by Satyajit Ray.

*The inner eye* (1972) by Satyajit Ray.