



Satyajit Ray's Documentary Film "Rabindranath" : A Saga of Creative Excellence

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Satyajit's Ray's documentary film 'Rabindranath' was a saga of creative excellence. Its wide range of conception is simply amazing. It is something more profound than a mere documentary. Ray was conscious that he was making an official portrait of India's celebrated poet and hence the film does not include any controversial aspects of Tagore's life. However, it is far from being a propaganda film.

In his poem Matthew Arnold once paid his tribute to Shakespeare in the ever inimitable words: "Others abide our question. Thou art free. /We ask and ask: Thou smilest and art still,/Out-topping knowledge." This is equally true of Satyajit Ray's Tagore. We ask and go on asking and Tagore smiles and is 'stillout-topping knowledge'. In 1623 the great Shakespearean editors did their fantastic job of publishing in the Folio edition posthumously the 36 out of the 37 plays. Almost comparable to this outstanding editing venture is the task undertaken by Satyajit Ray FASC (Film and Study Center) to develop its most comprehensive archive on the worksof Satyajit Ray. The total number of Ray films like Shakespeare's dramas is 37.

'Rabindranath', the 54 min B/W documentary film directed by Satyajit Ray was a saga of creative excellence for its wide range of conception .Tagore is revered by the world's 250 million Bengali speakers in India and neighbouring

Bangladesh. Celebrations had begun all over the world to mark the 150th anniversary of the birth of iconic poet and playwright Rabindranath Tagore, the first Asian to win the Nobel Prize for literature in 1913. The year 2011 is special since it marks the 150th anniversary of Tagore's birth. The documentary was made to celebrate Tagore's birth centenary in May 1961. In that sense, the documentary on Tagore also has its golden jubilee to celebrate it has passed fifty years after its production. Ray was conscious that he was making an official portrait of India's ever-celebrated poet and hence the film does not include any controversial aspects of Tagore's life. In making the film, he pries into every aspect of his production. Ray's eye for detail and the old magic of his genius does not let go of the documentary, a tour-de-force. The camera is wielded like a conductor's baton as it strikes chords deep in the mind. In a serene, classical style the documentary progresses and we can still hear in its message the voice of a great artist who had been again and again applauded by Kurosawa or James Ivory or Huston.

In his book, *Our Films, Their Films*, Ray wrote that Calcutta was far removed from the hub of things. Ray had evidently learnt more from Henri Cartier-Bresson than just a fetish for available-light photography. But even here too he excelled in taking the snapshots like an artist. He seems to have painted his picture with the right brush on the easel. However, it is far from being a propaganda film like 'Sikkim' which sparked off huge amount of controversies. It is perfect as a work of art as well in its music and visual graphic. Films Division of India holds 8000 titles on Documentaries, Short Films and Animation Films in its archives. These films range from events of Socio-cultural importance to political events. Since October 1993, Ray FASC has taken small steps to help correct this cultural loss. It has helped establish The Society for the Preservation of Satyajit Ray Films .The Ray Society, has arranged for the screening of the documentary on Tagore's life.

The film won in 1961 President's Gold Medal in New Delhi and Golden Seal at Locarno. It was specially mentioned in Montevideo in 1962. Very few documentaries can claim this kind of distinction. Akira Kurosawa, perhaps the greatest of Ray's admirers among his fellow directors, told Robinson : "Mr. Ray is a wonderful and respectful man. I feel that he is a 'giant' of the movie industry."(*The Times*, Aug 18, 2005).

The documentary film 'Rabindranath' comprises dramatized episodes from the poet's life and archived images and documents. Ray himself was proud of the delineation of the boyhood days of Tagore, the most moving and lyrical part indeed: "Ten or twelve minutes of it are the most moving and powerful things that I have produced" Shaw is said to have commented in his friend circle. The other parts of the documentary are no less mesmerizing, especially the part where Tagore had accompanied his father in the North India tour. This journey by train with his father was an outstanding picturisation of the two great souls communicating with each other thus throwing light on the secret influences the spiritual thoughts of Tagore which were to bloom as flowers in his later life. Dulal Dutta is simply unique in editing and Bansi Chandragupta in his Art Direction and Soumendu Ray in cinematography have given the Documentary an incredible height of excellence. Ray himself completed the script and directed the film and also excels in writing commentaries which are examples of lucid and yet dignified expression. Ray gradually moves towards the climax and goes in an epic style to narrate the detached episodes of his life. Ray focuses on various activities of Tagore. The object of Tagore's visit to England was to understand the education of the West. In Santiniketan, his motto was rural welfare. It was to make the world smaller that he envisioned the setting up of a new university of the most untraditional character. Ray discussed how the translation of Gitanjali got the final shape and won him the Nobel prize. Tagore was all praise for Rothenstein and W.B.Yeats. Tagore

was shocked at the degradation of human beings and in a tone of vehement denouncement and protest, he returned his knighthood title. He was one of the great signatories such as Jagadish Chandra Bose, Romain Rolland, Einstein and Gandhi and signing in favour of the World peace.

The only controversial thing if any in the documentary relates to the Gandhi –Tagore relationship which has been highlighted in the film. Gandhi and Tagore, in spite of their greater differences on many socio-political issues, with their deeper affinities on other levels were able to transcend all occasional barriers. The call of duty was of greater importance to Tagore than looking after his own broken health. The man who loved freedom all through his life wrote the song which Ray beautifully used in the film as a playback: 'Amar mukti aloi aloi ei akashe.' In the depiction of the last years of Tagore's life Ray took all care as a director and as a writer of commentaries which comprises all the outstanding watersheds of activities and literary milestones of his life. Tagore's ever wandering soul was restless. He never stayed in the same room or same house at Santiniketan. This restlessness reflects the ever liveliness of the young mind of Tagore who composed along with his sublime lines, the nonsense rhymes for the children. He had in himself a child. Ray has avoided detailing this aspect in the documentary. The film ends with Tagore's song sung in his own voice: "Mone rekho ..." which was interspersed in the film with many scenes of his later life till his passing away in 1941. As Shakespeare had returned for the last four years to his native home in Stratford on Avon, so did Tagore left Santiniketan not to return there again as he preferred to live the last days of his life at his Jorasanko house where the boy Tagore roamed on the corridor looking outside casting his poetic glance on the open blue sky.

Tagore has influenced many global leaders throughout the time Albert Einstein, Mahatma Gandhi, Aung San Suu Kyi, Octavio Paaz and Satyajit Ray. The 'myriad minded man' as

Andrew Robinson told about him was modern in his approach and outlook and the documentary focused beautifully on this aspect of Tagore. On Tagore's sesquicentennial birth anniversary the documentary was screened in 2011, in the Museum of Fine Arts Houston where the Curator of Film and Video section, Marian Luntz gave a welcome note to the audience and introduced Tagore and Ray to the audience. (*Times of India*, July 27, 2011). Houston-based well-known writer Prof Chitra Divakaruni delved into various aspects of Tagore's creativity in her keynote speech aptly named "Glimpses of Tagore". (TOI Article, July 27) Her powerful speech focused on the relationship of Gandhi and Tagore. The documentary that Ray himself said to be one of his most intense creations, gave the viewers a kaleidoscopic entry into the most eventful part of the modern Indian history. Ray's work drove the message of why Mahatma Gandhi called him "Gurudev" home quite convincingly.

Even at this senile stage of his life when he was eighty, the poet possessing a heroic soul registered his voice of protest against Fascism. He mourned the crumbling ruins of the European civilization although he never stopped hoping a 'new dawn' in the spirit of his beloved poet Shelley who also dreamt of the 'New Millennium' after the Reign of Terror following the French Revolution. He composed his last message for the world in which he vehemently criticized the barbaric aggression against the East by Europe. He was shocked to see this barbaric face of the civilised (erstwhile) Europe which he himself saw in its human contours. The display of Tagore's handwritten copies of poems during this part of the film and his golden voice beaming with hope add a multiple dimensions to the audio-visual effect. He mourned that the crumbling civilization stood like a vast heap of futility. Yet Tagore did not lose faith in man. Andrew Robinson regarded Rabindranath Tagore: as the 'Myriad-minded Man' and this is the main thrust in Ray's film script. Like the five Satyajit Ray films, *Charulata*

(1964) *The Music Room* (1958) *Pather Panchali* (1955) and *Nights in the Forest* (1969) *The Chess Players* (1977), the documentary should not be missed. This is how Ray raised the documentary to such a height which even a very few films can claim. Ray's friend James Ivory watched *Pather Panchali* in the USA in the late 1950s and remarked that it literally changed his life and it set him on the road to directing films in India, and then in the West. Satyajit Ray and John Huston, the larger-than-life director of *The Maltese Falcon* and *Moby Dick*, had much in common. But Huston himself wrote: "I recognised the footage as the work of a great film-maker. I liked Ray enormously on first encounter. Everything he did and said supported my feelings on viewing the film." (Times, 2005) Raya Chatterjee, Sovanlal Ganguli, Smaran Ghosal, Purnendu Mukherjee, Kallol Bose, Subir Bose, Phani Nan, Norman Ellis have made the documentary vivid by their powerful acting. The dawn will come from the East where the sun rise with the promise to be fulfilled about the unvanquished man leaves surmounting all barriers to win back his lost heritage. The film ends with the horizons being resonant with the melodious chorus singing "Oi mahamanab ashe / Dike dike romanco jage..." Akira Kurosawa remarked about Satyajit Ray's first film, *Pather Panchali* (*The Song of the Little Road*). "I can never forget the excitement in my mind after seeing it." (Robinson: *The Inner Eye* 45) This is the real feeling of the audience after seeing all his films, and even the documentary film 'Rabindranath' deserves mention in its impact. It is always more important for Satyajit Ray to do even the smaller things with a great care whatever it may be - a documentary or a film. The documentary was made to celebrate Tagore's birth centenary in May 1961. Ray was conscious that he was making an official portrait of India's celebrated poet and hence the film does not include any controversial aspects of Tagore's life. The film comprises dramatized episodes from the poet's life and archived images and documents. However, it is far from being a

propaganda film. The documentary details the life and work of the celebrated Bengali writer Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941). He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913 because of his profoundly sensitive, fresh and beautiful verse, by which, with consummate skill, he has made his poetic thought, expressed in his own English words, a part of the literature of the West. The dramatized sequences of boy Rabi (Rabindranath Tagore) and young Tagore in his twenties are moving and lyrical. Ray has been reported to have said, "Ten or twelve minutes of it are among the most moving and powerful things that I have produced".

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Important facts about the Documentary:

Script. commentary & Direction: Satyajit Ray

1961, India. Documentary, 54 min, B/W

Producer: Films Division, Govt. of India

Cinematography: Soumendu Roy

Editing: Dulal Dutta

Art Direction: Bansi Chandragupta

Music: Jyotirindra Moitra

Cast :Raya Chatterjee, Sovanlal Ganguli, Smaran Ghosal, Purnendu Mukherjee, Kallol Bose, Subir Bose, Phani Nan, Norman Ellis

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