

[Oscars Honor Famed Indian Film Director](#)

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Monday evening, March 30, 1992, the film world will present acclaimed Indian director Satyajit Ray with a special "Oscar" in recognition of his "rare mastery of the art of motion pictures, and of his profound humanitarian outlook, which have had an indelible influence on filmmakers and audiences throughout the world." Past recipients of this most prestigious award include Walt Disney, Orson Welles, Bob Hope, Charlie Chaplin, Fred Astaire, Cecil B. deMilles, Douglas Fairbanks and Sophia Loren. HINDUISM TODAY learned from Ray's son in Calcutta that his father - suffering from heart disease and hospitalized February 13th with kidney problems - is not expected to attend the presentation which will be broadcast live around the world.

Satyajit Ray is universally regarded as India's foremost filmmaker, in addition to being a notable artist, journalist, composer and novelist. He comes from an extremely gifted family. His father, (who died when Ray was three) was a writer and artist, while Ray's grandfather was a prominent author of children's books.

Ray's background and middle-class orientation are the two most important factors behind his talent for perceiving the reality around him and rendering it with simplicity. Remarkably, he not only produced and directed the films, but sometimes single-handedly designed the sets and costumes, wrote the script, composed the theme music and edited the film.

A Film Career Begins

After gaining a degree in science and economics at Calcutta University, Ray joined Shantiniketan, an educational institution founded by the Nobel Prize-winning author Rabindranath Tagore. Sometime before he left Shantiniketan in 1942, Ray had come across the film theories of Rudolf Arnheim and Paul Rotha. These writers made Ray aware of cinema as an art form, and he resolved to become a filmmaker.

In order to train himself (there were no film schools in India at that time), Ray invented his own way of writing screenplays. Whenever it was announced that a Bengali film based on a famous Bengali literary work had begun shooting, Ray would write his own treatment. When that film was released, he would compare his treatment with the finished work.

In 1948, while Ray was working as a commercial artist for an advertising company, he and his friends formed the Calcutta Film Society. This gave him a chance to view many of the world's finest films and to meet various celebrities, in particular Jean Renoir. Renoir came to India in 1950 to make *The River* and was to be an early influence on Ray's work.

A Movie on Borrowed Time and Money

Ray became increasingly determined to make a film himself and decided to adapt for the screen a novel by Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyaya called *Pather Panchali*, which Ray had been asked to illustrate some years earlier. Ray did not want to lose the security of his job, so he became a part-time filmmaker, devoting Sundays and holidays to shooting *Pather Panchali*. He pawned his wife's jewelry and sold his precious books and records in order to buy raw stock and hire a camera. He was soon broke.

Fortunately, the Bengali government provided the necessary funds to complete the film in 1955. It was shown at the Cannes Film Festival in Europe the following year and won worldwide acclaim. This for a movie with a first-time director and almost no professional actors - in fact, the cameraman was the only professional moviemaker.

Gandhi creator Richard Attenborough called Pather Panchali "one of the most exquisite pieces of cinema in existence." Arthur C. Clarke, creator of 2001: A Space Odyssey, extolled the movie: "Pather Panchali is one of the most heart-breakingly beautiful films ever made; there are scenes which I need never view again, because they are burnt into my memory."

Its success resulted in Ray's receiving many offers to make films abroad: though he speaks excellent English, he has said that he feels incapable of making films in any language other than his own, Bengali. Ray's acclaim as a director only grew over the years, until today he counts among his admirers nearly every film great of the world - the reason for his Oscar recognition.

Exploring Ray's Religious Orientation

Ray's personal philosophy of life is as difficult to encapsulate as his movies. People close to him say, "He is not religious at all." At various times he has described himself as an atheist, an agnostic or, most commonly, a humanist. His father and grandfather were members of the Brahmo Samaj - a 19th Century reformist movement that took the form of unitarian Christianity, scoffed at Hindu rituals and preached a crusade against image worship. Ray himself rejected the sect and later commented, "As a child, I found Hinduism much more exciting than Brahmoism and Christianity."

Andrew Robinson, who wrote the biography *Satyajit Ray: The Inner Eye*, asked Ray in 1982, "You have said that you don't see the necessity to believe in God: you tend much more to a belief in scientific knowledge." Ray replied, "That is oversimplifying things I think. I find it very difficult to answer this question. I don't think everything can be explained by science at this stage, but a lot of things will come under science eventually." Ray then recounted how his uncle made a prediction about him through the bhrigu system based on the date of birth. The uncle said, "International fame is going to change his profession and this particular profession will need the use of light." "Now," Ray told Robinson, "what can you say? Science? I really don't know. I have an open mind."

Hinduism in the Movie *Devi*

Brahmo thinking is embodied in the character of Umaprasad in Ray's 1960 acclaimed movie *Devi*. Umaprasad is the son of an old and deeply religious Brahman landlord, Kalikinkar, in this tale set in 1860 Bengal. Kalikinkar comes to believe that his daughter-in-law, Dayamoyee, is an incarnation of the Goddess, Kali. Umaprasad is aghast at the sudden deification of his 17-year-old wife. Thereafter follows a complex melodrama revolving around the father's intense belief, the son's Western "progressive" ideas and the daughter's descent into insanity.

Upon its completion the movie was so controversial that officials sought to prevent its release overseas. The ban was lifted at the personal intervention of then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru.

The movie is not so simple as Western reviewers judge it - for example, one such reviewer said, "*Devi* posits the ideological struggles between religion and rational reform, older and younger generations. Eastern and Western concepts." More precisely, at the movie's climax, Umaprasad accuses his father of "blind faith" - a charge many orthodox Hindus would agree with.

Ray himself said this about *Devi*: "There are perhaps two outstanding misconceptions among non-Indians that seriously hinder appreciation of the film. The first is the idea that God is male, which is integral to Western religious thinking. In India, the female nature of God is celebrated too. The writer of the film's theme, Prabhat Kumar Mukherjee, expresses this beautifully in *Creative Unity*: 'What I have felt in the women of India is the consciousness of an ideal - their simple faith in the sanctity of devotion lighted by love which is held to be divine. True womanliness is regarded in our country as the saintliness of love. It is not merely praised there, but literally worshipped: and she who is gifted with it is called *Devi*, the idea of God in an eternal feminine aspect.'"

An Enemy of the People

Other of Ray's movies similarly deal with unreasonable religious belief and practice, notably his 1989 adaptation of Henrik Ibsen's play *An Enemy of the People*. In its original form it is a story of a whistle-blowing doctor who discovers the waters of a famous health spa are contaminated.

Ray's adaptation is about a temple's contaminated water supply and the conflict between those who believe the sanctified water cannot be harmful and a Dr. Gupta who notices an outbreak of jaundice which he traces to the water. In a scene Ray wrote himself, Gupta's brother challenges him at a public meeting, "Do you call yourself a Hindu?" "Of course, I do," says the doctor, "but there are certain Hindu religious customs that I do not follow because of my scientific training. But I definitely call myself a Hindu." The younger brother says, "Do you go to the temple? Have you ever been to the temple?" the doctor replies. "No, I haven't, for the same reason - because I do not feel the necessity to go there. But I'm not saying that you should never drink the holy water. You should wait until it is decontaminated." In similar manner, Ray's other films do not disdain authentic devotion, which is often movingly shown in the course of the story. And his last three movies are very spiritual, without mentioning any religion.

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