Postcolonial Indian Nonfiction Cinema: The Documentaries of Satyajit Ray

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POSTCOLONIAL INDIAN NONFICTION CINEMA: THE DOCUMENTARIES OF

SATYAJIT RAY

By

MUZAHD SHARIF

A master’s thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

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Muzahid Sharif

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Postcolonial Indian Nonfiction Cinema: The Documentaries of Satyajit Ray

by

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Advisor: Peter Hitchcock

Satyajit Ray (1921-1992), one of the great masters of world cinema has directed five documentary films, other than his 29 feature films, in his long four decades of career as a filmmaker in India. He constructed his cinematic language and style with neorealism and a very distinct humanist approach to celluloid. Ray made his films in Bengali, English, Urdu and Hindi; his films depicted the complexity of human relationship, conflicts and interactions in contemporary Indian societies with great details and different levels of interpretations. Western and international audiences are mostly familiar with Ray’s fiction films, though his documentaries were well-acclaimed in India and abroad. Ray’s documentaries are mostly personality genre films. He documented the lives of great Indians who shaped and constructed the societies and cultures of colonial and postcolonial India with their creative endeavors and concepts. Ray made his first documentary film on famous Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore in 1961; and later he made films on Binode Behari Mukherjee (1972), a famous Bengali artist and Bala (1976), a Bharatanatyam dancer from Tamil Nadu. In 1971 Ray directed a
film on Sikkim, then an independent state in the Himalayas. Ray’s last documentary was also a biography film on Sukumar Ray, a pioneer of juvenile literature in early twentieth century India. In his documentaries, like his feature films, Ray told stories to his audience. His documentaries depicted history, politics, social changes and crafts of his time; and also elaborated the lives and achievements of the great personalities he documented in his films.

India and also the colonial India has a long history of nonfiction films. In British India, around 1910, newsreels as nonfiction films were produced regularly and after that, throughout WWI and WWII, and after the independence of India many filmmakers documented the different aspects of Indian life and other perspectives. Indian government controlled organization, the Film Division of India (FDI), world’s biggest producer of documentary films has produced 9,000 documentary films in last 75 years. After independence of India, Satyajit Ray and his contemporaries made some nonfiction films which portrayed the postcolonial aspects of India.

This dissertation briefly discussed the history of nonfiction films in India and also introduced and analyzed the documentary films of Satyajit Ray from the perspective of post colonialism, contents and aesthetics. This paper also discussed and examined his documentary film style and philosophy.
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Introduction

Satyajit Ray (1921-1992), one of the great masters of world cinema has constructed his cinematic language and style with neorealism and a very distinct humanist approach to celluloid. Ray made his films mostly in Bengali and in his four decades of film career he produced 29 feature films and depicted the complexity of human relationships, conflicts and interactions in contemporary Indian societies with great details and different levels of interpretations. Western and international audiences are mostly familiar with Ray’s fiction films, though he has produced five documentaries and his nonfiction films were well-acclaimed in India and abroad.

In twentieth century cinema, Satyajit Ray was a remarkable humanist who introduced modernism, neorealism and cinematic artistry to Indian film industry. In 1955, with his film *Pather Panchali* (Song of the Little Road), Ray created a new cinematic world, a realist version of Indian life. *Pather Panchali* was a story of a Bengal village, poverty, survival, human compassion and nature. In later years, Ray’s cinematic works included variety of subjects and mode of expressions. He covered wide range of topics, contemporary and historical issues in his films.

Satyajit Ray’s films were entirely Indian with a significant exposition of contemporary liberalism. His films contained Indian life, context, reality, philosophy and Indian values in a broad perspective of universal humanism. Ray established reality and real life context in Indian screen; he also introduced a parallel genre of Indian cinema to Western and domestic audience. In 1955, while India had a nationwide robust motion picture industry, Ray came forward with his non-glamourous black

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1 Satyajit Ray (1921-1992), an Indian filmmaker, writer, artist and composer and among the dozen or so great masters of world cinema, is known for his humanistic approach to cinema. In 1992, Ray received a Lifetime Achievement Oscar. Ray was born, died and worked in Calcutta. [http://www.satyajitray.org](http://www.satyajitray.org)

2 Satyajit Ray’s first film, *Pather Panchali* (Song of the Little Road, 1955) established his reputation as a major film director. He was awarded prizes like Best Human Document, Cannes, 1956 and Best Film, Vancouver 1958. *Pather Panchali* was a major breakthrough in Indian cinema. [http://satyajitray.org/films/pather.htm](http://satyajitray.org/films/pather.htm)
and white film which was completely a new phenomenon in Indian cinema that resembled a new reality and crafted an unprecedented cinematic artistry. In Indian cinema history, in 1950s, Satyajit Ray and his contemporary filmmakers (e.g. Ritwik Ghatak 1925-1976, Mrinal Sen 1923 – and others) founded a strong base of new realistic and artistic cinema in India which in later years inspired other cinema movements that redefined the character of Indian screen at home and abroad. Gradually, this humble, low-budget parallel cinema became the representative of true Indian life and the signature marks of talented Indian filmmakers. Satyajit Ray and his contemporaries have gathered different contexts of life in Indian screen along with social realism, politics, the unusual partition of India, postcolonial transformations, and the dynamics of socioeconomically divided, orthodox and prejudiced Indian society. Their sociopolitical engagements transferred the Indian cinema to a subjective, rational and engaging medium.

Satyajit Ray’s cinematic creations and his efforts inspired parallel cinema movement in India in late 1950s and 1960s, and this movement greatly influenced new filmmakers of later decades and Indian cinema received a greater recognition in global context. Though predominantly, Satyajit Ray was not a documentarian but his films made impact on the practices of nonfiction films in India. In different regions of India, there were also documentary film movements in late 1970s and 1980s and it may be argued that Ray had a kind of distant effect on these new generations of filmmakers who learned craftsmanship and control on their own cinema initiatives from Satyajit Ray’s films.

Satyajit Ray was an extraordinary story-teller, his fiction films were composed of multidimensional stories of Indian life. He compiled diverse aspects of life and time in his screenplays and as a narrator he used his own cinematic style. Ray’s cinema was an expression of humanism and an utmost realistic portrayal of postcolonial Indian life. Due to his neorealist approach, some parts of Ray’s fiction films have a kind of documentary constitution. Rabindranath Tagore’s humanism which influenced the
renaissance of nineteenth and twentieth century India has an impact on Ray’s work. His cinema has an engagement with Tagore’s literary and philosophical legacy though Ray’s works also included contemporary issues and aspects.

Satyajit Ray’s films were mostly based on literature. Other than Tagore, Ray based his cinema on the literary works of his prominent contemporaries of different Indian languages. Ray reconstructed the classics of his time, his cinema created a new cinematic reality which was absent in Indian cinema before his arrival. Throughout his long career Ray depicted societies from different periods and he conveyed messages through his stories. However, his philosophical message always focused on humanism which was his major creative obligation to the generations of his audiences in India and abroad.

Satyajit Ray started his career as a graphic artist in 1940s. His film education was entirely self-achieved; he was the pioneer of film society movement in India. His films have distinct postcolonial characters; his fiction films represented India with its genuine essence as a land with contemporary history and population. The realism substantiated by Ray in Indian film history was inspired by the postcolonial spirit of India that the nation gained through the decades of anticolonial movements before the partition.

Satyajit Ray’s documentary films were mainly about people, the lives, contributions and achievements of great Indians. His documentaries, like his feature films, also represented humanism, time, reality and complex context of the personalities he portrayed. Ray had deep admiration for the personalities whose lives and philosophies he reconstructed in his films and he displayed a strong appreciation about them. Other than personality films Ray produced a documentary on Sikkim, then a princely state in India. Ray portrayed the personalities and their works in his films from a postcolonial perspective and illustrated the lives of these luminaries from a new viewpoint that India
has achieved after independence in 1947. His film on Sikkim portrayed a nationhood, a small land and people with pride, history and progression.

India had a long and vibrant film industry from the colonial time. India also inherited a huge documentary film producing organization and multi-level production units located at different parts of India from the British imperial administration. When Satyajit Ray came to make his first documentary film in 1961, five years after making his first film, Indian government’s documentary film organization Film Division of India (FDI) had already led this field of filmmaking in India for two decades. FDI already had produced long lists of documentary films of different genres to keep the flow of information steady to the millions of Indians living in distantly located regions of a vast territory. Obviously, after the independence, those FDI films gained a kind of postcolonial characteristics within the newly gained national identity.

Satyajit Ray started his first documentary to meet the artistic and the bureaucratic challenge that was existing at that time within the FDI as a governmental monitor, exhibitor and the financier of the documentaries and mass communication films. Satyajit Ray made most of his documentary films with financial assistance from the organizations of Indian government. Ray chose the subjects of his documentaries and worked independently, but the limited financial support provided by the governmental organizations had impacts on his total production. In some cases, he has to work within a limited budget and compromise the content and length of his films.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the documentaries of Satyajit Ray in context of postcolonial studies and relate these films to the trends of contemporary filmmaking and the film style and aesthetics of Satyajit Ray. There is no book length study on Satyajit Ray’s documentary films in

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3 FDI Film Division of India. [http://filmsdivision.org](http://filmsdivision.org)

Indian or other languages. Ray’s critics have briefly written or commented about his documentaries in their books while writing his biography and evaluating his fiction films. For convenience of discussion, Ray’s film *Sikkim* was evaluated in a separate chapter. Alternatively, a different chapter was given to discuss his personality genre films.

This dissertation contains 7 chapters.

a. Chapter 1: Nonfiction Cinema in India: A Short History
b. Chapter 2: Satyajit Ray and His Films
c. Chapter 3: Nonfiction and Documentaries of Satyajit Ray
d. Chapter 4: Ray’s Personality Genre Documentaries: Perspectives, Contents, Aesthetics and Film Style
e. Chapter 5: Documentary *Sikkim*: Content, Controversy and the Background
f. Chapter 6: Discussion
g. Chapter 7: Conclusion
Chapter 1

Nonfiction Cinema in India: A Short History

Cinema photography or motion picture was an instant sensation in British India at the very beginning of twentieth century. Lumière motion pictures were first screened in Bombay (now Mumbai), in India in July 1896 (Garga, 2007; Mahadevan, 2010). And at the same time, Lumière pictures were also exhibited in Calcutta (now Kolkata) by an English person in a local theater. In fact, that was the beginning of the history of motion pictures in India. Later in 1898, Hiralal Sen (1866–1917), a Bengali Indian photographer produced some films that recorded theater performance on Calcutta stages. One of Hiralal Sen’s earliest film was *The Flower of Persia* and that was considered as the first recorded motion picture in India (Garga, 2007).

Around 1900s and 1910s, there were trends of producing newsreels in India and it was patronized by the British government in Delhi. There were some newsreels on *Delhi Durbars* which were filmed in-between 1903 to 1911 and those were mostly the ceremonioal pictures of British governors and their entourages. Individual enthusiasts recorded some historical incidents of India without governmental patronage (Roy, 2002). They recorded the political events, natural disasters and calamities in the major cities and those footage gained a great historical importance as documentations. These were considered as early Indian silent cinema or silent documentary (Majumdar, 2007).

Shortly after the breakout of WWI, the British Raj in India initiated a strong propaganda movement to influence the public opinion in the colony. After 1915, different English companies were filming, producing and exhibiting newsreels in India which were a part of a series of propaganda to involve and restrain the colony into the war (Garga, 2007). After the war, it became evident that the British

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5 Examples: *Great Bengal Partition Movement and Procession* (1905), *Bal Gangadhar Tilak’s Visit to Calcutta and Procession* (1906), *The Terrible Hyderabad Flood* (1908), and *Cotton Fire at Bombay* (1912) etc.
Raj in India needs a strong propaganda machine to keep the huge colony under control while the demand of self-rule in India was getting momentum due to the movements of Indian National Congress and the return of M K Gandhi⁶ as a newly famed leader of nonviolence from South Africa.

Within the period of WWI, British government in India formed different agencies to regulate the motion picture production and exhibition in the colony to administer the official rule and guidance on film production. In 1920, the first cinematograph act in India came into effect. Before that in 1913, Dadasaheb Phalke (1870-1944), an Indian, produced the first Indian silent film. In 1920s, the film industry in India took its lift and soon became a major film producing country after the US and the UK. In the second decade of twentieth century, India produced a long list of newsreels and other nonfiction film documents that widely recorded the major incidents of the colony and its rulers. Besides all these imperial propaganda, a good number of newsreels were produced by different Indian and British companies on local issues and politics. M K Gandhi was one of the frequent subjects of those films because of his increasing importance in Indian politics.

By late 1920s, India had a vibrant film industry mainly centered in Bombay and Calcutta producing more than hundreds films a year which reached 200 at the end of the decade. By 1930, most of the ordinances related to film production and exhibition were enforced and major cities in India had their separate film censor boards. Within the first three decades of the twentieth century, India had shown a noticeable progress in the industrial and artistic achievements about film production and technique. Throughout the period of WWII, British imperial propaganda machine worked with local professionals and experts to produce films on war and other issues related to British supremacy and victory.

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⁶ Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869 – 1948), popularly known as Mahatma Gandhi, civil rights activist, leader of nonviolence and Indian independence movement.
In 1940s, British colonial government utilized the documentary genre as part of its war effort and created a new instructional structure named Film Advisory Board (FAB) with a mission to influence the public opinion, publicize the requirements of the war situations and to propagate a popular support. After 1946, due to the end of WWII, the independence and partition of India in 1947, propaganda films became irrelevant in new circumstances.

The period after 1947 was marked as a period of postcolonial anxiety. After independence, new institutions replaced the colonial regulatory infrastructures with national operatives and newer bureaucracy. Unfortunately, new institutions and rules were an extension of colonial legacy (Roy, 2002; Jain, 2013). Film Division of India (FDI), a new financing and patronizing organization under the control of federal authority of India was launched in 1948 to oversee and regulate the documentary, newsreel and propaganda sector of the new Indian government. Until today, FDI has played a vital and significant role in the development of different documentary film genres in Indian screen history.

Over the first three decades of independence, the Indian government used documentary films as the main audio-visual medium of communication and education (Deprez, 2017). The first Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru (1889-1964), although was an architect of Indian independence with anticolonial views, but his regime followed and practiced the British political, economic, social and cultural system which was a contrast to the new nation and national identity. The bureaucratic and political influence of colonial rule was indispensable in Indian media policy at that time. However, the documentary films produced by the government machines played a vital role to create national unity, identity and social consciousness in a widely diverse, unequal and vast Indian society.

Within 1970s, the Indian government had developed an infrastructure to support the existing film industry which was huge in generating revenue and was a mammoth in creating investment and
employments and at the same time, very crucial in influencing mass opinion. The government established a film school, an archive and a financing body to support creative filmmakers who could use the medium in a more artistic, exemplary and critical way. In continuation to this process, the National Film Development Corporation (NFDC)\(^7\) was created, film censor boards were rearranged and the central government initiated a continuous support to cinema as an apparatus to accelerate national development and reconstruction. Postcolonial policies were reflected in these governmental processes but India was culturally dominated by its colonial legacy and it was concurrently reflected in fiction and nonfiction cinema (Deprez, 2017).

In 1950s and 1960s, there were frequent bureaucratic and regulatory changes within FDI. In these decades, FDI continued to dominate Indian screens as a state funded producer of audiovisual materials and government utilized the power of documentary cinema to educate people and encourage them to adopt modern thoughts and transform their social and personal life. Until the declaration of the ‘state of emergency’ in 1975, by then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi (1917-1984), FDI produced a mammoth numbers of films as a routine program, but among those a good number of films were produced by famous and creative filmmakers. Involvement of filmmakers like Satyajit Ray, Hari Shadan Dasgupta, Mohan Bhavnani, Mushir Ahmed, Jean Bhownagary and others gave FDI films a great aesthetical lift and modification.

From the beginning of 1960s, the political situations in India were transforming internally and internationally. Sino-Indian War of 1962, the death of Jawaharlal Nehru in 1964, India-Pakistan War of 1965, after independence tumultuous decades in Kashmir, rise of Marxist and Maoist politics and insurgency caused a great unrest throughout India in 1960s and 1970s. The Liberation War of Bangladesh and the exodus of millions of refugees to the bordering states of India in 1971 added a

\(^7\) NFDC National Film Development Corporation established in 1975. [https://www.nfdcindia.com](https://www.nfdcindia.com)
new stress to this situation. The hostile political scenario of the state had an impact on the federal policies that regulated the audiovisual medium. Concurrently, a new generation of filmmakers disappointed and marginalized by the monopoly of the FDI demanded a change in the policy of the state sponsored film production. It was realized that FDI films were unpopular, the quality of films were nonstandard and the contents of films were repetitive.

In 1964, government appointed a committee led by A K Chanda\(^8\) to review and report on public media. The committee known as Chanda Committee submitted their report in 1966. They pointed at similar areas of improvement both internally and externally to FDI to that of the Patil Committee report of 1951 led by S K Patil\(^9\). Chanda Committee report was largely bypassed by the government and FDI was not given any autonomy from the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting; governmental control over FDI remained dominant while its films grew estranged from general public (Deprez, 2017; Garga, 2007). However, in this period of time, new filmmakers like Sukhdev, Pramod Pati, S N S Sastry, K S Chari, Fali Bilimoria and others came forward with new ideas and even within the control and the bureaucracy of FDI produced some iconic films in Indian documentary film history.

1975 ‘state of emergency’ imposed strong control over state and private media. Newspaper, state controlled radio and television, Film Division, private publications and films went under vigorous censorships. Disregarding all democratic norms and rules, FDI produced films on issues justifying the emergency, boosting Prime Minister Indira Gandhi’s role in nation building and development (Garga, 2007). After the lift of emergency, in late 1970s, Indian state television Doordarshan gradually replaced FDI as new government propaganda machine. In 1984, government drastically

\(^{8}\) Asoke Kumar Chanda, Indian bureaucrat, former Auditor-General of India.

\(^{9}\) Sadashiv Kanoji Patil, a political leader from then ruling party Indian National Congress from Maharashtra, India.
curtailed the budget for FDI, the film production was reduced to half from average 100 films to 50 films per year and production of 200 films were suspended. Defunding FDI in 1980s had opposite impacts on the production of documentaries in India. Firstly, FDI with revised budget concentrated all efforts in producing cheap propaganda films and lost importance to creative filmmakers as a financial source and patron. Secondly, post-emergency period and the financial and organizational shrinking of FDI had inspired an avant-grade beginning of the independent documentary practice in India. According to Garga (2007) and Deprez (2017), 1980s was a liberating decade for independent documentary makers who explored their creative path without governmental and bureaucratic domination.

A new group of filmmakers, in 1980s after the VHS revolution, stepped into the field of Indian documentary equipped with new instruments, such as, video recording system which made filmmaking handy and cheap. Young filmmakers started to work on a new format with much more financial independency and freedom; foreign television channels, aid organizations, corporations and individuals had financed many documentaries at that period. In 1990, government of India initiated a film festival in Mumbai (Bombay) known as Mumbai International Film Festival (MIFF) which provided a forum for nonfiction films.

In post-independence years, India also attracted many world renowned filmmakers to work on Indian subjects and shot their films in Indian locations. Jean Renoir’s famous film *The River* was filmed in Bengal, India in 1949. Satyajit Ray had an acquaintance with Renoir at that time. Famously, Robert Flaherty shot *Elephant Boy* in 1937. Besides that, Roberto Rossellini (*India Matri Bhumi* 1959) and Louis Malle (*Phantom India* 1969) produced their acclaimed and controversial documentaries on India partially with Indian governmental support (Garga, 2007). Other famous filmmakers, Russian Roman Karman and Swedish Arne Sucksdorff also made several films in India 1950s.
Now after the emergence of new media and private televisions, documentaries became more common to Indian audiences; though there are questions and criticism about the contents and quality of the films. FDI lost its monopoly as the producer of documentaries and government lost much of its control over this medium but the documentaries of present satellite and digital age lost its value as an expression of creativity and opinion. New documentaries mostly serve TV stations and their popular demand. However, there are few filmmakers still making quality films with limited budget and keeping this medium in progress and competing with other odds and obstacles from newly emerged corporate media and state policy.

In the last half of twentieth century, as the largest documentary unit in the world, FDI documentaries had 10 million audiences per week and FDI has produced nearly 9,000 films in last 75 years since 1943 (Garga, 2007). FDI as a state organization was bureaucratic, conventional, politically influenced, traditional and unfriendly to the liberal filmmakers. In last seven decades, FDI has promoted a limited number of highly acclaimed documentary projects while India’s other film financing institution NFDC have financed many outstanding fiction films since 1975. Government restrictions, FDI’s rigid bureaucratic norms and narrow political motives overruled the creative and progressive documentary initiatives and FDI films grossly lost reliability to the general audience.

In 1980s, individual filmmakers came forward with new film initiatives that included subjects like: political, social and economic inequality, race relations, gender issues and tumultuous regional oppression in different parts of India. These new films exposed a new form of documentary which were not based on carefully approved subjects by FDI authority and documented undistorted reality. Finally, film historians consider FDI as a huge organization that dealt with documentaries in a postcolonial political situation and helped to integrate a new nation and at the same time, introduced the technology, infrastructure of documentary making and developed a standard circulating system.
In the long run, the Indian film industry was overall benefitted from the activities of FDI, though it is true that, after 1980s, Indian documentaries were liberated from the clutch of restriction and these new films are the true examples of new Indian documentaries.
Chapter 2

Satyajit Ray and His Films

Satyajit Ray introduced a new era of filmmaking in India. He depicted a realistic version of classic Bengal in his early films. Until mid-1950s, before the emergence of modernist and realist cinema by Satyajit Ray and his contemporaries, Indian films, as well as Bengali films were romantic and melodramatic stories. Within the robust Indian film industry located throughout the regions of Indian states, after the independence in 1947, Calcutta was the capital of Bengali cinema, and at the same
time, besides Bombay, it was the most important Indian city producing successful commercial films and film stars (Gooptu, 2011).

Satyajit Ray appeared on Calcutta screen, in 1955, with a new cinema that revealed an unprecedented reality of life. Due to the prevailing characteristics of Indian cinema, the audiences around India were not really ready for realistic films. Indian film industry from its beginning was a private industrial sector based on investment and profit. In the early years of the industry, the artistic and technological concepts of cinema were largely neglected. In addition, in 1930s, after the beginning of ‘talkies’ and the origination of stardom, Indian films became a major source of mass entertainment; and from then on, a world of fantasy is triumphing on Indian screen. With his debut film, in 1950s, Satyajit Ray transformed the history of Indian cinema and gradually, he received a perpetual attention of global audiences and film critics.

As a director Satyajit Ray was influenced by Italian neorealism. Poverty, village life, the crisis of human relationship, uncertainty and unpredictable nature (Apu Trilogy 1955-1962 including Pather Panchali) were the main subjects of his films until 1970 (Seton, 1971). Pather Panchali, now a world classic, as a film portrayed a slow, darkened, stagnant and prejudiced early twentieth century Bengal village, an archetype of Indian villages. Apu Trilogy (1955-1962) was based on classic novels by Bengali writer Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay (1894-1950). In 1950s, on Indian screen, Pather Panchali was a new cinematic phenomenon; filmgoers, critics, people within the film industry, government and the bureaucracy were not familiar with such an artistic and crude realization of life on screen. Ray had to overcome obstacles until his film received a very enthusiastic response from abroad. Pather Panchali was the first Indian film that presented a new version of Indian life which was contrary to the colorful dance and song oriented Hindi films that created a prototype of Indian cinema abroad.
Satyajit Ray’s films have different phases. Content of his films transformed time to time; he accommodated different social, philosophical and humanitarian aspects in different phases of his film career. In the beginning of his film career, until early 1960s, Ray was engaged with his Apu Trilogy films and that can be considered as the *Pather Panchali* era. The films of that time was based on literary classics, portrayed village life, poverty, prejudice and circumstantial reality. Ray made *Distant Thunder*, one of his important film in 1973 which was focused on the great Bengal famine of 1943\(^\text{10}\) and the destitution of rural life. Most of his films Ray made on rural life was produced in late 1950s and 1960s.


Stayajit Ray made films on historical and colonial perspectives, all of his films on these subjects contained the colonial reality and a postcolonial context. Some of his prominent films (*The Lonely Wife* 1964, *The Home and the World* 1984) were based on Rabindranath Tagore’s (1861-1941) novels, the celebrated Bengali poet and philosopher of colonial time. Ray interpreted and reevaluated Tagore on the screen. Tagore’s stories captured the transforming perspectives of India’s colonial life, and he represented the complexity of a new era, a renaissance inside the educated middleclass of Bengal and

\[^{10}\text{In 1943, the province of Bengal under British India experienced one of the deadliest famine in world history. The famine lasted throughout the year in Bengal that includes present day Bangladesh and the Indian state of West Bengal. Three to five million people died at the time of famine directly out of starvation, malnutrition and disease.}\]
the onset of anticolonial movements. Portraying Tagore’s female protagonists and their prominent role with socio-psychological complexity gave Ray’s films a distinct height within the films of his time. Ray produced five films from Tagore’s stories.

Satyajit Ray’s films were based of classic novels and stories written by renowned Bengali and Hindi writers. Two of Ray’s films were in Hindi and Urdu (The Deliverance, 1981 and The Chase Player, 1982), and were based on famous Hindi writer Munshi Premchand’s (1880-1936) stories. The Deliverance dealt with subjects like caste system and feudalism in Indian societies, while The Chase Player told about the time and the social responses to the British colonial rule before the historical Sepoy Mutiny of 1857\(^{11}\). Few of his films were written by Ray himself (Kanchenjungha 1962, The Hiro 1966, The Fortress 1974, The Elephant God 1978, Kingdom of Diamonds 1980, Branches of the Tree 1990, and The Stranger 1992).

Satyajit Ray portrayed urban India in his films those dealt with the social, economic and moral transformation of Calcutta metropolis after Indian independence. He interpreted the changes in the family, the adoption of new values, the impacts of colonial culture, the growth of angry urbanity, the decay in the postcolonial politics and inequality in his urban films (The Big City 1963, The Adversary 1970).

Satyajit Ray established his female characters with importance in his films. Pather Panchali (1955) has an important female character. Later in his films he introduced independent, intelligent and dynamic female characters which was absent in Bengali and as well in Indian cinema. Female characters of Bengali screen before 1950s were mostly romantic, sentimental and melodramatic.

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\(^{11}\) The Indian Rebellion of 1857-1858, known as Sepoy Mutiny was the first civil-military uprising in India against colonial rule.
Female protagonists in Ray’s cinema were impactful, significant and complex (*The Lonely Wife* 1964, *The Home and The World* 1984).

Satyajit Ray was a great storyteller in world cinema; he established his own film style, narrative and cinematic composition. In four decades of his filmmaking career he transformed his creative endeavors and incorporated new idea and initiatives in his films. Ray remained diverse with his art and conveyed new massages to his audiences around the world. Ray wrote all his screenplays and dialogues of his films; he had his own editing style, he also composed music and directed cinematography. Despite of his films overwhelmingly Indian content, due his distended humanist and realist philosophical approach and his very communicative film style, Ray has universal audiences; his films have a noticeable impact on every audience group across the globe.\(^{12}\)

\(^{12}\) Satyajit Ray’s filmography: [http://satyajitrays.org/films/filmo_directed.htm](http://satyajitrays.org/films/filmo_directed.htm)
Chapter 3

Nonfiction and Documentaries of Satyajit Ray

Four out of Satyajit Ray’s five documentary films were personality films, a kind of biographical documentations. In these films, Ray illustrated the lives, contributions and achievements of his famous and iconic predecessors and contemporaries who illuminated the creative spectrum of nineteenth and twentieth century India.

Satyajit Ray’s first documentary was *Rabindranath Tagore*, produced in 1961, as a commemorating film on the occasion of Tagore’s birth centenary and it was also the first documentary on Tagore. Film Division of India (FDI) produced this film on behalf of the Government of India. Jawaharlal Nehru, the then prime minister of India personally took initiatives to commission this film to Satyajit Ray.

Ray’s other personality genre films are: *The Inner Eye* (1972), *Bala* (1976) and *Sukumar Ray* (1987). His second documentary *Sikkim* (1971) was not a biography; it was produced under the patronage of then Sikkim government, which documented the life, nature, environment and the culture of a landlocked state in Himalayan range within the Indian subcontinent.

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13 *Rabindranath Tagore* (1961). Produced by Film Division of India. Script & Commentary: Satyajit Ray. 54 min. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SPqQ7-XuLeA
14 Rabindranath Tagore was a Bengali poet, musician, novelist and painter, a renaissance man and a philosopher, first non-European and Asian to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913. Tagore was born on May 7, 1861 and died on Aug 7, 1941, in Calcutta, British India and lived most of his life in Calcutta and Shantiniketan, Bengal, India. His creative period was considered as the most prestigious era of Bengali culture and literature.
15 *The Inner Eye* (1972). Produced by Film Division of India. Script, Commentary, Sound & Music: Satyajit Ray. 22 min. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XjaSB7jkFqU
16 *Bala* (1976). Produced by National Centre for the Performing Arts, Bombay & Government of Tamil Nadu. Script, Commentary & Music: Satyajit Ray. 33 min. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2rCCoagZzUU
17 *Sukumar Ray* (1987). Produced by Government of West Bengal, India. Script, Commentary & Music: Satyajit Ray. 29 min. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kRg1WbFvXgo

The Inner Eye was a film on painter Binode Behari Mukherjee’s life and work. The film Bala was a documentation of the life and work of famous Indian classical dancer Balasaraswati. His last nonfiction film Sukumar Ray was a documentary on Ray’s father who was a writer, illustrator, printing expert in India in early twentieth century.

Satyajit Ray had personal attachments with the subjects of his documentary films. Those personalities he depicted had somehow an interaction with Ray in some period of his life. At early years of 1940s, Ray went to Visva-Bharati University at Shantiniketan, Bengal in then British India founded by Rabindranath Tagore. Ray studied art and design there under famous oriental artists Nandalal Bose and Binode Behari Mukherjee. Ray told his biographer Marie Seton (1971) that ‘Gurudev’ had a great influence on him and Shantiniketan days formed him very much aesthetically and philosophically.

Young Satyajit Ray met Binode Behari Mukherjee, his ‘master-mashai’ (respected teacher), the subject of his film The Inner Eye as a student of Visva-Bharati Art School. Ray was fascinated by Mukherjee’s orientalist approach to art and aesthetics. Though Ray left Visva-Bharati soon after the death of Tagore at 1941 before completing his studies, but influence of Mukherjee remained apparent in his short career as a graphic artist in a British advertising firm branched in Calcutta.

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19 Binode Behari Mukherjee (1904-1980), an artist and muralist from West Bengal, India. He was considered as a key figure of contextual modernism in Indian painting.
20 Balasaraswati, popularly known as Bala (1918-1984), a celebrated Indian classical dancer of Bharatanatyam, born in Tamil Nadu, India. Bala was hailed from an 18th century traditional musical family. She played a significant role in spreading classical dance performance beyond the precincts of temples to broad Indian and international audiences.
21 Sukumar Ray (1887-1923), father of Satyajit Ray, popular Bengali juvenile writer, humorist, artist and pioneer graphic specialist in British India.
22 Visva-Bharati University, a public university in West Bengal, India, was established by Rabindranath Tagore on 1921.
23 Tagore was called Gurudev (revered master) at his time. Even now in conversation and in literature people love to mention him as Gurudev.
Ray depicted the life and works of Tanjore Balasaraswati, the famous South Indian Bharatanatyam dancer in his film *Bala*. Satyajit Ray was a distinguished scholar of oriental music and dance. In mid 1970s, Tamil Nadu government commissioned Ray to produce a film on Balasaraswati; *Bala* was shot in Tamil Nadu and the film reflected a broad scenario of Indian civilization.

*Sukumar Ray*, the last personality genre film of Satyajit Ray was a documentation of the life and work of his famous father. Government of the Indian state of West Bengal produced this film in 1987 to commemorate the centenary of Sukumar Ray. Satyajit Ray completed this documentary four years before his own death in 1992.
Chapter 4

Ray’s Personality Genre Documentaries: Perspectives, Contents, Aesthetics and Film Style

Satyajit Ray contributed in the field of cinema largely as a fiction filmmaker. The cinema historians do not consider him a documentarian. Ray was also famous for his stories, novels, film scripts, graphic arts and music scores. Experiencing his films are a kind of a journey through the work of a complete filmmaker. His films are engraved with his very vivid signature marks.

Documentary or nonfiction films are considered a minor sphere of Satyajit Ray’s cinematic spectrum. Critics do not consider his nonfictions as any major endeavor as his fiction films, though his nonfictions also resemble his film style, narrative method, aesthetical aspects and philosophy. Indian film historian Garga (2007) argued that with his few documentaries Satyajit Ray established a standard for personality genre documentaries in Indian nonfiction cinema history. Other than Seton (1971) and Robinson (1989), his biographers and critics have not emphasized much on his shorter films in their books or journal articles published in different languages in India and abroad.

Rabindranath Tagore 1961

Satyajit Ray had not planned a documentary on Rabindranath Tagore until late 1950s. Before making Pather Panchali in 1955, Ray worked on a film script based on Tagore’s novel Ghare Baire (The Home and The World)\(^{24}\), but never took any initiative until 1984 to complete it on celluloid. Satyajit Ray had acquaintances with Tagore as a kid. He became a student in Tagore’s university as a young man, and gradually achieved more familiarity with Tagorean philosophy and doctrine. Ray had clear

\(^{24}\) Satyajit Ray produced film Ghare Baire in 1984, based on Rabindranath Tagore’s novel of the same name written in Bengali and first published in 1916.
influence of Tagore’s monotheist Brahmo Samaj\textsuperscript{25} socio-religious movement and Vedic teachings. Ray filmed Tagore’s stories in different times of his film career and interpreted Tagore on the screen from a new postcolonial perspective. Young Ray felt his passion for Rabindranath and eventually he created a biography of the poet in cinema. By this film, Ray constituted bridges between two separate periods of history; between nineteenth and twentieth centuries, between the colonial and postcolonial periods of India and between the time of Rabindranath Tagore and the time after hundred years of his birth.

Satyajit Ray described a straight biography of Tagore including major aspects of his life. The film opened with the funeral procession of Tagore in Calcutta, and a voice-over announced the departure of the poet and his legacy. The film was comprised with dramatized episodes from Tagore’s life, archived images and cinematic footages. At the beginning of the film Ray described a brief history of the city of Calcutta and the rich and prestigious ancestral line of Tagore family. After the film

\textsuperscript{25} Brahmo Samaj (Society of Brahma) is a 19th century monotheistic reforming movement in Hindu religion. \url{http://true.brahmosamaj.in}
progressed with the dramatized episodes of young Tagore, the documentary entered into the inspiring and vibrant phase of Tagore’s prolific literary and philosophical life. Gradually, we came to know about his social and political involvement, his trips abroad, his winning of Nobel Prize in 1913, establishment of the Visva-Bharati University at Shantiniketan, his friendship, interaction and collaboration with Indian and foreign politicians, literary personalities, artists, musicians, scientists, statesmen, activists and philosophers. The audience within the short span experience the vastness of Tagore’s creative world, his huge contribution to the field of literature, and his phenomenal accomplishment as a musician and painter. Finally, in the film Ray introduced the philosophical insight of Tagore in the midst of WWII, when he as a poet and a prophesier argued for the universal attention toward the crisis of civilization and humanity.

Satyajit Ray wanted to create a filmic biography of Tagore with relative evidences and documentation. The archival footages that Ray used in the film were gathered from different sources, especially, the footage and photos of early 1900s contributed a lot to create a factual passage through Tagore’s formative and young age. Ray used some historical footages of 1905 Partition of Bengal Movement26 that were the historical footages related to the early cinematography in India. Ray documented most important occasions of Tagore’s life, and we see them appearing chronologically in the film as archival footages or photos or sketches with commentaries.

Ray vividly interpreted Tagore’s creative life, his philosophical journey as a poet and musician, and his work in many different fields and artistic genres. Throughout the film, there was a composite presentation of Tagore’s creative life, but as a filmmaker, Ray did not make it redundant with frequent examples of the poet’s compositions, poems, and dance or theatrical references. The middle part of

26 The Partition of Bengal Movement (1905-1911) was an anticolonial movement against the administrative decision of colonial British government to part the Indian province of Bengal. In 1905, Bengal was separated into two different administrative states: one was East Bengal and Assam and the other was West Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. In 1911, Bengal was reunited again. It was considered as a major anticolonial movement of early twentieth century India.
the film contained an episode that elaborated on Tagore’s major books, his literary and musical accomplishments, and also discussed *Gitanjali*[^27], his phenomenal book that introduced him to the Western literary and scholarly world. Tagore’s winning Nobel Prize in 1913 as an Asian for the first time influenced the world to revere orientalism and Indian philosophy as a mode of peace, spirituality and coherence.

Satyajit Ray independently initiated the film on Tagore and procured the materials (Seton, 1971). Even in 1960, there was no credible biography of Tagore in Bengali, though in his lifetime, a lot of biographical references, literary criticisms and memoirs on him were published. Ray did not rely on any of them. The film *Rabindranath Tagore* was a sole creation and interpretation of Tagore’s life by Ray based on facts and evidences of Tagore’s life. Ray partly based his film on Tagore’s autobiographical book *Jeevan-Smriti*[^28] to reconstruct the childhood, youth and life inside Jorasanko, Calcutta, poet’s palatial family home.

Ray did not have a formal script for his first documentary. He drafted details of visual continuations for the film after a month long research in Shantiniketan. Ray noticed that there were manuscripts, books, conventional photographs of important events, and even paintings of Tagore he could use in his film, but those static materials lacked mobility which was very contrary to a cinematic recreation (Seton, 1971). In this circumstance, Ray decided to make camera movements frequent and included some reconstructed scenes to bring mobility to Tagore’s ancestral story and remake his childhood. Nonetheless, the theatrical reconstruction of some parts of Tagore’s life and relinking of some historical events with newsreels and footages made this film unconventional in comparison to Ray’s own film style. It could be argued that Ray maintained a story line from the very beginning of the


film to the end, though the film never lost its character as a nonfiction. Most of the reconstructed and
dramatized part of the film conveyed a story or a fraction of a story to link between the phases of
Tagore’s life and Ray chronologically moved forward to different ages and achievements of Tagore
and the film captured a smooth motion over its much stagnant visual contents.

Ray’s film had three major visual components; firstly, the collected archival footages, secondly, the
still photos and other documentary clippings and finally, the theatrically reconstructed sequences. The
film also had audio commentaries in Ray’s own voice, musical scores by Jyotirindra Moitra based on
traditional Bengali tunes and Tagore’s own musical compositions and songs. The film sustained an
intellectual interest throughout its screening time. Marie Seton (1971) mentioned about the cinematic
essentiality and the constructions of some of the sequences in her book. For example she referred the
construction of a scene that compiled Tagore’s paintings and calligraphy of his manuscripts.

Ray’s film had avoided all controversial materials and subjects of Tagore’s life. There was criticism
about Ray’s uncontroversial approach to Tagore’s personal life and creative achievements. None of
the emotional and family turbulences of Tagore’s life were recalled in the film, Ray consciously
avoided that part of Tagore. Though Ray himself made a film based on Tagore’s novella in his later
career and that reflected a subtle part of Tagore’s youth.29

Many film critics consider Satyajit Ray’s film *Rabindranath Tagore* as an official portrait of India’s
and Bangladesh’s most celebrated poet who has been adored across South Asia for more than a
century. Garga (2007) and Nyce (1988) wrote that Ray’s creative and balanced approach and lacking
in any genuflection gave Tagore’s film a character of fine documentary especially as a personality

29 Satyajit Ray made his film *Charulata* (The Lonely Wife, 1964) based on Rabindranath Tagore’s novella *Nastanir* (The
Broken Nest, 1901), according to some biographers of Tagore, this story had reflected some personal events of Tagore’s
eyouth. A recent film (not by Satyajit Ray) named *Kadambini*, (Director: Suman Ghosh 2015) tells a story about that
period of Tagore’s life.
genre film. *Rabindranath Tagore* can be considered as a moving biography of a great man and a great work of art (Nyce, 1988).

**The Inner Eye 1972**

Satyajit Ray unveiled the inner strength and intuition of painter Binode Behari Mukherjee in his film *The Inner Eye*. As a film, *The Inner Eye* has an extensiveness; within a limited space, Ray roughly depicted an era of mid twentieth century East Indian art. Binode Behari, the subject of the film has an important place in Indian art history. Because of the films interpretative, inter-contextual visuals and commentaries, Ray biographer Andrew Robinson (1989) described *The Inner Eye* as a ‘small masterpiece’, and the ‘finest short documentary about a creative artist’.

![Binode Behari Mukherjee](www.wikipedia.com)

*The Inner Eye* was the second biographical documentary by Satyajit Ray and very clearly it was different from his first documentary *Rabindranath Tagore* (1961). Ray shot the total film in early 1970s, in Shantiniketan, West Bengal, India; Binode Behari Mukherjee was a resident professor of art there in Visva-Bharati University. In 1940s, Binode Behari was reaching the highest level of his creativeness while Ray arrived there as a student. Ray was highly influenced by Binode Behari’s
artistic conception and style. Nyce (1988), a critic of Ray argued that Binode Behari’s courage and vision, along with his conception of drawing and murals inspired the filmmaker to document his works.

Satyajit Ray emphasized two parallel subjects in the film. Firstly, Ray described the journey of Binode Behari as an artist and his vision impairment and his intuition with a spectrum of creative reality. Secondly, Ray depicted Binode Behari’s art, his conception of contextual modernism in the context of Indian and East Asian art, his philosophical concepts, his reconstruction of myth and rural life in a challenging art form like fresco.

Ray clarified and exhibited the major works of Binode Behari; we watched a composition of a mural and its installation. Binode Behari appeared on the screen and we watched him active with creative efforts and domestic habits. Ray’s narration mostly concentrated on the murals, Binode Behari’s life and his creative life after his total visual impairment in 1953. Ray narrated three major murals of Binode Behari. We learned briefly from Ray that Binode Behari’s form and the techniques were absolutely new and experimental at that time in 1950s and afterwards. Binode Behari was enriched with Indian philosophy and the conception of one of his mural was mythically and historically very close to the low class and caste people of India and his depiction of rural life was contemporary.

Satyajit Ray’s style in The Inner Eye was clearly different from his previous work Rabindranath Tagore. In limited space (within 20 minutes) Ray accommodated all most every aspects of Binode Behari and he used the style of interviewing, interacting and documenting and compiled the artist’s existing installations. Binode Behari’s presence gave the film a contemporary taste and character. The film was released in India and abroad while Binode Behari was alive and working. In Tagore’s film Ray’s attempt was to reconstruct Tagore from different sources, on the other hand, in The Inner Eye,
he analyzed Binode Behari more and emphasized his artistic achievements and his vision impairment which opened a powerful sight within Binode Behari’s artistry.

*Bala* 1976

Satyajit Ray’s *Bala*, a distinct personality film documented the life and the performance of famous Bharatanatyam artist Tanjore Balasaraswati, who was popularly known as Bala throughout India and abroad. Ray produced this film in 1976 when Bala was 59. In his interview with Andrew Robinson (1989), Ray recollected his first appreciation of Bala’s performance in Calcutta in 1935 while she was 17. This film was a kind of personal admiration of Bala’s talents and achievements by Ray and an evaluation of her artiste in a retrospect.

Ray introduced Bala and her dance in the film with the core aspects of traditional Indian classical music and dance and the history of temple based performances and its transformation from the mediaeval period to the modern time. Ray also emphasized the aesthetic aspects of South Indian dance.
and its continuous evolution through the reformation of Hindu rituals over centuries. Ray established the ‘gharana’ (school) of Bala’s performance which in time became a popular platform of classical Bharatanatyam in modern India and abroad.

Ray’s film contained interviews with different personalities and experts from the fields of dance, music and Indian aesthetics; they clarified and narrated the art form and also critiqued Bala as a performer. Ray used still photos, some archival materials and related narrations to establish Bala, her childhood, adult life and her performances. The tours abroad and her teaching engagements in USA were also documented with photos and footages. Ray went through her ancestry to establish her family’s long journey in the field of dance and music.

The film contained relevant narration and Bala was filmed dancing in the background of the Bay of Bengal in Madras (now Chennai) beach and film ended with a long performance by Bala. And with this part of the film a rare performance of Bala sustained for the future generations.

_Sukumar Ray_ 1987

_Sukumar Ray_, the last documentary produced by Satyajit Ray was a film about his father. This film was based on different archival materials, graphics and narrations. Ray dramatized some part of the plays and some characters from Sukumar’s fictions and he made the film as a story composed on his father’s life, his literature and ancestry.

_Sukumar Ray_, as a film contained his time, the early twentieth century Bengal, the influence of _Brahma Samaj_ movement, European education, the influence of Rabindranath Tagore on the society and culture and at the same time, the rise of political movements against British colonial rule. Ray incorporated all segments of early twentieth century and he also focused on flourishing juvenile literature in Bengali pioneered by his grandfather Upendrokishore Ray and his father Sukumar Ray.
Ray told a family story which contained the tales of generations, and also portrayed the personalities around Ray’s family and their time.

Like his other personality genre film on Tagore, Ray didn’t have any footage about Sukumar Ray in hand. He didn’t dramatize any part of Sukumar’s life. Only a narrator kept links between different phases of Sukumar’s life throughout the film. Family photos, diaries, letters, published newspaper articles and archival literary documents filled up the gaps to relate Sukumar Ray’s short creative life. This documentary was a tribute to Ray’s father by Ray who was an infant at the time of his father’s death and didn’t have any active memories about him.
Chapter 5

Documentary *Sikkim*: Content, Controversy and the Background

Satyajit Ray produced *Sikkim* (1971), his second documentary, when he was at the height of his career as an internationally famed filmmaker. By the beginning of 1970s, Ray had already made half of his films including his first documentary *Rabindranath Tagore* (1961).

*Sikkim* as a film, documented the nature, habitat, life and tradition of a nation located at the Himalayan ranges within the Indian subcontinent. The film was never exhibited in India until 2010, due to a ban imposed by the government of India in 1975, after the accession of the state of Sikkim within the Indian Union. *Sikkim* was not a political film, nor did it contain any controversial message. Critics consider *Sikkim* as a classic in the postcolonial history of Indian nonfiction cinema. Satyajit Ray, in
his film, documented the sovereignty of a nation and it became a pictorial existence of a land under the geopolitical crisis of Sino-Indian border of that time. Most of Ray’s documentary films were personality genre films that portrayed the lives, contributions and achievements of great Indians of postcolonial and colonial time. *Sikkim* was clearly different from Ray’s other films in content, context and film style.

**The film and the content**

*Sikkim* was Satyajit Ray’s only documentary which was not a personality genre film. The film was banned for 26 years, though Ray didn’t accommodate any controversial contents in the film. Ray authored, narrated, directed, composed and even mastered the soundtrack of the film that he made in 1971 when he was at the height of his career.

The film *Sikkim* was financed in 1970-1971 by the then Sikkim government and the royal family. Ray covered all important aspects of the Himalayan state, a protectorate of India at that time and the film came out as a unique production that revealed a land, the people and also the monarchy. Ray’s authorship gave the film completeness, a character and relevance. Due to the decision of the royals of then Sikkim as the financiers, the film didn’t have any public screening at that time. Only the King and his entourage watched the film in a private arrangement in Calcutta. The royals were unhappy with some of the contents of the film. So they decided not to release the film for public exhibition. Ray didn’t make *Sikkim* a travel documentary. He neither made a hagiography about the royals.

The film was banned in 1975 after the accession of Sikkim as a state in Indian Union. At that time, Indian government considered the film sensitive due to the political controversy raised after the takeover of Sikkim and the abolition of the monarchy. Audio visually as a film, *Sikkim* didn’t contain any politics or generate any political idea. However, the film was about the sovereignty of the state of Sikkim and about the history and the existence of the Sikkimese people. The film conformed
Sikkim’s existence in a crucial geographical location between the confronting states of India and China. Geo-strategically, the existence of Sikkim as a state was under constant threat after the Sino-Indian war in 1962.

Newspaper reports said, all the copies of the film was confiscated and destroyed by Indian government at that time. The film was in Ray’s filmography, but it was not screened anywhere in India. Most of his biographers and critics had mentioned the film in their respective books, but no detail of the film was available until 2010. For many years, cinema critics and film historians in India and abroad considered the film as a lost work of Ray.

In 2003, it was discovered that a copy of the film was survived in the archive of the British Film Institute, and with the help of the Academy Film Archive a copy of the film was restored in 2007. A restored version of the film was first screened in 2008 at Satyajit Ray Retrospective at the Nantes Three Continents Film Festival in France. After lots of controversies the film was first shown to Indian audiences at Nandan, Calcutta in Nov 2010. Earlier in 2002, Indian government had lifted ban on the film and later in 2010, the state of Sikkim government obtained the copyright of the film. A print of the film has been preserved by a Gangtok based state organization which works for the preservation of art and culture of Sikkim.

The film *Sikkim* opened with a shot of traditional Sikkimese orchestra, and then the camera captured a snow covered mountainscape of the Himalayas and later the audience experienced a wordless mise-en-scène of the flora and fauna of that biodiverse region. A long montage introduced the land, nature, environment, weather and the human habitations to the audience and a folk-tune followed by a voice-over intercepted the sequence and carried it over to an audio commencement as an introduction to the subject of the film. Ray’s camera slowly unfolded different aspects of Sikkim and at the beginning the film narrated the anthropological culture of the land, briefly mentioned the perspectives of history
and described the geology. Gradually, Ray introduced the farming, livelihood, crops and the agricultural products and the cattle along with the waterfalls, rivers and ropeways to recreate a physical appearance of a mountainous land before forwarding to the life of a small township of remote Sikkim. Ray visualized the life of farmers in Lachung and Lachen, focused on dresses, dialects and religions. Ray’s concentration remained focused on the diversity in market places like Namchi Bazar or Gangtok’s Lal Bazar.

Depiction of religious practices in Sikkim was another vital part of the film. Ray narrated Mahayana Buddhism as the official religion of Sikkim and he referred to the syncretic tradition of the land, and talked about diversity based on faith and ethnicity. Filming a major Buddhist monastery at Rumtek with elaboration to the decorating stone tablets, stone engravings, art and wood works, ornamental brocades of Tibetan origin, referring the hierarchy of the monks, prayers and assemblage of devotees enriched the documentary with ethnic elements. There was a shot about Pamiyangchi, the old capital of Sikkim that symbolized the existence of an ancient community and ethnicity of Himalayan tribes.

The film has a part on royals and rituals. Ray documented the Chogyal (King) and the royal festivities, celebration of Tibetan New Year with ritual dances and masks and traditional music. Robinson (1989) mentioned that, Ray was unhappy with the footages he had included in the film to satisfy the bureaucratic demands of the royals. He had to accommodate the scenes from a modern English style school and some statistics about the royal patronages in education. The appearance of the king Palden Thongdop Namgyal and his American born queen Hope Coke was seen in the film as they were participating in festivals. There was also an archival footage of Palden Namgyal’s wedding with Hope Coke in Gangtok in 1966 that attracted Western media interest to Sikkim.

The documentary ends with a royal feast, dance and celebration. The feast was in honor of the elites, but commoners also participated in the feast, they prostrated themselves before the king, and the
celebration ended with flaming a makeshift straw shrine as a ritual at the outskirts of the palace. Ray ended his film with jubilant youths eating the leftovers from the feast, singing, dancing and smoking as if they were liberating the land from age old customs, traditions and stagnations.

The background

Satyajit Ray was commissioned by then king of Sikkim Palden Thondup Namgyal and his American wife Hope Coke to make a documentary on Sikkim. According to Sandip Ray, Ray’s son, the queen of Sikkim was an admirer of Satyajit Ray and thus recommended him to the king (Das, 2014). Satyajit Ray’s film *Kanchenjungha* (1962) was filmed in Darjeeling and Ray had acquaintances with this regions. Hope Coke watched Satyajit Ray’s documentary on Tagore and that made the royal family interested in Ray when they decided to produce a film on Sikkim. Ray completed the filming within one season. He travelled remote parts of Sikkim to connect the film with a total feature of the land.

After the completion of the film the king and the queen of Sikkim expressed their unhappiness with the content. Similarly, Ray was unhappy for including different statistics and sequences to satisfy Sikkimese bureaucratic demands. Finally, the royals decided not to release the film for the public. And that was for the first time in Ray’s long film career his film remained out of projection. Robinson (1989) mentioned in his book that Ray was not satisfied with the existing version of *Sikkim*. Ray did not get complete editorial freedom in making this film. The royals of Sikkim and the government of India did not allow Ray enjoy a creator’s freedom of work and expression.

The Controversy

In general, there was no controversy in the contents of the film *Sikkim*. The film was descriptive, less opinionated and more picturesque. Satyajit Ray was more engaged with people, nature, history, culture and the diversity of Sikkimese communities rather than other socio-political issues. Politics
was absent in the film both thematically and representationally. No sequences and no narrations contained political aspects of the region.

![Map of Sikkim](https://www.wikipedia.com)

*Sikkim* as a film underwent at least three controversial effects until it was exhibited in India for the first time in 2010. First, the royals of Sikkim, due to their dissatisfaction on some of the contents of the film decided not to screen the film for public. It was not known that how Ray reacted to their decision but he expressed his dissatisfaction about the film’s final version (Robinson, 1989). Later, after the accession of Sikkim as a state of Indian Union, the then government of India banned the film considering the film’s content volatile due to aroused situations after the demolition of the monarchy.
and the process of accession. Finally, after the lift of the ban on the film in 2002, a judicial battle over the copyright issue of the film-work took nearly eight years to be settled and the film remained prohibited for screening until the legal decision was finalized.

What was the political controversy about the film *Sikkim*? Did the film contribute any important aspect behind the political decision of Indian government to take over Sikkim in 1975? Was this ban of the film necessary or was it a bureaucratic whim?

The film *Sikkim* received universal certification of the Central Board of Film Certification, India in 1973. But due to the patrons’ decision the film was not released for public screening and in 1975, after the merger of Sikkim into India initiated the ban of the film (Das, 2014). The film *Sikkim* was produced at a volatile time of Sikkim’s history, and the ban of the film *Sikkim* indicated the political apparatus at that moment in Sikkim and India was nervous with the situations emerged after the bill of accession was adopted in Indian parliament in April 1975. As per Indian official literature, Sikkim was merged into Indian Union after a referendum. The referendum was followed by few years of popular uprising (Das, 2014). Many versions of Sikkim’s merger into India can be cited in newspaper reports, political and governmental documents of 1970s, probably, all of them were irrelevant to the ban of the film *Sikkim*.

As a state Sikkim was a victim of geo-political tension between India and China. The fear of communism and a political unrest which led India to make this controversial move to takeover this tiny land which had no visible disputes with Indian government. The alienated monarchy lost its connection with Sikkimese middle class formed by the majority of ethnic Nepalese population and simultaneously, other minorities like Bhutia-Lepcha community lost its political dominance due to the constant migration of Nepalese origin people from the Himalayan regions since the British colonial era. Sikkim’s monarchy alongside with its limited administrative and political power came
in confrontation with Sikkimese elites which resulted a controversial uprising and debatable referendum. As an aftermath, Indian accession of Sikkim took place with a swift change of power.

Sikkim as a state had no foreign policy and liaison with other nations. After the wedding of the king Palden Thongdup Namgyal and American socialite Hope Coke, Sikkim attracted a brief media attention. Hope Coke initiated some activities to draw Western attention to this mountainous nation but that was mainly focused on handicrafts and artifacts, mostly cultural and academic.

What was the political significance of the film *Sikkim*? As a film *Sikkim* represented a sovereign nation, a historical, recognized and validated existence of a land, a truly anthropological existence of a diverse, and at the same time, intermixed and interrelated community, a broad culture, coexisting and vibrant religious harmony and livelihood. The essence of the film was nonpolitical and noncritical, though Ray juxtaposed some sequences that conveyed the inequality, feudality and the underdevelopment in Sikkim. These sequences did not carry any political message and nothing in the film was related to any political controversy that prospered to the demolition of a state and a government.

The nonpolitical character of the film *Sikkim* contained a strong political message. Das (2014) noted that the lack of politics in the film *Sikkim* made it politically volatile. After the accession of Sikkim, the film remained as a documented version of a sovereign state and thus the film became a symbol of a free state and a nation. Still today, this film can be exampled as a document of a free nation-state Sikkim.

The reason behind the ban of *Sikkim* in 1975 was a strong political issue and at that time, a controversy had surfaced as a strong political debate about the process of accession of Sikkim. Indian domestic and international policy at the height of Sino-Indian and Indo-Pakistan conflicts of 1960s and 1970s
and the emergence of Bangladesh in 1971 had influenced the accession of Sikkim, and in that period, this process also questioned the coexistence of the nations bordering India within South Asia.

Ten years after Satyajit Ray’s death in 1992, without any apparent ground, the ban of the film was lifted in 2002. Newspaper reports said that the ban was lifted by the Ministry of External Affairs of the Government of India, but the reason behind it was not clarified from any government or private sources. As newspapers reported, no copy of the film was preserved in India at the time of banning the film. So the lifting of the ban did not help the film to come back on screen right at that time. It can be argued that in Indian governmental consideration, after the quarter century of the accession of Sikkim, the aroused controversy of that time had been subsidized gradually and in other political contexts the film *Sikkim* became irrelevant and inarguable.

The last phase of the controversy was the legal battle for the right of the film. A Gangtok based organization The Art and Culture Trust of Sikkim (ACT) demanded the right of the film after the lift of the ban. This copyright suit lasted until 2010 up to the time it was resolved in higher court in New Delhi. The right of the film went to ACT, after that the public screening of the film was allowed for the first time in Calcutta.

As a nonpolitical documentary *Sikkim* underwent three obstacles that kept the film 35 years out of public screen. Firstly, the personal and institutional disapproval from the royals of Sikkim as the commissioner of the film in 1971, secondly, politically motivated ban from the Government of India in 1975 and lastly, a long dispute on copyright issue from 2002 to 2010 determined the fate of the film and the film virtually disappeared from the recent history of Indian cinema.
Chapter 6

Discussions

Satyajit Ray’s personality genre films have few common characteristics. Firstly, these films have sublime storylines to describe the biography of the personalities, though the story never became prominent over the total presentation of the film. Secondly, Ray mostly talked about the works, achievements, contributions and legacy of the personalities he documented. Thirdly, Ray kept the films informative, focused, analytical and masterly articulated with relevant commentaries.

There are similarities between the films *The Inner Eye* and *Bala*; the contents of the films were conceived thematically, and the subjects of the films painter-sculptor Binode Behari Mukherjee and dancer Balasaraswati were alive at the time of filming. Ray depicted them and confronted them on the screen very straightforwardly, and he revealed their lives mostly encountering them in real life. He interacted with other personalities to discover them, highlighted or critiqued them and their works. His approach towards his subjects was direct, and the representations of the personalities were contemporary; they appeared on the screen informative, acquainted and updated. Ray’s interaction moved from his subjects to the related information, archival footages or documents to the narration and finally, to the live presence of the subjects to the relevant researched contents. Within a short screening time, relatively, *The Inner Eye* and *Bala* revealed historical aspects, facts and clarifications about oriental painting and murals of Eastern India and about the long legacy of Bharatnatyam in Indian cultural history.

In contrast, *Rabindranath Tagore*, as a film had broader perspective and it was a distinctively researched film and in 1960s this film had created a standard for personality genre films in India (Garga, 2007). Ray adopted all cinematic techniques to make Tagore’s biography accountable, significant, unique and visually communicable. Due to the historic importance of Tagore’s time, life
and contributions, Ray had to search documents and footages from different archives around the world. He also reconstructed Tagore’s time and the time of his ancestors and their contemporaries. In addition, Ray had to establish a city and a nation and the transformation of a colonial era of nearly a century. *Rabindranath Tagore*, as a film contained cinematic materials from the different parts of the Indian continent and it contained the story of transformation of Tagore as a poet and a renaissance personality and the gradual change of India from a well-controlled colony to a nation emerging for independence.

In *Rabindranath Tagore*, Ray’s job as a filmmaker was to recreate history that will evidently and reliably communicate with the audience of a different time. Satyajit Ray’s composition throughout the film contained dependable entities from the history to depict the time. He never approached the content or total composition of the film from a journalistic viewpoint, not even as a historian or a compiler; his style was cinematic, he gathered the anecdotes for a visual representation and thus, out of a biography with lots of cross references, Tagore’s film became a complete cinema. A similar approach could be noticed in the film *Sukumar Ray*, but the canvas of this film was brief, and the visual resources were limited. However, the making of other two films (*The Inner Eye* and *Bala*) were different than *Rabindranath Tagore* and *Sukumar Ray*; Ray visualized the later films mostly based on documents in a descriptive form, not through his interaction with his subjects or their presence.

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) lived his long 80 years of life under British colonial rule. In his documentary Ray portrayed and analyzed him from a postcolonial perspective. Ray looked at Tagore as a filmmaker of a postcolonial state. Tagore’s life and work under British rule was depicted from an analytical viewpoint that included all sociopolitical and historical events relevant to a nation transforming rapidly as a colony. Ray highlighted the 1905 Partition of Bengal Movement which was
led and organized by Tagore and that was a major political instance from his life. Ray used dramatized recreations, still photos and press clippings and newsreels to elaborate these events. Ray dramatized the night when Tagore decided to give up his Knighthood after the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre\textsuperscript{30} in Punjab, India, in April 1919. Visualizing Tagore in political circumstances and his reaction to colonial rule were other instances of Ray’s postcolonial aspects which was subtly noticeable throughout the film. In other documentaries Ray talked about different aspects of Indian culture, and there he elaborated about oriental art, South Indian dance and much more about Indian cultural traditions. The Inner Eye and Bala, as films were an exposition of Indian tradition which survived and practiced under British colonial rule for two centuries. Ray’s contents in his personality genre films were liberally crafted, and truthfully depicted but as a filmmaker he never compromised with the characteristics of his protagonists and their roots and their Indian-ness.

As a film Sikkim was completely a different story. A nation, a nationhood, an anthropologically and culturally harmonious community and a treacherously isolated land and a decaying monarchy was the subject of the film. The contents of film Sikkim were interconnected and the film expressed the totality of the contents. And Sikkim was very distinct from Ray’s other documentaries considering the contents, research and the cinematic style.

Today, Sikkim is considered as one of the key documentaries of Satyajit Ray who rarely produced such documentary in his long film career. Ray filmed Sikkim from a positive viewpoint, and also with slightly negative notion by asserting the existing feudality in an unenlightened and poverty-stricken land. Ray did not add any remark nor speculatively commented on the progress or the future

\textsuperscript{30} Jallianwala Bagh Massacre took place on April 13, 1919 in Amritsar, Punjab, British India, at the colonial era of India and in the early years of Indian anticolonial movement. At that day a troop of British Indian Army commanded by a colonial opened fire on a peaceful crowd holding a public meeting at a garden and as British government sources, 379 people were killed and other 1200 were wounded. But according to other sources, thousands of people were killed in that massacre. It is considered as the most brutal massacre in Indian modern colonial history.
development of the land, nor did he mention any existing political condition in his film. As a film, Sikkim promoted the voice of a positive land though it told the audience the story that existed four decades ago, and nothing as documented as in the film is existing now. The political controversy ascertained by the Indian politicians and bureaucracy achieved the political goal by banning this film after the accession of Sikkim into the Indian Territory. On the contrary, the ban of Sikkim jeopardized the political and constitutional right of an artist and Satyajit Ray expressed his disappointment after the ban of Sikkim (Robinson, 1989).
Chapter 7

Conclusion

According to Robinson (1989), Satyajit Ray had plans to make few more documentaries. But in his career, he did not get opportunities to work on any documentaries in-between his fiction films.

*Rabindranath Tagore* was considered as his major documentary; while as a film *Sikkim* received much more attention due to the political controversy and ban. On the other hand, *The Inner Eye* was considered challenging film due to its very exceptional content.

Satyajit Ray produced five fiction films based on Tagore’s story and novels. His acquaintances and involvement with Tagore’s literary works gave him more opportunities to evaluate and interpret Tagore’s life. Critics consider that Ray transformed and rehabilitated Tagore in a modern cinematic form, and introduced him to a new generations of audiences in India and abroad. In films based on Tagore’s stories, Ray revealed the creative world of Tagore to new generations of audiences in India and most of them only had acquaintances with Tagore on the textbooks. Ray’s film introduced Tagore from postcolonial aspects, and to new generation of audiences that was a new revelation of a poet of colonial time. In fact, the absence of an authentic biography of Tagore gave Ray’s film a pivotal place in the field of Tagore studies, and Seton (1971) considered the film as a postcolonial reconstruction of the poet’s life. To international audiences, *Rabindranath Tagore* as a film was a unique experience that gave them an opportunity to know India from various contexts and to get familiar with a maverick poet of modern time.

Ray’s documentaries accommodated his own interpretation of orientalism. We experienced an oriental philosophical approach in Tagore’s biography and other biographies. In Ray’s film, Tagore was an internationalist, an oriental master and a messenger of peace from the East to the West who
had lived throughout the world wars. In Ray’s documentaries we could see a recreation of humanism in post WWII perspective, and observe a postcolonial message to international audiences. Like his fiction films, in his documentaries, Ray remained an interpreter of humanism, modernism and above all the orientalism that he earned from his long association with Tagore and Tagorian legacy.

Aesthetically, critics consider *Sikkim* a significant Ray film freely conceived with defined cinematic texts, mesmerizing visuals and a certain degree of ethnographic quality. But it was not a film about any ethnicity; it told a story and depicted a totality. Extraordinarily, as a film *Sikkim* has an academic significance and it represents a certain style of narrative documentary cinema in the mid-twentieth century.
References


