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Urban Baggage: The Absent Kolkata in Satyajit Ray's 1960s films

[accepted manuscript]

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'The Calcutta of the burning trams, the communal riots, refugees, unemployment, rising prices and food shortages does not exist in Ray's films. Although he lives in this city, there is no correspondence between him and the 'poetry of anguish' which has dominated Bengali literature for the last 10 years.' (Chidananda Dasgupta, film critic)¹

'the New Wave seems to be on the losing side. As a result, in utter frustration and impotent rage, the over energetic members of the new generation who have refused to yield so long are now seen to haul themselves one against the other, holding Ray responsible, even if partially, for this sad state of affairs... can anyone deny the fact that in a work of art, as much as in politics, the leader's attitude and actions often become exemplary even without his meaning it?' (Mrinal Sen, film director) ²

In the 1970s, Satyajit Ray directed three films, *Pratidwandi* (*The Adversary*, 1970), *Seemabaddha* (*Company Limited*, 1971) and *Jana Aranya* (*The Middleman*, 1975), which were contemporary realist narratives of life in his city Kolkata (then Calcutta) in India. These three films are often grouped together as *The Calcutta Trilogy*. Before this, Ray's only film about contemporary life in Kolkata was *Mahanagar* (*The Big City*, 1963). Throughout the 1960s, Ray's popularity in his own city was tempered by the criticism that the internationally feted director was neglecting the realities of his home in his films (see above), as Kolkata increasingly became a hotbed of violent political activity, student unrest and economic instability.

This essay takes the position that Ray's 1960s films were much more about contemporary Kolkata than critics have been willing to accept. This argument is based on an analysis of three of Ray's films made in the beginning, middle and end of a decade that brought about a series of political, social and cultural

¹ Das Gupta, Chidananda. 1966. 'Ray and Tagore' in *Sight and Sound*, London: BFI. p. 36

² Sen, Mrinal. 1977. 'Satyajit Ray Sets the Example' in *Views on Cinema*, Calcutta: Ishan, p. 47.

upheavals which proved crucial to the city's future. Taken together, these three films constitute a trilogy in their own right, and by reading them together it is possible to clearly trace some of the prominent social trends in the evolution of Kolkata in the 1960s.

Of the three films discussed in this essay, the earliest, *Kanchenjunga* (1962) is set in the hill station of Darjeeling at the foothills of the Himalayas. It is an ensemble piece about the final afternoon of an upper class Kolkata family on holiday, where the interplay of characters reveals the cracks in their impeccable veneer of aristocracy as they find themselves in the midst of individual and social changes. The often underrated *Nayak* (*The Hero*, 1966) features a Bengali film star on his way to collect a major award and is set in the first class carriage of a railway train which has left Kolkata for India's capital city, Delhi. The film hero's encounter with an intrepid young journalist results in a conversation which leads to the labyrinths of his mind. The third, *Aranyer Dinratri* (*Days and Nights in the Forest*, 1970), is set in the forests of Palamau in northern Bihar. Like *Kanchenjunga*, this film is about 'tourists' from Kolkata. These are a group of four young men on holiday in the forests where they meet two young urban women who are tourists like themselves and try to woo them awkwardly with unhappy results. A parlour game sequence towards the end of the film provides an insight into their confused sensibilities.

Beyond the City

Ever since British colonial rulers discovered that they could escape the heat of the Bengal summer by moving away to the cooler hill station of Darjeeling with its splendid views of Himalayan snow peaks, the resort grew in popularity. The British 'masters' were closely followed by their elite Indian subjects, and later by the subalterns. After India became independent in 1947, Darjeeling continued to be popular as tourists flocked to what had become over the years a picturesque settlement surrounded by the Himalayas around and tea gardens below. As the archetypal private tutor in *Kanchenjunga* animatedly explains to his nephew Ashoke, Darjeeling is a 'melting pot'. The term misleadingly implies that it is a

space where class divisions disappear and identities are reconfigured, and carries a suggestion of social equality, one that had a particular resonance for a new generation of Indians in the 1960s and their experience of India's still nascent democracy.

The irony could hardly be more severe. In Ray's film, Darjeeling emerges as a space where people from different classes move together side by side. While they are all on holiday in Darjeeling, away from the city of Kolkata that is their common point of origin, they remain within their respective, carefully insulated worlds. They pass each other by often without acknowledging the other's presence. They seldom meet, and never mix. The tourists do not mix with the impoverished locals. Within the tourists, there is no intercourse between classes. Darjeeling is a space which conveys the impression of a single unified world, but is in reality a fractured space within which they move in their respective orbits.³ And when these orbits cross, chaos ensues.

Kanchenjunga portrays a Bengali upper class family who carry their baggage of class identity even when they leave the city on holiday. Like valuables too precious to be left behind, these tourists carry the markers of their class with them, if only because they provide 'security'. The four friends in *Aranyer Dinratri* are no exception to this rule, even though they clearly belong to the upper echelons of Kolkata's middle-class. Not having booked accommodation in the forest bungalow, they initially try to get access by misleading the caretaker. When that ploy fails, they try to impress him saying they were VIPs, and are finally allowed entry after they grease his unwilling palms. This exploitation of the lower classes by those more powerful is carried out through deception, intimidation and bribery, in that order. These tools are used individually or in combination to unlock otherwise closed doors in the city as well as beyond it, even those of a 'secure' bungalow in the 'insecure' forest. Class identity is baggage that is both essential and convenient to carry.

³ See Ghosh, Suman: 'Development Dynamics in India: Two Examples, One Film; A Reading of Satyajit Ray's *Kanchenjunga*' in *Global Built Environment Review*, March-April 2004, vol 3, no. 3, pp 15-23 available at <http://www.globalbuiltenvironmentreview.co.uk/Pages/default.aspx>.

The urban tourist in these two films carries much more baggage than class identity. This includes not only the sense of class belonging which distinguishes their way of life in Kolkata, but also, effectively, the city itself. Escape from the city is impossible. Ironically, in trying to escape the city, these tourists carry the city with them wherever they go. This distinguishes the 'tourist' from a 'traveller' like Monomohan in Ray's final film *Agantuk (The Stranger, 1991)* whose cultural roots do not seem to affect his ability to engage with the groups of people he comes in contact with in his anthropological journeys. Conversely, Ashim in *Aranyer Dinratri* has come to the forest because he needed a 'break from routine'. Arindam, the hero in *Nayak*, hopes that the train to Delhi will give him 'freedom for twenty four hours'. The family in *Kanchenjunga* has been on holiday for seventeen days, but the holiday has not gone well. The father hopes to 'acquire' a suitable groom for his younger daughter, while his eldest daughter is going through a difficult marriage. Through their failed attempts to escape, the characters mirror the changing face of Kolkata throughout the 1960s in these three films, made in the beginning, middle and end of what proved a decisive decade for the city.

If the 1950s, under the prime-ministership of Jawaharlal Nehru, firmly set the foundations of democracy in the newly independent republic of India and provided stability to the nation-state, the 1960s were markedly different. There was aggression and warfare across international borders as the country woke up from the rosy, optimistic childhood of its first decade to an uncomfortable adolescence in its second. Nehruvian socialism died, as did Nehru himself, in 1964. West Bengal's chief minister Dr B.C. Roy, whose vision of engineering and technology based industrial development for the state mirrored Nehru's own, suddenly died in 1962, leaving the state's politics in disarray at a time when economic growth had begun to slow down. Like elsewhere in India, Kolkata's economy experienced its first post-independence difficulties in the early 1960s; private banks faced liquidation, companies closure and families insolvency.

A brief economic survey of this period provides clear indicators about the nature of social change in contemporary Kolkata. West Bengal's industry, on which the city's financial prosperity depended, suffered a series of setbacks in the 1960s. During 1959-65, 'West Bengal's engineering industries recorded a growth of 16.8 per cent per year in net value in current prices and 8.3 per cent per year in employment. This period of rapid expansion was followed by a period of sharp recession,' which developed primarily because of two reasons. Firstly, 'foreign aid was suspended during the Indo-Pak war of 1964'. Secondly, 'there was a two year succession of droughts which severely affected Indian agriculture and led the central government to reduce its investment outlay in an attempt to hold back the drought induced inflation. The area hardest hit by the reduction of government investment was West Bengal, which contains India's main concentration of engineering industries.'⁴

A period of economic hardship ensued. The state's financial resources were depleted. Larger numbers of unemployed graduates began queuing for fewer jobs and by the end of the decade the situation was out of control. A new generation of college graduates struggled with increasingly difficult chances of obtaining a livelihood. Political parties became increasingly factionalised and the Left split into many parts. The American war in Vietnam swelled the support for the Left, and angry, disillusioned students from Bengal's universities joined the radical strands which promised retribution through revolution, believing Mao's maxim that 'political power grows out of the barrel of a gun'.⁵

Faces of Unemployment: Anger, Compromise and Apathy

Ray's reluctance in portraying the political unrest and the emergence of the radical Left in the 1960s in his films drew the ire of his critics⁶. Ray's own view

⁴ Lubell, Harold, 1974. *Calcutta: Its Urban Development and Employment Prospects*, Geneva: International Labour Office. p.7

⁵ Tse-Tung, Mao, 1965. 'Problems of War and Strategy' (November 6, 1938), *Selected Works*, Volume. II, Foreign languages Press: China, p. 224.

⁶ Apart from Sen and Dasgupta quoted at the beginning of this essay, see for example Kolkata based critic P. Lal's acerbic review of *Nayak*, which describes the film as 'remote and fluffy and

was that 'a person with a definite political line is often psychologically less interesting: revolutionaries don't think for themselves all the time'. Discussing his 1970 film *Pratidwandi (The Adversary)*, he suggested that the individual, on the contrary, 'thinks of himself', 'suffers', and 'carries out an act of protest at a personal level, which to me is a marvellous thing because it comes from inside and not as the expression of any political ideology'.⁷ The first voice of such personal protest in Ray's films is of course Apu in Ray's final film of the Apu Trilogy, *Apur Sansar (The World of Apu, 1959)*. The unemployed Apu refused a job offer with the railways because they were recruiting workers to replace protesters on strike, and instead chose to tutor students privately to earn a living. In *Kanchenjunga*, made three years later, Ashoke, the unemployed young man from Kolkata, not only refuses a job offer from the aristocratic Indranath, but rebuffs him deliberately because of his class bias.

This ability to protest in Ray's characters seems to weaken considerably as the decade advances and they appear more willing to compromise. If Ashoke submits to the temptation of offending his condescending benefactor in *Kanchenjunga* at considerable cost to his own prospects, it is partly because he retains his optimism. He is still unsure whether he should have accepted Indranath's offer, but has faith in his own ability, despite an uncertain future of 'endless job applications, wearing out the soles of my shoes, and appearing for interviews in borrowed trousers'. He admits that he might have accepted the offer if he were in Kolkata instead of Darjeeling, even if it meant that he would be accepting 'charity'. As this essay will argue, he may even have accepted the offer if the story was set at the end of the 1960s rather than the beginning of the decade.

By the mid-1960s, the film star in *Nayak* has already accepted compromise as a way of life. He admits to Aditi, who edits a magazine for women, that his motto is to 'catch fish without wetting your hands'. He chose to act in films rather than on

sweet and 'unintegrated', in Dasgupta, Chidananda, ed. 1981. *An Anthology of Statements on Ray and By Ray*, New Delhi: Directorate of Film festivals, p75.

⁷ Thomsen, Christian Braad. 1973. 'Ray's New Trilogy: An Interview by Christian Braad Thomsen', *Sight and Sound*. London: BFI. p. 33

stage not out of any artistic conviction but because he preferred to be a 'successful puppet earning thirty thousand rupees per film' than 'a human being' earning a pittance. He still has a working conscience, which he 'drowns in alcohol'⁸, and regrets the loss of his friendship with the trade-unionist Biresh after he refused to address a group of striking factory workers. To him, this is 'the price of success'.

The four friends in *Aranyer Dinratri* appear to be less troubled by afterthoughts and pangs of conscience. By the end of the 1960s, Kolkata's youth had already become polarised through the choices they made: to reject and rebel, or to accept and compromise.⁹ The third possibility i.e. to continue without compromise seems to not exist even in Ray's optimistic world. Ashim, the corporate executive and his friend Sanjoy, the labour officer in a jute mill, have learnt this lesson. Many years back they edited a quarterly magazine together, are still proud of their previous idealism, even though they suffered losses. The wiser for their misfortunes, they have now given up, and live easier, more comfortable lives. Their former tenacious struggle to publish the magazine is accepted nostalgia, and their lack of idealism does not trouble their conscience anymore. Ashim knows that 'the more he rises, the more he will fall'. This closely guarded sense of failure is revealed in inebriated moments like the night sequence when Ashim staggers drunkenly towards a car in which two women are travelling, and loudly proclaims that they are VIPs, 'very impotent people'. Earlier, he suggests that Sanjoy's boredom with his job in the jute mill may be 'compensated' if he wins the affections of his superior officer's daughter. On hearing that Sanjoy's mother has already decided a suitable match for her son, he says in a typically Kolkatan blend of Bengali and English, 'you will continue in your job, serve your boss, live

⁸ Ray's 1965 film *Kapurush* features a conversation between the scriptwriter and the manager of a tea garden where the latter extols the virtues of whisky for 'keeping one's conscience afloat.'

⁹ This polarisation is reflected in the escalation of violence in Kolkata's streets even as radical fringes in Leftist politics across Bengal increasingly advocated 'direct action' against the establishment. Naxalite politicians declared their support for the 'annihilation' of class enemies. For a detailed study of this period see Banerjee, Sumanta. 1984. *India's Simmering Revolution: The Naxalite Uprising*, New Delhi: Zed Books

with your wife, and you will be a cent per cent Bengali middle class conventional good boy'.¹⁰

Ashim's words seem to echo those of Apu in *Apur Sansar (The World of Apu, 1959)*.¹¹ During their walk back home from the theatre at night, Apu had teased his friend Pulu in almost the same words: 'You'll go abroad for a degree, come back home to take up a job with a fat salary, and then settle down. That's all.' Unlike Apu however, Ashim would choose to be 'successful' in the establishment, joining Kolkata's insular urban sophisticates adroitly and without compunction. In fact, he comes to holiday because he wants 'to try out his new car, and to be irresponsible in the company of his friends'¹². Sanjoy, who has remained true to his middle class values, is uneasy about upward social mobility and indecisive about much else in life, from bribing people to accepting Jaya's seductive overtures.¹³ Ashim and Sanjoy are two faces of Kolkata's youth emerging towards the final year of the 1960s. Ashim uses his arrogance to mask his regret, while Sanjoy betrays his lack of conviction through his awkwardness.

The indecisive nature of the male characters becomes symptomatic of the transitions in youth culture, both political and social, in Kolkata of the 1960s. In 1962, Banerjee, the bright young engineer in *Kanchenjunga* had confidently said that he preferred to work in a quiet and secluded place, away from the city,

¹⁰ The labour officer's discomfort and insecurity in working at the jute mill may be read as a symptomatic case rather than an isolated instance in the context of 1969. Times were especially bad for the jute mills, which had been crucial to Bengal's industry in the previous decades. In 1966-67, West Bengal accounted for 21.6 per cent of India's export earnings through the export of jute products alone, which fell to just 12.4 per cent by 1970-71. In terms of employment, the number of people employed in the industry was reduced from 315,000 after Independence in 1948-49 to just 204,000 in 1969. See Lubell, Harold etc. p.3 and p. 17.

¹¹ In her review of *Aranyer Dinratri* in the *New Yorker*, 1973, Pauline Kael observes: 'Ashim is much like what Apu might have been turned into if he had been corrupted', though she does not identify where the similarity lies, apart from mentioning that both characters are played by Soumitra Chatterjee. Reprinted later in Das, Santi. ed. 1998. *Satyajit Ray: An Intimate Master*, New Delhi: Allied Publishers, p. 136

¹² Robinson, Andrew. 1989. *Satyajit Ray: The Inner Eye*, London: Andre Deutsch, p. 192

¹³ This has an interesting counterpoint in Ray's later film *Seemabaddha (Company Limited, 1971)*, where an unscrupulous labour officer organises a workers' unrest to aid his company's interests and callously suggests that a large size floral wreath may be offered to a worker injured during this unrest.

pursuing his fascination with building the dams he designed, fitting in with the post-Independence Nehruvian vision of the 'temples of modern India'. There was unemployment in Kolkata, of course, but the unemployed Ashoke could still retain his dignity. He could afford to smoke his cigarettes from the pittance he earned as a private tutor and accepts a filter tipped cigarette from Banerjee reluctantly. He is too proud to admit in public that he is unemployed, and is embarrassed at his uncle's entreaties to Indranath to secure him a job. Shekhar in *Aranyer Dinratri* is from the Kolkata of 1969, a city that has changed. Shekhar is unemployed, but 'borrows' filter tipped cigarettes, shaving blades and even money to gamble from his friends without embarrassment, and consciously 'repays' it by being the butt of their jokes. As Ashim insensitively remarks, the others have 'brought him' on holiday because 'without him around, there is no fun'.¹⁴

Shekhar is different from Jyoti, the film star Arindam's friend in *Nayak*, who has subsequently become his assistant. The narrative implies that Jyoti too was largely unemployed, and has reworked his relationship with his actor friend to become his assistant, taking his telephone calls, planning his trips and arranging meetings. He has accepted this altered relationship, even the star's occasionally supercilious tone (Arindam thinks his presence in any film should be 'enough' of a draw), and is not embarrassed to refer to himself as the star's 'satellite', which, for him, has led to better living, marked by the improved quality of tea he drinks. Through Ashoke, Jyoti, and Sekhar —unemployment in the 1960s Kolkata of Ray's cinema evolves rapidly as individual characters appear increasingly willing to compromise.

¹⁴ This was the time when unemployment suddenly spiralled out of control, creating a widespread feeling of helplessness. "The number of applicants on the live register at the employment exchanges of the national employment service in West Bengal fell from 457,000 in December 1966 to 445,000 in December 1968, but thereafter rose rapidly and at an accelerating rate, reaching 586,000 in December 1970 and soaring to 867,000 in December 1971." Of these, approximately 67 per cent were from Kolkata. See Lubell, Harold etc. pp. 56-57

Money

In a post-Gandhian India in which the focus had steadily shifted from an agrarian to an industrial model of economic development, the connections between wealth, status and power became an increasingly important part of the changing social formations among the urban population. When young engineer Banerjee meets the unemployed Ashoke in *Kanchenjunga* he offers him a cigarette, the contemporary currency of conversation. 'Choley?' ('Like one?') he asks, and then, rather off-handedly says 'aarey nin na moshai' ('oh come on, have one'). His tone indicates that he is talking from 'above', as revealed by his next question 'tell me then, what's happening in Kolkata?' The power of his wallet functions as the principal signifier of his other actions: the many ornaments he has presented to Manisha who is hoping to marry ('so many you can't even recognise them' she reminds him once), or the bar of Cadbury's chocolate he holds out to her like a bait. He is the perfect foil to Manisha's father, the aristocratic Indranath who views him as an 'acquisition', measured by his 'starting salary of twelve hundred rupees per month', a considerable sum in the 1960s.

Banerjee and Indranath prominently share their class attitudes and their proclivities towards wealth. Indranath offers Ashoke a job, and asks him condescendingly: 'how much do you need to get by? Two hundred? Three hundred?' He looks away from Ashoke, preferring to stare into the mist, and expects him to be grateful and run errands when asked. In *Kanchenjunga* money is a motif which functions as a counterpoint to the cultivated behavioural codes of sophisticated gentility. Indranath's son Anil adheres to the behavioural traits of his class when he clicks his fingers to ask for the restaurant attendant and pushes a few rupees into his hand dismissively.

In *Nayak*, money assumes a different significance. In the first sequence Arindam packs his shaving set carelessly, the cords sticking out, and then opens his safe and pulls out a wad of one hundred rupee notes disdainfully, counts ten and puts the rest back into the bag, leaving it, and the safe, open. This is 'black money', unaccounted for, undeclared for tax purposes. With such large amounts of spare

change, his assistant would have 'booked an entire coupe' had he decided on his journey earlier, and he can offer his trade-unionist friend Biresh 'any amount' as long as his name was not mentioned in connection with it. He admits that money is the chief determinant in his choice of career, prompting him to sacrifice the 'art of theatre' and become a film director's 'puppet' instead. Money, in turn, becomes the quicksand of his surrealist nightmares in the film's first dream sequence. He is haunted by the prospect of failure, having seen established actors reduced to penury after their films were unsuccessful. Mukunda Lahiri, who was a leading star when Arindam acted in his first film has now been out of work for four years, his savings spent, and is reduced to making requests for bit roles: 'anything, even a gatekeeper will do'. He is still too proud to ask for a drink, suggesting that his 'soul' wanted it, not his 'self'.

If in *Kanchenjunga* wealth signified class inequality, in *Nayak* and *Aranyer Dinratri* it is symptomatic of avarice rather than prosperity and benevolence. Bose, the senior captain of industry in *Nayak*, appears unwilling to respond to the requests of the young advertising entrepreneur Sarkar for a commission but becomes easier to placate when Molly, Sarkar's attractive wife, makes a carefully timed appearance in the pantry car of the train. Sarkar will get his contracts, provided Molly is a 'nice' to Bose. Towards the end of the film, Sarkar gets an offer for a contract from the leader of a spiritual cult. He is initially reluctant, unsure of the financial possibilities, but takes a keen interest when he learns that the budget is substantial. In 1960s Kolkata, spiritualism too has become commodified and worldly, owing to a renewed Western interest in India and Hinduism fostered by the Hippie movement, the Beatles and spiritual gurus like Maharishi Mahesh Yogi.

In *Aranyer Dinratri*, friendship has clear economic hierarchies. This is the reverse of the situation in *Kanchenjunga* where friendship across classes and economic backgrounds between Ashoke and Manisha was possible. It is different even from the renegotiated terms of friendship of Arindam and Jyoti in *Nayak*. In *Aranyer Dinratri* Ashim is the 'leader' — he is the highest earner among his friends, he has come to test the performance of his new car on a long road trip

and the proposal for the holiday, as he points out clearly, was his and the others had merely 'accepted it'. His sense of superiority is evident from the beginning of the film when he drives into a petrol pump, and with a curt direction to Sekhar, walks away towards the fields. He is accustomed to having his way over the others. He lures the tribal youth Lakha with the promise of a tip and then keeps him waiting. When Lakha returns him small change, he loudly wonders if Lakha was stealing from him. He tries to impress Aparna by paying for whatever she buys. His wallet is a symbol of his male prowess. Sanjoy is more reserved but not dissimilar; he buys Jaya ornaments, and shows off the bulge in his purse. Only in his case, he is incapable of advancing much further, as he soon realises when she tries to seduce him that evening. Hari's relationship with the tribal girl Duli is exploitative, as both of them know that urban earnings have more 'purchasing power' in the forest.¹⁵

Finally, money functions as a symbol of the urban tourists' inability to engage with their surroundings in the forest. Hari's accusation that Lakha stole his wallet is typical of the urban prejudice against tribal communities, a cultural legacy of the colonial era, as a result of which certain tribal groups were identified as 'habitually criminal'.¹⁶ In revenge, Lakha beats up Hari and disappears with his wallet towards the end of the film. Ashim's experience is more oblique. Aparna writes her telephone number on the back of a five rupee note and gives it to him in a silent and decidedly open-ended gesture: whether he keeps the note or spends it will determine whether their relationship will progress. With this, she has repaid him for his favours in the market in a manner he cannot refuse. If the relationship is to progress and he is to meet her in future, it must be on her terms. 'I don't go to cocktail parties', she simply tells him.

¹⁵ Duli, the tribal girl from Palamau in Bihar, wants to come to Kolkata, just as her friend Phulmani had done before. Data from 1961 show that West Bengal had 2.2 million immigrants from other Indian states, of which Bihar accounted for the most, 60.6 per cent. They were all lured by the myth of higher wages in the biggest city in eastern India. See Lubell, Harold etc. p. 39.

¹⁶ The Criminal Tribes Act was officially repealed in 1952, but prejudiced opinions among sections of the establishment and the general public on the 'criminal nature' of many of these tribes have been far more difficult to counter.

Since the beginning of the 1960s, money replaced birth to become an increasingly important determinant of class hierarchies in the absent Kolkata of Ray's films. The importance of family wealth as a key determinant of class identity and social status in the beginning of the decade decreases amid growing unemployment, economic depression and social unrest, accompanied by an ideological shift to the Left. Ashim, with his corporate ambitions becomes the 'leader' of the new age; he is the new, exploitative face of the establishment. The emergence of a parallel ('black') economy becomes a predominant characteristic of private enterprise in the unregulated sectors (including film production), one that haunts the film star Arindam in his nightmares. Corruption plays an important part throughout the decade but is also marked by a significant shift. In *Kanchenjunga* corruption it is about 'backing', i.e. securing the support of the influential aristocrat in order to get a job. By the end of the decade in *Aranyer Dinratri* it becomes much more blatant when Sanjoy "thanks god for corruption", and even Aparna is not averse to acting a shade friendlier with the four friends in front of the forest ranger to prevent them from being evicted from the guest house. But then, as Ashim has already observed astutely, she doesn't look that 'innocent'. Money is the metaphor though which these three films reflect the progressive loss of innocence in the city that binds them together.

The Marital Contract: Arranged, Amended and Aborted

'Marriage is a noble institution', says Shankar to his wife Anima in *Kanchenjunga*. The evolution of this institution in 1960s Kolkata is both rapid and remarkable in the context of social change as portrayed in Ray's films about contemporary life. Shankar and Anima do not share a single sequence with the rest of the family members in what is supposedly a 'family holiday', apart from an initial sequence with Anima's younger sister Manisha when she comes into their room, looking for safety pins. The unit family, which properly came into being in the 1960s to become the enduring feature of 'modern' living in the city, makes its presence felt for the first time here in Ray's films. *Kanchenjunga* notes a change in the traditional family value system when Shankar suggests that the

couple separate as 'divorce is legal now'.¹⁷ Even the 'scandal' element, the social stigma of a broken marriage, was losing its sheen. From the beginning, 1960s Kolkata geared itself for radical social changes leading to the breakdown of the joint family into unit families and, in the upper classes, unit families into further isolated individual units. The rupture had taken place and the cult of individualism had already begun.

While Shankar and Anima cling to the ideal of 'nobility' in the marital institution, and save their marriage with a compromise to safeguard the interests of their growing daughter, other changes had already begun. At one point, Shankar proposes a 'business arrangement' between husband and wife to help them preserve their own 'independence' while preserving the façade of the marriage. Elsewhere in the film, 'eligible' bachelor Banerjee is more openly utilitarian, — like everything else he does, he plans his prospective marriage with a predetermined 'end result'. In his view, a mutual understanding of each other's interests and activity is inconsequential to the success of any marriage. On the contrary marriage is, for him, an institution where the woman feels secure in the wealth and professional success of her husband. Banerjee is the ideological successor to Indranath who is complacent in his belief that his younger daughter will do his bidding, as he had done his father's, 'without regret'.

The noble institution is already undergoing a change in *Nayak*. Bose, the company chairman betrays the invisible purdah system in his household when he tells the train conductor that while his family would have their lunch in the seclusion of their coupe, he 'would prefer to have it in the dining car'. He does not have to ask them what they want as he makes their decisions himself. Advertising professional Sarkar and his wife Molly have already worked out a kind of 'adjustment' because in their marriage, there is no sharing of interests. While she is clearly enthralled at her first sighting of the film star, her husband does not even recognise him because, as he mentions later, 'it is far more natural' for him to know the company director Bose by sight. The lack of shared interest

¹⁷ The legal framework for a divorce among Hindus in India is described in the Hindu Marriage Act of 1955 and other similar legislation.

Banerjee spoke of amongst the elite in *Kanchenjunga* has become accepted practice for the upper middle class in *Nayak*, and is part of the 'business arrangement' between husband and wife. If Molly agrees to be 'nice' to a prospective client, she also names her price: 'a pearl necklace on my next birthday'. This is an arrangement that, evidently, her husband has proposed and she has accepted. Like his business, this too is 'a game, a strategy'. Molly later tries to extend this arrangement on her own terms: she would do her husband's bidding provided he agreed to her trying a career in film acting. Sarkar refuses. He will not allow his wife the financial and social independence of a film career. Not all lines have been crossed.

Marital transgression is the central theme in the relationship of Arindam the film star and Promila, who first visited his house one night as an unknown newcomer and asked for a role in his latest starrer *Moner Manush*, even though casting for the film had already been decided. She pretended to be single and made it clear that she was ready for his advances. Unable to resist, Arindam had used his influence to replace the original actress with Promila as the female lead in his new film. However, the relationship affected his work and left him dissatisfied with his performance and the fear that his film would be a failure. Also, a newspaper had printed a report of Arindam's midnight brawling with someone at a club. It emerges in the film's second dream sequence that his adversary was Promila's husband and that her deception had left him shaken. He is afraid that the adverse publicity could ruin his career.

During the train journey, when Molly requests Arindam for a break in his films, he says he would like to discuss the matter with her husband first. He has learnt his 'lesson' the hard way and will be more careful in future.

The insecure star does not have late nights, not even a late night drink with his guest if he is filming early next morning. His insecurity is manifest in his sense of 'discipline'. Promila, on the contrary, is much more desperate, — she is not averse to histrionic displays, and even offers to see him off at Howrah railway

station which, given the hero's reputation and the day's newspaper headlines about his brawling, is sure to create more news for the gossip press.

The marital institution becomes progressively more complex in Ray's films throughout the 1960s. Ray's *Charulata* (*The Lonely Wife*, 1964) and *Kapurush* (*The Coward*, 1965) are both stories featuring a breakdown of marital relations as a key theme. In *Aranyer Dinratri* the complexity takes a new form as the four youths show themselves to be some of the most 'conservative', status-quoist characters in Ray's films, for social reasons which have their roots in Kolkata. Unemployment, student unrest, and violent attacks by the radical Left against a stagnant establishment and an unprepared political system in Bengal had already scarred the face of Kolkata the year *Aranyer Dinratri* was made. Famously reluctant to discuss politics, Ray response to a pointed question was: 'politics in India is a very impermanent thing. Political parties break up very quickly, and I don't believe in the Left as such any more. There are now three communist parties India, and I don't really see what that means.'¹⁸ In these uncertain times, both Ashim and Sanjoy are in stable employment and are reluctant to quit despite their occasional misgivings. Conservatism is their answer to insecurity. Sanjoy still hopes that his manager's daughter will accept his marriage proposal, because that is a 'sure' mark of future success. He is open to flirtation, but withdraws when Jaya tries to seduce him. To his friends Sekhar's short stature is symbolic of his inadequacy. Shekhar masks his 'deficiencies' in his pathetic jokes, in his quaint assertions of gallantry ('Ladies first', he says at the beginning of the memory game), and in his sham smartness ('I thought this was the French Riviera', he says after the women suddenly visit the youths while they have a bath at the well). For these confused young men in a time of social crisis, marital stability seems a distant prospect and even the complexities of adult relationships appear too overwhelming. Even Ashim, the most assured among the four friends, is 'still a boy', as Aparna points out at the end of the film, to his mortification. In times of stunted progress and increasing frustration in a

¹⁸ Thomsen, Christian Braad. 1973. 'Ray's New Trilogy: An Interview by Christian Braad Thomsen', *Sight and Sound*, London: BFI. p. 31

fractured society, marriage, an institution that is ideologically founded on ideas of sexual union, bonding, procreation and responsibility, becomes impossible.

Questions of Class: Conflict, Compromise and Social Mobility

'Ashoke: I never met a girl of your type before. I always thought I would say this if I ever had the opportunity.

Manisha: A girl of my type? How do you mean?

Ashoke: I mean, your class.'

(*Kanchenjunga*, 1962)

'Class' is the operative word in all three films. It is arguably the strongest indicator of social change in Kolkata in this decade. Indranath, the aristocrat of *Kanchenjunga* who resists change and covets the title his former rulers gave him, is succeeded by Bose, the globetrotting industry captain of *Nayak* who is used to being waited upon, thinks it is his right to admonish the dining car attendant in a tone reserved for 'class inferiors', talks volubly about the displays in the shopping malls of Western cities he has visited, and is a habitual boaster. However, it is possible to detect subtle changes taking place. The aristocratic Indranath is used to being 'served' with a lifelong sense of entitlement and assurance. In his ill-treatment of class inferiors, Bose shows his relative lack of assurance, and displays decidedly less suavity than Indranath.¹⁹ Not unnaturally, he too is in a position to give favours. But while Indranath dispenses favours in an affectation of magnanimity, the petty bourgeois company director extracts his price. By the mid 1960s, with the passing of the Land Reforms Act of 1955 and other legislation, feudal systems began to crumble, and the petty bourgeois began to replace the aristocracy to become the newer, more corrupt face of power. However, amidst the economic and social decay towards the end of the

¹⁹ This is evident in their politics too. Indranath displays a conviction (however misplaced) when he openly sides with his colonial masters. Bose is much more non-committal, as he says ambiguously that he is Right wing, but not without his sympathies towards the 'less conservative' Left.

1960s, even this class lost much of its foothold in Kolkata. The only class that retained its strength, and continued to flourish, stamps its presence in *Aranyer Dinratri*, as the new generation civil servant of independent India in the form of the forest conservator.

This neo-colonial is urbane, flaunts his education and his social superiority in clipped accents and precise use of the English language, and in a single stroke, both replaces and successfully replicates the former colonial masters of imperial India. Suranjan Ganguly notes that when the conservator asks them to leave the guest-house, the youths 'speak in Bengali and cringe before an authority figure who speaks English with an ease and confidence they clearly lack'. This is a far cry from the petty clichéd English phrases with which they bullied the conservator's subordinate before. This is not a sudden development. Ganguly notes that these youths 'maintain with the local illiterates a certain façade that begins to crack as soon as they meet people from the city who speak not only in English, but in better English than they do.'²⁰ It becomes evident that when Ashim and Sanjoy speak in English, they only try to emulate their more powerful counterparts placed in the higher social echelons of the establishment to which they aspire.

For the establishment, English is both the dominant language and the language of dominance. In *Nayak*, a smattering of English phrases decorates the language of company director Bose when he gives instructions: 'I would prefer to have it in the dining car' or 'Can I have a Coke, then?' Even the film star, an ambiguous presence in the class-ridden city, cannot ignore this. When he instructs his assistant to dial 'double two fourr six fourr' the rolled 'r's are clearly an effect of his trying to imitate an American accent from the movies of Marlon Brando, Humphrey Bogart and Paul Muni who he admires. The acquired accent, which tries to mask the humble beginnings of which he is so afraid, exposes his

²⁰ Ganguly, Suranjan. 2000. *Satyajit Ray: In Search of the Modern*, Maryland and London: The Scarecrow Press, p. 106

vulnerabilities: like most of his image, this too is superficial. Sarkar, the advertising professional is even less sophisticated, and crudely uses 'Englishness' to secure a wealthier clientele when he says that his name Prithish 'rhymes with British'. This same tendency to achieve upward social mobility is manifest in Ashim in *Aranyer Dinratri* who finds Tripathi's cottage 'English' though he has 'seen' England only in British films, and in Sekhar who pronounces 'thirty' as 'thearty' while giving the time: 'eight thirty sharp'.

In Ray's films, the new urban generation that Indranath the aristocrat in *Kanchenjunga* grandly says are the nation's 'future' seem to have all but disappeared by the end of the 1960s. While Banerjee is probably still indefatigably building dams far away from the city, playboy Anil and reformed profligate Shankar have both become irrelevant in an increasingly competitive city which is recalibrating its positions of power, where unprincipled and uneducated advertising men and equally ruthless, self advertising film actors emerge as examples of a redefined notion of 'success'. Amidst this change, only Ray's women remain as they are, dutiful and principled, prepared to be outspoken when the need arises as in *Kanchenjunga*, complex but sympathetic like Aparna in *Aranyer Dinratri*, or 'voices of conscience in village plays' like Aditi in *Nayak*. They represent the only hope in a city where the men seem to become increasingly confused.

The reason for this confusion becomes clear when these three films are viewed successively. In *Kanchenjunga*, there is an old order against which the new generation envisions itself. As long as a conflict against the old order is possible, there is also the hope that a new order will emerge. In *Nayak*, that old order is rapidly disappearing and there are only traces of an increasingly unequal and irrelevant skirmish in the form of the hero's 'revenge' on the beaten enemy, the old, out-of-work film actor who was once a hectoring star. In *Aranyer Dinratri*, there is no old order left anymore, which is why there is no one else left to fight. The youth of Kolkata had begun fighting each other at the end of this decisive decade, leading to increasing frustration and social strife. This is the critical point of history in which a simmering cauldron called Kolkata found itself in the final

year of the 1960s, when the film was made. The bubble of post-Independence hope, stretched to the point of maximum tension, was about to burst.

Notes

- Quotations marks indicate lines of dialogue from the films referred to.
- Translations from the original Bengali mine.
- I am grateful to Pabitra Chatterjee for his suggestions.

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