

Film Enlightening Ray

"I was an atheist but I'm beginning to be more and more agnostic, as I grow older", the film director Satyajit Ray told me in Calcutta in 1988, while I was researching his biography. "When I speak to my doctors I find they are great believers. My house-physician says that if you inspect the human body—the incredible complexity of it—you have to believe in a superior force." Ray was then about to start shooting another feature: his adaptation to modern India of Henrik Ibsen's 19th-century play, *An Enemy of the People*. Its central character, a doctor, is an obstinate whistleblower who destroys a comfortable existence for the sake of a principle.

Ray was India's greatest film director. Internationally his films were fêted, beginning with the *Apu Trilogy*, one of which won the top prize at Venice in 1957, and ending after some 30 feature films, just before his death in 1992, with an honorary Oscar awarded for his lifetime achievement. In addition to making films, Ray was a bestselling writer of fiction, mainly detective novellas and science fantasies, and a skilled book and magazine illustrator—he had trained in fine art and graphic design before he took to film-making. Some of his designs for film posters are currently on display at London's BFI Southbank, to accompany its retrospective of his films.

Ray's great-grandmother was India's first fully qualified woman physician; she completed her medical training in Edinburgh, and delivered baby Satyajit in Calcutta in 1921. Both his grandfather and his father, though illustrators and writers by profession, had scientific and technical training. Ray himself was fascinated by science and technology. Perhaps the most famous scene in the *Apu Trilogy* shows the curiosity and awe inspired in the small village boy Apu by the sound of humming telegraph wires followed by the boy's first sight of a passing steam

train scattering black smoke across a field of white pampas grass. In Ray's last film, *The Stranger*, an avuncular anthropologist enchants his schoolboy great-nephew with a puzzling question: why are the apparent sizes of the sun and the moon in the sky similar, and the earth just the right size for total solar and lunar eclipses?

Three of his films depict the world

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of medicine, each from a different perspective. In *The Adversary*, a promising medical student is forced by his father's death to abandon college and search for a job in a hopelessly overcrowded market. Waiting for an interview, he has a sudden hallucination: the corridor of inert interviewees are stripped to their skeletons. In *Branches of the Tree*, four sons gather around the bedside of their father, a self-made but scrupulously honest industrialist who has had a heart attack. When he

regains consciousness, the sons start quarrelling about "black money", out of his earshot. However, the wave-form of his agitated electrocardiogram betrays his awareness. The film is "of distressing beauty", said Henri Cartier-Bresson.

An Enemy of the People confronts public health, Hindu fundamentalism, and business corruption. By laboratory testing the "holy water" in a recently constructed Hindu temple, a local doctor, whose patients have infectious hepatitis, discovers the water to be polluted by sewage, presumably as a result of faulty pipe-laying. He calls for an enquiry—but the temple authorities and the temple-going public denounce him with a vengeance. When the film was shown at the BFI Southbank in 2002, I recall a surprise ovation for its powerful and sophisticated plea for rationalism. Somehow, Ray's finest films manage to be both timeless and topical, like all classic works. If you have yet to sample them, don't miss this unusual opportunity.

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Courtesy of BFI

Satyajit Ray
BFI Southbank, London, UK, until
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<https://whatson.bfi.org.uk/>
Online/satyajit-ray

Andrew Robinson is author of
Satyajit Ray: The Inner Eye and
wrote the programme notes on
Satyajit Ray for the BFI
retrospective



Courtesy of BFI

Satyajit Ray, *An Enemy of the People*