

Entertainment

Satyajit Ray: Decoding five essential films from the auteur

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Satyajit Ray - no words are enough to mention the legacy left by him. The man who spearheaded a new-wave in Indian cinema and guided it to the global arena, the man who made several spectacular works of cultural creations is Satyajit Ray. Be it movies and literary creations for children or the visionary and thought-provoking films, filmmakers all around the world bow down to this genius even today. Let's remember the cinematic legend with our heartfelt gratitude and utmost respect. Here are five cult classics made by Ray which are essential for any true cine lover.

Pather Panchali (1955)



One of world cinema's great directorial debuts, 'Pather Panchali' not only announced the arrival of a new filmmaking talent, it was also credited by western critics with putting Indian cinema on the map.

Filmmaking in India had in fact been well established for decades; indeed, it celebrates its centenary this year. But those who saw Ray's debut at the 1956 Cannes Film Festival were met with an entirely different proposition from Bollywood's trademark musicals and melodramas: a delicately told human drama inspired by Jean Renoir (whom Ray had assisted on his 1951 India-set drama *The River*) and neorealist films like 'Bicycle Thieves' (1948), which had bowled over the young Ray when he saw them during a stint in London.

‘*Pather Panchali*’ is an adaptation of a 1929 novel about a young boy, Apu, growing up in rural Bengal, where the abject poverty of his family does little to suppress his youthful inquisitiveness and awakening sensibilities. Ray followed Apu’s progress in two further films – ‘*Aparajito*’ (1956) and ‘*Apur Sansar*’ (1959) – in which the maturing boy moves to Calcutta to take up studies and find his place in the adult world. The Apu trilogy remains Ray’s most famous achievement.

Watch it for... the joyous moment when Apu and his sister run through fields to catch a glimpse of a passing steam train.

Jalsaghar (1958)



Now a filmmaker on the world stage, Ray took time out before the final part of his Apu trilogy for this magisterial drama about an ageing Bengali landowner and his fatal clinging to the past.

Set in the 1920s, after the Indian government had abolished the feudal zamindari system, it stars Chhabi Biswas as a landed aristocrat, Roy, who sequesters himself in his grand home, taking refuge in his beloved classical music while the winds of change rage

through the outside world. Ray brings Roy's perfumed world to life with glittering images of fireworks, gleaming chandeliers and the cavernous extravagance of his music room, where he invites sitarists and dancers to entertain him and his guests. But there are also portentous images of doom – a lightning storm, an insect drowning in a goblet, a spider crawling across the portrait of one of his illustrious ancestors – that suggest these musicians are merely fiddling while Roy's Rome burns.

It's a great film to rank with 'The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp' (1943) or 'The Leopard' (1963) about grand old men whose ways are being eclipsed by passing time. There's even a touch of Norma Desmond, the has-been silent screen star of 'Sunset Blvd.' (1950), about Roy's proud faith in old illusions and the privileged blood in his veins.

Watch it for... an extraordinary kathak dancing sequence that enchants Roy and his assembled guests, just as it does us in the audience.

Mahanagar (1963)



There's a moment part way into 'Mahanagar' when Arati Mazumdar (Madhabi Mukherjee) turns to her husband, Subrata (Anil Chatterjee), saying, "If you saw me at work you wouldn't recognise me." Her eyes are bright with pride, widened by new experiences.

"And at home?" comes Subrata's forlorn reply, his own pride injured. He's envious of his wife's professional prowess, and struggling to adapt to these changes in the subservient housewife he loves.

Finding it hard to support a large, extended family on his bank-clerk salary alone, she has persuaded him to let her take a job as a saleswoman. To her surprise, and the consternation of her hidebound, traditionalist family, Arati, who has never known much outside cooking and cleaning at home, takes to the world of work like a duck to water. She finds herself surprisingly adept at earning money, and laps up her newfound independence in the city, the camaraderie of her colleagues, and glowing praise from her boss. With this 1963 drama, Ray found himself railing against the 'a woman's place is in the home' mentality, making a sassy, nuanced and deeply moving film about the gathering speed of modernity and feminism in his home city of Calcutta.

Watch it for...a nail-biting scene in which Arati stands up to her male boss on behalf of one of her new colleagues, risking more than she knows for something she believes in.

Charulata (1964)



Ray's 1964 film 'Charulata' is a perfect example of this more concentrated approach, a closeted, short story-like drama set almost entirely within a house and its grounds in 1880s Calcutta. While her wealthy husband, Bhupati (Sailen Mukherjee), busies himself with running his own newspaper, The Sentinel, his bored wife, Charu (Madhabi Mukherjee), occupies her time reading, relaxing and spying on passers-by through her field glasses. But the arrival of her husband's young cousin not only sends ripples of adulterous desire through her pinned-butterfly existence, but also sets Charu along her own path towards an artistic awakening as a writer.

Like *The Big City*, it's a film about a woman beginning to shrug off the straitjacket of a male-dominated society to explore her own sensibilities and ambitions. It's also exquisitely shot, both within the ornamented spaces of the house and in the dappled light of the garden.

Watch it for... the famous scene when Charu sings Rabindranath Tagore's song 'Fule Fule Dhole Dhole' to her cousin from the garden swing. The camera captures her joy in thrilling pendular

swoops, cutting between Charu's askance view of her cousin and her own face against the sky.

Aranyer Din Ratri (1970)



Mentored by the great French filmmaker Jean Renoir in his early career, Ray created a tribute to Renoir's classic 'Partie de campagne (1936) with this film, transplanting the scene from pastoral France to the forests of north-eastern India.

Like the Renoir film, it's a story about middle-class city folk taking a holiday to the countryside. Four male friends from Calcutta go on a road trip to rural Bihar, where they lodge at a forest guest house despite the protestations of its caretaker. They're from the big city: brash, confident, careerist, and ready to lord it over the more 'backward' tribal communities living on their new doorstep. They vow not to shave, but that goes out of the window when they come across two beautiful women staying nearby, and an elegant game of flirtation and embarrassment ensues.

"When people leave Calcutta, they become younger," says one of the friends in the car, as they're first heading out for the country. They've come in search of booze, relaxation and women, but Ray

lets us warm to their more obnoxious traits, bottling a happy holiday mood that's ripe with chance and rife with lessons to be learned.

Watch it for...the terrific picnic sequence in which the circle of friends plays a memory game, taking it in turns to name a famous person then adding more and more to the chain.

Reference:

<https://m.timesofindia.com/entertainment/bengali/movies/news/satyajit-ray-death-anniversary-decoding-five-essential-films-from-the-auteur/articleshow/75313016.cms>