

VIVEKANANDA COLLEGE  
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NAAC ACCREDITED 'A' GRADE



Topic: Film analysis: Rabindranath Tagore

Course Title: cc iv

Paper: GE IV

Unit: 4

Semester: IV

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Name of the Department: Film Studies

Satyajit Ray made one of the greatest documentaries on the life and work of  
**Rabindranath Tagore**

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) was one of the world's remarkable cultural polymaths – he ranks right up at the top with the likes of Da Vinci and Al-Biruni. In producing so many novels, essays, short stories, travelogues, dramas, poems, paintings, and more than two thousand songs, Tagore



reshaped the entire landscape and the very shape of Indian literature, music, and art. And enthusiasm for Tagore's work was not just limited to his native Bengal: Tagore's songs were used for the national anthems of India (Jana Gana Mana) and Bangladesh (Amar Shonar Bangla), and the Sri Lankan national anthem was inspired by his work.

So to celebrate the centenary of Tagore's birth, the Indian government, at the insistence of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, commissioned **Satyajit Ray** to make an hour-long documentary in English on the great poet. Ray was a particularly apt choice. Not only was Ray a consummate film artist, but his grandfather, Upendrakishore Ray Chowdhury, was personally acquainted with Tagore and his illustrious family. And Ray, himself, had been schooled at the special academy, Santiniketan, that Tagore had founded. Ray would proceed to make several films that were based on Tagore's stories, including one that he was working on contemporaneously with this documentary film –

**Teen Kanya** (*Three Daughters*, 1961), **Charulata** (*The Lonely Wife*, 1964), and **The Home and the World** (*Ghare Baire*, 1984).

Making a documentary on Tagore may seem like a straightforward enterprise, but the remarkable subject's range of expression presented challenges for Ray. How could one capture in an hour-long film the full spectrum and

magnificence of Tagore's poetry, fiction, music, and art? In particular, there was an issue with Tagore's poetry. Although he was justly famous in India, Tagore's poetry was not known internationally until he travelled to England in 1912 and showed some of his own translations of his *Gitanjali* collection of poems to English colleagues there. These were enthusiastically received and came to the attention of famous poet William Butler Yeats, who praised Tagore's poetry emphatically. For a taste, here are some sample verses in English from Tagore's *Gitanjali* :

*Thus it is that thy joy in me is so full. Thus it is that thou hast come down to me.  
O thou lord of all heavens, where would be thy love if I were not?*

*Thou hast taken me as thy partner of all this wealth. In my heart is the endless  
play of thy delight. In my life thy will is ever taking shape.*

*And for this, thou who art the King of kings hast decked thyself in beauty to  
captivate my heart. And for this thy love loses itself in the love of thy lover, and  
there art thou seen in the perfect union of two.*

*Leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads! Whom dost thou worship  
in this lonely dark corner of a temple with doors all shut?*

*Open thine eyes and see thy God is not before thee!*

*He is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground and where the pathmaker  
is breaking stones.*

*He is with them in sun and in shower, and his garment is covered with dust. Put  
of thy holy mantle and even like him come down on the dusty soil!*

In short order Tagore was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913, the first non-European to be so honoured. However, several Indian critics have felt that the magic of Tagore's Bengali verse has never been adequately captured in English. For example, Amartya Sen remarked,

*"Anyone who knows Tagore's poems in their original Bengali cannot feel satisfied with any of the translations (made with or without Yeats's help). Even the translations of his prose works suffer, to some extent, from distortion."*



Evidently Ray was of the same opinion, and he decided not to include any quotations or recitations of Tagore's poetry in his documentary. Ray also took the uncommon step of eschewing any interviews in his film. Ray did not want to just document Tagore's achievements; instead he made the effort to evoke the inner spirit of his subject. As he remarked,

"I put in as much work on it as on three feature films. My approach to the biography was to stress Tagore as a human being and patriot."

This involved staging some dramatized re-enactments from Tagore's youth and surrounding circumstances. But Ray avoided presenting any dramatized events showing the adult Tagore, because he knew that Tagore's authentic visage was too familiar to many members of his intended audience. So in the second half of the film he had to work with a lot of static photographic images and somehow make them more dynamic by employing subtle camera movements. In the end,

"he came to the conclusion that the Tagore film would require more camera movement than any three of his feature films; that there would have to be hundreds of opticals each worked out with mathematical exactitude."

The result of all of Ray's efforts was a moving and thoughtful evocation of an enlightened soul, the visual portrayal of which was graced by Ray's own eloquent narration.



The film opens with historical

footage of the massive crowd that assembled in Calcutta for Tagore's funeral in 1941. Then it jumps back in time to cover the background of the wealthy and prominent Tagore family, who were Bengali Brahmins and important social figures. His grandfather Dwarkanath Tagore (1794–1846) and his father Debendranath Tagore (1817-1905) were both important cultural personages who participated in the 19th century Bengali Renaissance and were actively involved with the Brahmo Samaj (Brahmoism) movement, a progressive monotheistic Hindu reform movement. Rabindranath Tagore was the youngest of Debendranath's fourteen children, many of whom became prominent writers and musicians. Indeed, one of his sisters, Swarnakumari Devi (1855–1932), became the first published Indian woman novelist.

Surrounded by older, highly intellectual, siblings, Rabindranath, known as "Rabi", couldn't tolerate formal classroom instruction, and was instead largely home-schooled within the Tagore household. Soon, even as a teenager, Rabi was writing poetry and stage plays and was inspired to take up Brahmoism. This section of the film showing Rabi's upbringing and his rigorous absorption of Indian, Persian, and Western culture includes a number of dramatized depictions of Rabi's family environment that is effectively suffused with moody Indian music on the soundtrack .

Tagore quickly established himself as a leading Bengali intellectual, but in addition to his prolific authorial output (he would publish more than two hundred books over his lifetime), we also see other sides and interests of the man. In 1901 Tagore founded an ashram and progressive school based on Upanishad principles at a Tagore family-owned estate at Santiniketan. Over the next thirty years he would spend much of his time and energy to nurturing

this school, which Tagore wanted to offer as a creative alternative to the robotic pedantry that infects most schools the world over. Later, in 1921, Tagore established Visva-Bharati University at Santiniketan. Among those who later received schooling at Santiniketan were Satyajit Ray, Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen, and later Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi.



Tagore was also actively interested in politics, too, and he became fervently involved in the opposition to British governor Lord Curzon's "divide-and-rule" intention to partition Bengal into Hindu and Muslim sectors that would fuel internecine communalism. (The idea of fanning the flames of identity politics in order to create mayhem and weaken the broader social order is, of course, a complex and recurring issue. For other films touching on this subject in the Indian context, see my reviews of *Viceroy's House* (2017) as well as Ray's adaptation of another Tagore story, *The Home and the World* (*Ghare Baire*, 1984).)

By 1912 Tagore was fifty-one and although famous in India, he was still relatively little known internationally. The film now covers his trip to England and the publication of the English translation of some of his *Gitanjali* poems. The resulting explosive popularity of this work led to Tagore receiving the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913 and a British knighthood in 1915.

But Tagore still held true to his principles. Europe was now engulfed in the self-destructive Great War, and Tagore in 1916 denounced the notion of nationalism as an underlying cause of this catastrophe. Tagore was further disturbed by the cruel Jallianwala Bagh massacre (also known as the Amritsar massacre) undertaken by British troops firing on unarmed protestors, which led him to renounce his knighthood in 1919.



All the while, Tagore was continuing to express his spiritually influenced notions of rational humanism and expand the range of his artistic output. Remarkably, in his late sixties, he took up painting for the first time and demonstrated a marvellous flair for abstract surreal and expressionistic imagery.

In his latter years Tagore was also engaged in meeting up with and exchanging ideas with many famous intellectuals and cultural leaders from all over the world, including, of course, his long-time friend and, for the most part, ally, Mohandas Gandhi. One such intellectual exchange was the interesting encounter that Tagore had with Alfred Einstein in 1930, which has been recounted by Amartya Sen :

"The report of his conversation with Einstein, published in The New York Times in 1930, shows how insistent Tagore was on interpreting truth through observation and reflective concepts. To assert that something is true or untrue in the absence of anyone to observe or perceive its truth, or to form a conception of what it is, appeared to Tagore to be deeply questionable. When Einstein remarked, 'If there were no human beings any more, the Apollo Belvedere no longer would be beautiful?' Tagore simply replied, 'No.' Going

further - and into much more interesting territory - Einstein said, 'I agree with regard to this conception of beauty, but not with regard to truth.' Tagore's response was: 'Why not? Truth is realized through men.'"

From my perspective, Tagore's Interactionist view expressed here is much richer and more profound than Einstein's apparent Objectivist view.



At the very end of his life, Tagore saw that Europe, from whose admired rational-humanist principles he had been inspired to incorporate into his own thinking, was once again engaged in a self-annihilating conflagration. And again he could see how closed-minded self-identity politics and nationalism could ruin even the greatest of civilizations. So on the occasion of his 80th birthday and now severely ill, he turned his critical eye one more time to the external culture from which he had drawn so much inspiration and which he most admired, but in which he also saw fatal weaknesses – England. This resulted in one of his last public statements, *Crisis in Civilization* [9], and Ray eloquently summarizes Tagore's feelings on these matters in this film's closing section.

As mentioned, Satyajit Ray's film here focuses on Tagore, the enlightened spirit, rather than on the specifics of Tagore's many artistic creations. To a certain extent Amartya Sen's essay on Tagore has a similar focus, but Ray's film is more eloquent and directly engaging. Overall, Ray does seem to capture and evoke the spirit of Tagore, and for this reason this is an outstanding documentary film.