



RE-RELEASES

The Big City

Based on a short story by Narendranath Mitra, *The Big City* tells a relatable story about fear and courage, with a loveable protagonist offering a female point-of-view on issues such as money, labour and justice in 1960s Calcutta.

Arati (Madhabi Mukherjee), an intelligent and resourceful housewife, must leave the familiarity of domestic life to join the workplace and supplement their income. First unconfident, Arati soon thrives in her job selling sewing machines door-to-door. She is no less devoted to the family she wants to share this success with, but her husband and children begin to resent her new responsibilities and the time she's forced to spend away from their home.

The Big City is a story that asks contemporary questions with empathy: how to heal distance in marriage? How to switch between your home and work selves? What to do about ageing parents, or when you witness injustice? It shows the daily doses of love, humour, determination and forgiveness that are needed to make ordinary life go on. The strength to do so, Ray's film proves, is not all that ordinary after all.

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Across his three-and-a-half-decade career, the celebrated Bengali director Satyajit Ray authored over 30 films, revolutionising Indian cinema and introducing the nation on screen to audiences worldwide. For author Salman Rushdie, Ray was 'the poet *par excellence* of the human-scale, life-sized comedy and tragedy of ordinary men and women'. Akira Kurosawa believed that 'not to have seen the cinema of Satyajit Ray means existing in the world without seeing the sun or the moon.'

Andrew Robinson has compiled this interview from a long series of conversations he had with Ray while researching his biography *Satyajit Ray: The Inner Eye*, in the years before the director's death in 1992.

Have you ever wanted at any time to be rich?

I'm pretty rich, I think [laughs]. I mean I have no money worries as such – thanks to my writing, not from films really. My books bring in a steady flow of income. I'm certainly not as rich as Bombay actors, by no means, but I can live comfortably. That's all I need. I can buy the books and records I want.

What about the trappings of being a film director? The cult of personality?

I never imagined that I'd become a film director, in command of situations, actually guiding people to do things this way or that. I was very reticent and shy as a schoolboy and I think it persisted through college. Even the fact of having to accept a prize gave me goose pimples and things.

But from the time of *Pather Panchali* [1955] I realised I had it in me to take control of situations and exert my personality over other people, etcetera – then it became a fairly quick process. Film after film, I got more and more confident. Even public speaking: I can face a crowd. I'm not bothered at all – but only when I am in command and I'm talking about things that I know.

What is your moral attitude as a filmmaker?

I don't like to be too articulate about it because it's all there in the films. One has to see the films and read them. I don't begin by formulating a moral attitude and then making a film.

I think it's the business of the critic to form his own conclusions. I don't want to add footnotes to it. I'm very unwilling to do that.

But have your moral attitudes to people and society changed since your first film Pather Panchali? Have you become more cynical?

Not necessarily. I have become more aware of my surroundings. I was probably a little isolated from things in the early days, being so immersed in my various pursuits. I can imagine other young people being more aware of, say, politics. I was not. I gave more time to my intellectual pursuits. I was developing myself as an artist. And I had so many interests right from the beginning that I felt I couldn't take on any more.

The Big City shows the impact on family life when a middle-class Calcutta housewife gets a job. Is the working woman's dilemma something you saw in your own family?

My wife used to work before we got married at what was the Supply Department during the war. And she worked as a teacher.

So was The Big City in some sense a personal response?

Well, one understood the story and the context in which the story took place. Therefore you make the story not like an outsider, but as if you're part of the milieu. It was easy because the story was very revealing, and many of the elements in the film came from the story.

Do you see a common thread running through your films, that women are psychologically stronger than men?

Yes, they're stronger that way. My own experience tells me that.

Any speculation as to why that is?

Well, I think because they are physically the weaker sex. Some balancing element was needed, so nature made them that way... I'm not thinking only of Bengali society, but women in general. Women everywhere. Women as a species.

Relationships are very strong elements in your films, especially within families.

That may be said to be a specialty of mine. It comes naturally to me, instinctively. I think I understand human psychology. You can feel closer to a person who's not related to you, much more than your own brother, your own flesh and blood.

Are relationships on the screen difficult to establish?

Everything in a film is difficult. There's no easy solution to anything at all. It needs thought and careful observation and it needs calculation and understanding.

Did growing up in an extended family with your mother in the house of your maternal uncles help you in depicting psychology on screen?

I must have been observing a great deal in my childhood about people, because of being a loner, in the sense that I had no brothers or sisters, and I was alone much of the time with my thoughts and with my little preoccupations. So this process has probably been going on a long time even without my being aware of it. I was surrounded by people who were all older than me. I was the youngest. I must have imbibed a lot in my childhood.

Would you ever call yourself a humanist?

Not really. I can't think of being anything else but what is represented by my films. I am not conscious of being a humanist. It's simply that I am interested in human beings. I would imagine that everyone who makes a film is to some extent interested in human beings...

I'm slightly irritated [laughs] by this constant reference to humanism in my work – I feel that there are other elements also. It's not just about human beings. It's also a structure, a form, a rhythm, a face, a temple, a feeling for light and shade, composition, and a way of telling a story.

What about that final mysterious shot of The Big City, with one bulb in the Calcutta streetlight working and the other one missing. What did you have in mind there?

The double lamp happened to be like that. The shot was taken from the balcony of the office where we shot most of the exteriors. It so happened that I needed a long shot of the two characters merging into the crowd after office hours. And I saw, as I tilted up the camera as they were walking away, a lovely shot of these two lights in the foreground. One of the bulbs was not working and [laughs] – my God – the amount of interpretation that has taken place because of that one missing light is incredible! I had nothing in mind. I didn't want to suggest anything at all, except that it was typical of Calcutta for the streetlights not to be working properly... It makes the shot more interesting, because it adds another layer of meaning to it which I'm afraid was not intended. As I discovered it, I was quite happy. I felt it was better than both lights working.

There's no symbolic meaning?

No.

Andrew Robinson, *Sight & Sound*, September 2013

THE BIG CITY (MAHANAGAR)

Director: Satyajit Ray
Production Company: R.D. Bansal Productions
Producer: R.D. Bansal
Production Manager: Bimal Dey
Screenplay: Satyajit Ray
From the short story 'Abataranika' by: Narendranath Mitra
Photography: Subrata Mitra
Editor: Dulal Dutta
Art Director: Bansi Chandragupta
Music: Satyajit Ray
Sound: Debesh Ghosh, Atul Chatterjee, Sujit Sarkar

Cast

Anil Chatterjee (*Subrata Mazumdar*)
Madhabi Mukherjee (*Arati Mazumdar*)
Jaya Bhaduri (*Bani*)
Haren Chatterjee (*Priyagopal, Subrata's father*)
Sefalika Devi (*Sarojini, Subrata's mother*)
Prasenjit Sarkar (*Pintu*)
Haradhan Banerjee (*Himangsu Mukherjee*)
Vicky Redwood (*Edith Simmons*)

India 1963
135 mins

A BFI release



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