



SATYAJIT RAY: THE LANGUAGE OF FILM

Devi + Pikoo

+ pre-recorded intro by Sangeeta Datta

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

Contemporary reviews

On a first glance you might see *Devi* as no more than a film with a thesis, Ibsen in an Indian setting. Kalikinkar, a devout and elderly aristocrat, believes his daughter-in-law, Doyamoyee, is an incarnation of the goddess Kali. He sets her up in a shrine; holy men worship her; a miracle apparently takes place when a dying boy revives; then another child, Doyamoyee's nephew, dies without medical care since the family think that the avatar alone can save him.

The thesis, it seems, is clear; and in fact is nothing less than the latent theme of the Apu trilogy made articulate. Kalikinkar is superstitious: the 'proof' of his daughter-in-law's divinity is a vision and a miracle. Such superstitions will finally destroy the old India; the 'proofs' and achievements of science will provide the only salvation. Satyajit Ray has tactfully set the action of his film a hundred years ago. All the same, the reference to modern India is plain. One can understand why some Hindus were infuriated by it, and why for a time it was not granted an export licence.

On the level of a thesis, then, the plot is both inexorable and tight. Ironies fall into place neatly – almost too neatly. A child is saved, so another child must die. Women are treated both as serfs *and* as idols; in any event, they are never allowed to be human beings. There are also a number of lesser ironies – for instance, Doyamoyee's husband, Umaprasad, believes he is able to win any argument, yet is stunned into silence when confronted by his deified wife. In the Apu trilogy episodes were mainly related to each other by association; as the images of river and parched land recurred, they took on the resonance, possibly the symbolism, of myth. In *Devi*, episodes relate to each other with rationalistic logic. So symbolism is played down; the river and landscape never become more than a beautiful backdrop to the action. Such a logic, moreover, requires motives to be highly plausible, a requirement which *Devi* doesn't entirely satisfy. Would an intelligent girl like Doyamoyee – and in Sharmila Tagore's performance she comes over as sharp as a pin – allow herself to be deified, even a hundred years ago? And would a husband as shrewd as Soumitra Chatterjee makes Umaprasad allow himself to be so easily checked?

But – fortunately – *Devi* is much more than a tract. As always, Ray shows sympathy for the old order as well as for the new: Kalikinkar may be self-indulgent, yet he is also a man of his time and, in the manner Chhabi Biswas plays him, both good-natured and subtle; the pilgrims also are seen as impressive. On a closer look, indeed, *Devi* is anything but a tract. It has touches of a Greek tragedy in which Kali, the destroyer, enacts her necessary sacrifice; not without reason is Doyamoyee chased by furies across a sunlit field of flowers. Again, and most convincingly, you could see *Devi* as a study of the unconscious forces which hold a family together. Kalikinkar believes his daughter-in-law is a goddess because he misinterprets a dream; he doesn't realise how much he is in love with her. Umaprasad is paralysed by his wife's

deification because he relies on her in every way, and without her becomes indecisive. In this context, we see the child's death as a family tragedy.

Ray establishes the domestic scene swiftly and with tact, above all in the two finely edited bedroom sequences. One remembers, in particular, the moments when Doyamoyee releases her husband from a ravelled-up shirt, or massages Kalikinkar's feet while he fastidiously sucks at a hookah. The spacious palace is evoked by sounds: footsteps clatter across marble pavings, a parrot squawks, a silly nursemaid laugh hysterically from behind a door. The camera roves around beds shrouded in mosquito nets, in a grave twilight reminiscent of the final scenes of *L'avventura*. Lovers require privacy, and the camera holds back; a kiss is seen from middle distance and in silhouette. Privacy and reticence: all the more poignant, then, that the sacrifice should be so public, and the catastrophe take place in streams of sunlight.

Ray's observation of this household may at times appear to be mannered; the child peeping through fingers while his aunt finds him a sweet looks tired in comparison with a similar scene in *Pather Panchali*. Still, *Devi* is about a high-born family, and the atmosphere needs to be a little precious. Like Renoir, and unlike most other directors, Ray has a real understanding of every class. He describes his aristocrats generously and without bias; yet he misses none of their foibles. I liked, especially, one vignette of two young patricians, moustachioed like Douglas Fairbanks Sr, riding home in a carriage – manicured nails, elegant gestures, yet bashful in conversation. As a structure, *Devi* is deceptively lucid.

Eric Rhode, *Sight and Sound*, Autumn 1964

For a film by Satyajit Ray, *Devi* has an exceptionally large amount of plot. Usually, his situations spring so naturally from character, the rhythm of his films is so much that of life being lived, that there seems to be nothing as artificial as a story there at all. With *Devi*, he is more formal, more consciously shaping a work of art and more obviously expressing a point of view. His marvellous talent with people is being used in a way that could be regarded as less fundamental, more of a surface embellishment than usual. More than ever before, in fact, Ray lays himself open to the charge of charming us into accepting something slightly contrived. And, as if anticipating the charge, he has quickened the pace of his editing, tightened up his technique in general and concentrated the more on dazzling us with imagery of a reverberating beauty unique even for him.

But comparisons with the trilogy can be misleading as well as profitless, for here Ray aims, as he did not in the trilogy, to be interpreted on several levels and understood in a variety of ways; here his raw material is mythology rather than life. Thus, images pertaining to the Hindu religion, from wooden idols to the relic on the shore which frightens Doyamoyee away from her last chance of escape, are so woven into the fabric of the film that, with no knowledge of Hinduism, one fancies that the story may make complete sense in terms of the superstitions it is attacking. This is, of course, to be expected of a tale that makes sense equally in terms of ancient legend and modern psychology – the sort of tale that is, of necessity, being constantly retold. For Ray, always preoccupied with the conflict between the old loyalties and traditions and the new education and emancipation in India, such a theme has obvious attractions, not least of which is the possibility of making a single family stand for a context so much wider. The film has a life of its own because he has seen all the conflicts primarily as personal ones, and human behaviour is

something that he always illustrates in a perceptive and affectionate manner. The pampered landowner, whose 'blind faith' causes the tragedy, is, for instance, another Oedipus obtaining the ministrations of a mother first from his wife and then from his daughter-in-law, until his subconscious guilt drives him too far. He has in him something of every man, and, as played by Chhabi Biswas (the old nobleman in *The Music Room*), he is absolutely credible on the simplest, as well as the more ambitious level.

Ray's ability with actors is by now so undisputed that one hardly need mention that yet again there are impeccable performances all round. One must, however, draw attention to the way in which Soumitra Chatterjee, as Umaprasad, brings out the precise degree of weakness, or fatal hesitancy, in the husband (a familiar characteristic, this, of Ray's educated young men) that enables him to let the final tragedy happen. And Sharmila Tagore, as Doyamoyee, the treasure inevitably lost to the new generation, is exquisitely moving to the end in a role that could so easily have been interpreted as that of a mere figurehead. In its structure as well as in its theme, this is Satyajit Ray's most classical film, and its sparkle, like that of a carefully cut and polished diamond, is the more brilliant in that it emanates from more than one facet.

Monthly Film Bulletin, October 1964

Pikoo

Commissioned by Henri Fraise for French television, Ray adapts one of the stories from his book 'Pikoo's Diary and Other Stories', about a six-year-old child. On a balmy afternoon, Pikoo draws flowers in the garden, unaware of his mother's liaison and his grandfather dying in another room.

bfi.org.uk

DEVI (THE GODDESS)

Director: Satyajit Ray

Production Company: Satyajit Ray Productions

Producer: Satyajit Ray *

Production Manager: Anil Chowdhury

Screenplay: Satyajit Ray

Based on a short story by: Prabhat Kumar Mukherjee

On a theme by: Rabindranath Tagore

Director of Photography: Subrata Mitra

Editor: Dulal Dutta

Art Director: Bansi Chandragupta

Music: Ali Akbar Khan

Sound: Durgadas Mitra

Cast:

Chhabi Biswas (*Kalikinkar Roy*)

Soumitra Chatterjee (*Umaprasad, younger son*)

Sharmila Tagore (*Doyamoyee*)

Purnendu Mukherjee (*Taraprasad, elder son*)

Karuna Banerjee (*Harasundari, Kalikinkar's wife*)

Arpan Chowdhury (*Khoka, the child*)

Anil Chatterjee (*Bhudeb*)

Kali Sarkar (*Professor Sarkar*)

Mohammed Israil (*Nibaran*)

Khagesh Chakravarti (*Kaviraj*)

Nagendranath Kabyabakarantirtha (*priest*)

Santa Devi (*Sarala*)

India 1960

99 mins

* Uncredited

PIKOO

Director: Satyajit Ray

Producer: Henri Fraise

Cast:

Arjun Guhathakurta

Aparna Sen

Soven Lahiri

Promode Ganguly

India 1980

26 mins

Print courtesy of the Packard Humanities Institute Collection at the Academy Film Archive.

SATYAJIT RAY: THE LANGUAGE OF FILM

The Music Room (Jalsaghar)

Mon 1 Aug 20:40; Sun 14 Aug 18:15

Charulata (The Lonely Wife)

Fri 5 Aug 18:20; Mon 8 Aug 18:15; Mon 15 Aug 14:30; Wed 17 Aug 20:40;
Sat 27 Aug 12:00; Wed 31 Aug 20:45

Devi (The Goddess) + Pikoo

Sat 6 Aug 14:30 (+ pre-recorded intro by Sharmila Tagore); Sun 14 Aug
14:45

Teen Kanya (Three Daughters)

Sun 7 Aug 17:35; Sat 13 Aug 14:50

Kanchenjunga

Tue 9 Aug 18:20; Mon 15 Aug 20:50

The Expedition (Abhijan)

Wed 10 Aug 20:10; Sat 20 Aug 14:30

Kapurush (The Coward) + Mahapurush (The Holy Man)

Thu 11 Aug 18:00; Sat 20 Aug 20:20

Satyajit Ray Documentaries Programme 2

Tue 16 Aug 20:40; Wed 24 Aug 18:20

The Hero (Nayak)

Wed 17 Aug 18:10; Thu 25 Aug 20:40

Days and Nights in the Forest (Aranyer Din Ratri)

Thu 18 Aug 18:15; Sat 27 Aug 14:40

The Home and the World (Ghare Baire)

Sun 21 Aug 17:50; Wed 24 Aug 20:20

The Chess Players (Shatranj Ke Khilari)

Tue 23 Aug 18:10 (+ pre-recorded intro by Shabana Azmi); Sun 28 Aug
14:40

Distant Thunder (Ashani Sanket) + Deliverance (Sadgati)

Sat 27 Aug 17:30; Mon 29 Aug 14:40

Enemy of the People (Ganashatru)

Sun 28 Aug 12:10; Tue 30 Aug 18:15 (+ intro by Ashvin Devasundaram)

In association with The Academy Film Archive



Don't miss: **Beyond Bollywood – The Musical**
Peacock Theatre, 24 Aug – 3 Sep 2022

BECOME A BFI MEMBER

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at [bfi.org.uk/join](https://www.bfi.org.uk/join)

BFI PLAYER

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view.

See something different today on [player.bfi.org.uk](https://www.player.bfi.org.uk)

Join the **BFI mailing list** for regular programme updates. Not yet registered? Create a new account at www.bfi.org.uk/signup

BFI SOUTHBANK

Welcome to the home of great film and TV, with three cinemas and a studio, a world-class library, regular exhibitions and a pioneering Mediatheque with 1000s of free titles for you to explore. Browse special-edition merchandise in the BFI Shop.

We're also pleased to offer you a unique new space, the BFI Riverfront – with unrivalled riverside views of Waterloo Bridge and beyond, a delicious seasonal menu, plus a stylish balcony bar for cocktails or special events. Come and enjoy a pre-cinema dinner or a drink on the balcony as the sun goes down.

Programme notes and credits compiled by the BFI Documentation Unit

Notes may be edited or abridged. Questions/comments? Email prognotes@bfi.org.uk

The British Film Institute is a charity registered in England and Wales No. 287780