
Film Review

Satyajit Ray, *Distant Thunder*

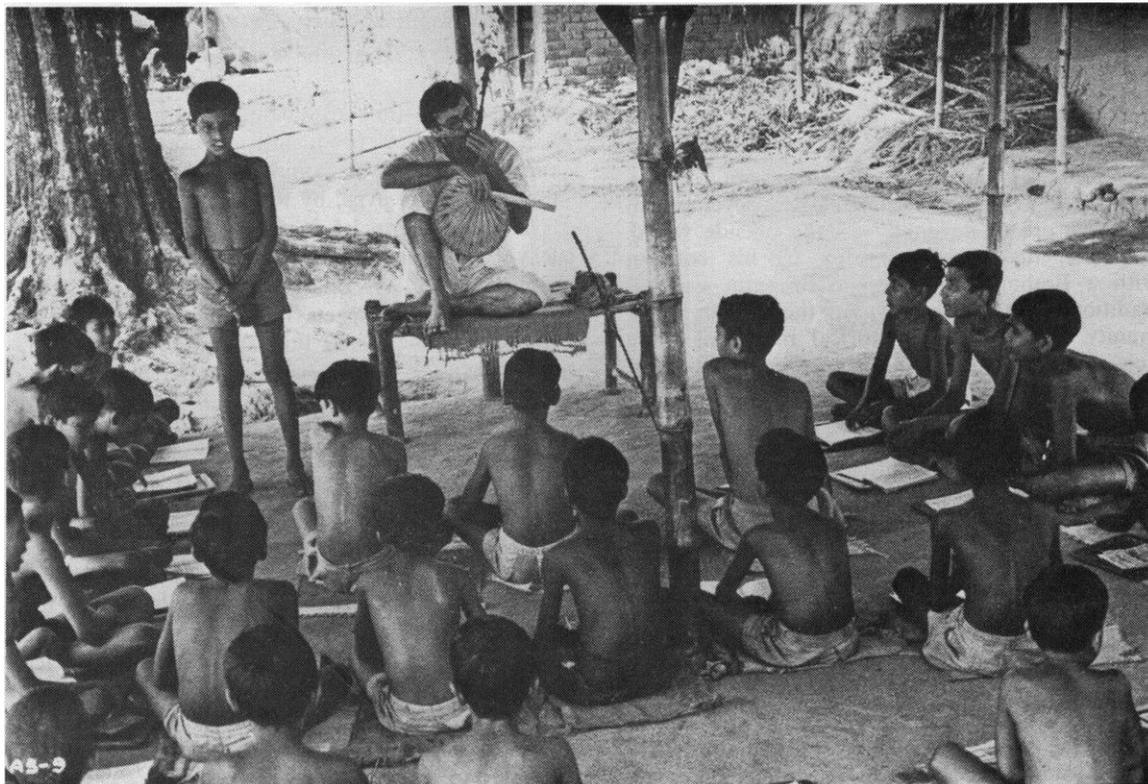
Roy Laishley

At the end of his new film, 'Distant Thunder', Satyajit Ray reminds us that more than five million people died in the Bengal 'man made famine' of 1943. The message is framed by an effective last shot of massed ranks of starving poor fading into silhouette. The drama of this scene stands in contrast to the rest of the film, for Ray chooses to show the effects of famine indirectly through the eyes of a young and relatively well-off Brahmin couple.

The film is set in a Bengali village in 1943. It centres around the couple, newly married and newly arrived in the village. Their arrival permits Ray to develop the two concerns which dominate his new film. The couple's attempt to assert their spiritual leadership—the philosophical ideas of the man, the aesthetic presence of the woman—gives him the opportunity to delineate the ethos

of the rural community so important to his almost Gandhian ideals. Super-imposed upon this theme is the village's gradual awakening to the threat of starvation, which subverts and destroys the pattern of social relations in which the Brahmin is trying to place himself. Overtly the film concerns itself with the reaction of two people to the vicissitudes of famine, but underneath lies a treatise on the nature of Indian society.

In previous films Ray has been concerned to show the strains and ambiguities felt by the urbanized middle class in India during a process of economic transformation. The colonial past, reinforced by the import of foreign technology and modern institutional structures, has produced alien values and precepts which threaten traditional Indian culture. To Ray, only development **through** the indigenous culture can lead to sustained and meaningful escape from poverty and stagnation. In this framework the village has a central role to play; it is both the locum upon



which the technology and skills learnt from Western science has to be centred if India is to create social and economic transformation, and yet at the same time, the village is the repository of the traditional values and organization to which this knowledge has to be moulded.

In an earlier film, 'The Adversary', Ray's central character escaped the ambiguities (and materialism) of urban life to seek understanding, and to bring his skills to the village. The limited effectiveness of such an outside force is the theme Ray develops more explicitly in 'Distant Thunder'. Ray's thesis, however, is two-edged: it is one of invasion and impotence. The arrival of the Brahmin couple in the village represents an invasion of vitality (albeit eccentric) and knowledge into the village; at the same time the device acts as a portent to a less benign invasion—the not so distant thunder of advancing famine. The attempt of the couple and the rural community to adjust to each other, finely and humorously drawn by Ray, is stopped by the urgency of the search for food. The Brahmin's one-man attempt to direct and promote the future of the village halts in the face of his own impotence to deal with the one crucial factor in the life of the village—food—an impotence that reflects the village's own inability to feed itself.

The essential paradox in the development of the rural community is brought out by Ray. On the one hand it is the central reality of Indian society, and as such its structure and values determine the range of options for future patterns of development. At the same time the village is passive and parochial: change must come from without, and the key factor in the village's development is the nature of its links with the outside world. Ray perpetuates this paradox by his concern with a Brahmin couple. The Brahmin caste is traditionally the memory of the Indian community. Although the historical reality of India does not allow for any simple representation of social stratification the Brahmin caste has, over parts of India, been both the repository and enforcer of antediluvian values, and generated a sufficient number of individuals to develop a rival tradition as a source and servant to the people for 'enlightenment'. This latter role is the traditional structure through which Ray wishes change to take place. Yet in his portrayal of the Brahmin he is alive to the weaknesses inherent in such a paternalistic process of modernisation.

This becomes apparent, incidentally, as the film progresses. Ray develops a picture of the Brahmin husband as the agent of change in the village (while the wife is given a traditionally more passive and idealized role in which she represents

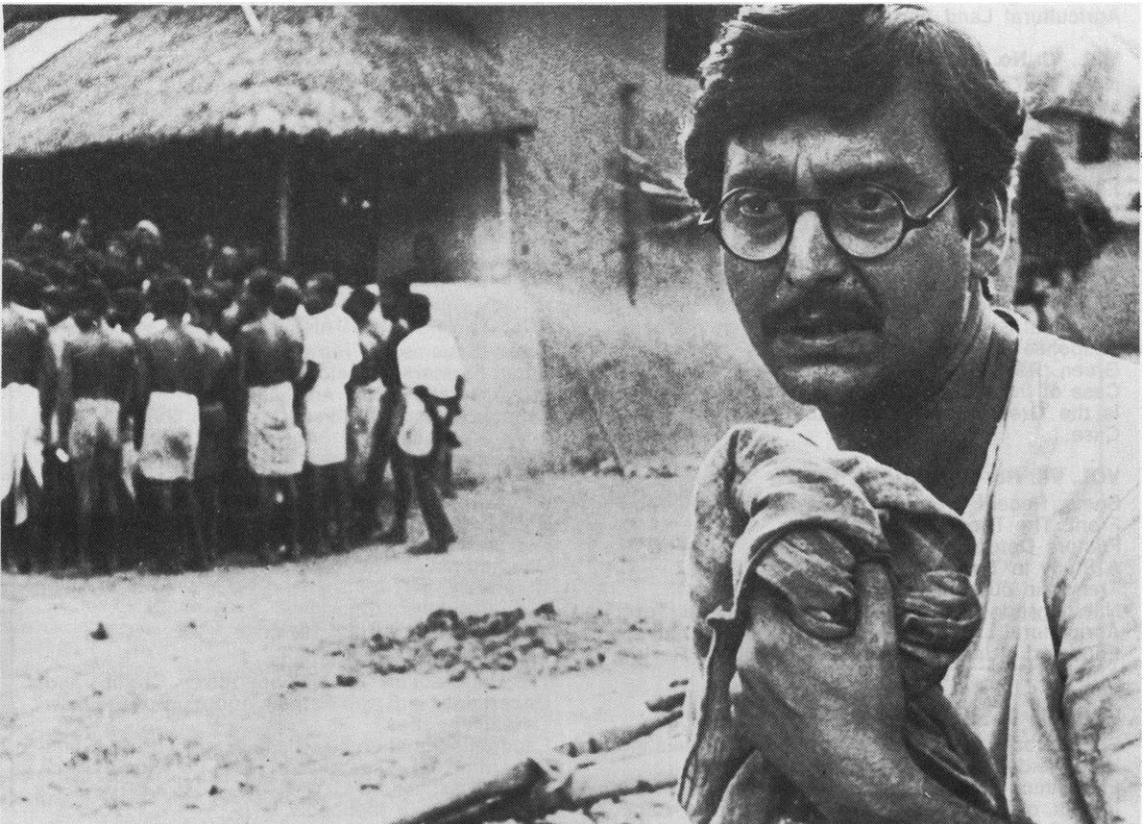
the 'good' values of generosity, purity and aesthetic beauty). As a Brahmin the man is allocated a consultative status in the village, which while not reflecting economic power, allows him to enter, a young man, into the councils of the elders. From acting as the village's priest he moves to being their doctor and their teacher. All this is finely drawn. When a villager comes to be reassured that his pulse is still beating the Brahmin covers his hesitant medical knowledge by arrogance, and secures his own subsistence—a gift of rice—at the same time. The Brahmin husband also sets up a village school—a makeshift structure in which the rote learning is frequently interrupted by the Brahmin's concern with other tasks in the village. The school is a good example of the delicacy with which Ray portrays village life. The paternal and casual attitude of the Brahmin is emphasized, and the absence of girls in the school is inevitable. The question of what advantages the school provides is therefore raised: a question to be asked of the whole of the Brahmin's activities in the village. This point is developed by Ray as the threat of starvation becomes more ominous and the villagers turn to him to provide a solution. Priestly rituals prove abortive, and the Brahmin's impotence is driven home by his own inability to feed himself and his wife.

Ray's portrayal of the famine also establishes the impotence of the village. The famine is the result of war-time dislocations, with administrative inadequacy producing a short-fall in rice supply. The evil of famine (characterized in the film, like other evils, by the sound of war-planes) is a consequence of factors outside the village. Ray's analysis (which conforms to the view argued in B. M. Bhatia, **Famines in India; A study of some aspects of the economic life of India, 1860-1945**, Asia Publishing House, London, 1963) is used with special effect to demonstrate the village's isolation from, and yet dependence upon, the outside world. The colonial administration gave the village apparent autonomy, but stimulated no efforts towards rural development. Inadequate storage facilities mean that the produce of a wet harvest has to be disposed of quickly, with consequently, a total dependence on the second rice crop. When that fails as well the village is dependent on a shaky administrative system, which distributes, at a price, surplus rice from other areas. When that system collapses the distribution of land and the concentration on one crop, rice, ensures that the mass of the rural people face famine.

Implicit in the film is the concept of a shield formed by a colonial administration, backed up by a land-holding elite, between the village and a corpus of knowledge available in the outside world. The Brahmin represents a (traditional) attempt to penetrate that shield, but the famine forces him to face the contradiction of his own existence. He claims to bring development to the village, but is totally dependent on the villagers for his subsistence. He calls upon his traditional base, his caste, and finds them begging for food as well. He can offer no resources to the village. At the crunch he is a parasite, and recognizes the fact.

The basic danger inherent in paternalistic modernization is exemplified by the helplessness of the villagers as the colonial regime, the land-owners and finally the Brahmin fail them. They have been denied the tools and the knowledge to secure their own survival.

'Distant Thunder' convincingly demonstrates the present importance of the nature of the links with the outside world in the pattern of village development. The film appears to argue that this development cannot be achieved through established structures, whether they be the welfare system of traditional caste structure, or that of the modern state, but can take place only when the people have the resources in their own hands. Ray offers no solution to how to achieve this redistribution, a position which is fair enough when so many ideas and attempts to do this have failed. Yet Ray leaves his Brahmin couple, starving, and responsible for others, with the pregnancy of the wife. It is a statement of faith denied by the rest of the film, and denied implicitly by the villagers who desert their farms for the false hopes of the towns. In these circumstances Ray's act of faith exemplifies his film's own theme of impotence. India's villages require more concrete solutions.



Sonmitra Chatterjee in "Distant Thunder".