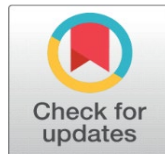
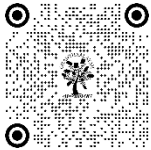


SATYAJIT RAY AS A DOCUMENTARIAN: A STUDY ON *RABINDRANATH TAGORE AND SUKUMAR RAY*

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ABSTRACT

Satyajit Ray, renowned globally for his cinematic brilliance, also left an indelible mark as a documentary filmmaker. It is to be mentioned here that the literatures and writings on Ray's documentary are very less in number. Ray's documentaries on Rabindranath Tagore encapsulate the multifaceted persona of the Nobel laureate, exploring his literary contributions, artistic vision, and philosophical ideologies. Through meticulous research and visual finesse, Ray elucidates Tagore's timeless relevance, weaving together archival footage and dramatic reenactments to present a holistic portrayal of the poet's life and legacy. In his exploration of *Sukumar Ray*, Satyajit Ray ventures into the whimsical world of children's literature and satire to commemorate the centenary birth anniversary. This paper tries to discuss on documentaries made by Ray with special emphasis on *Rabindranath Tagore and Sukumar Ray*. Besides reviewing relevant literatures, the researchers have tried to describe two documentaries vividly. In addition to this, they also have taken insightful interviews of three literary and film scholars to understand Ray as documentarian. The interviews were analysed and conclusion have been drawn on the basis of that. The paper shows, beyond mere biographical documentation, Satyajit Ray's documentaries serve as nuanced reflections on the socio-cultural milieu of their respective times, offering profound insights into the artistic legacies of Rabindranath Tagore and Sukumar Ray. The paper serves to highlight the intricate nature of Ray's documentary legacy and its ongoing significance in influencing conversations within Indian cinema.

Keywords: Documentary Film, Satyajit Ray, Rabindranath Tagore, Sukumar Ray

1. INTRODUCTION

Most people associate the Indian filmmaking industry with commercial rom-coms, vibrant songs, dance, fictional dramas, etc. but India has a rich history of documentary filmmaking that was started well before India's independence in 1947. In 1888 'Pundalik Dada' by H.S. Bhatwadekar became the first Indian documentary and Bhatwadekar became the one who started exploring the non-fiction genre of cinema. Later on, many popular filmmakers like P.V Pathy, D.G. Tendulkar, K.S Hirlekar started working on documentaries based on Indian themes. Indian

documentaries set themselves apart from the rest with their unique topics ranging from social issues and political dramas to natural and biographical documentaries, based on India's cultural heritage. The Indian government in 1948 officially formulated the Films Division of India which became the tool to distribute and propagate documentaries to Indian audience. It was a desperate attempt from the Films Division of India to provide proper exposure of India's heritage among its audience. [Bondebjerg \(2014\)](#).

Satyajit Ray, the man who brought renaissance in tradition-bound Indian cinema, made five documentaries, (*Rabindranath*, *Bala*, *Inner Eye*, *Sikkim* and *Sukumar Ray*) in his entire career apart from masterpieces in the field of feature films. His documentaries, not only focused on the placement of factual information but also on eliciting human emotions by highlighting the subject's worth or importance. Still, the least talked about area is his documentaries- the non-fictional work. This paper will try to explore Ray as documentarian.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Robinson in his book *'The Inner Eye'*, attempts to highlight Satyajit Ray's great respect towards some of India's leading personalities. Among his five documentaries four are biographical. His deep admiration for these figures eventually led him to make some of the finest biographical documentaries. Robinson, who was Ray's biographer, also carefully enunciated the fact that his documentaries are not just a detailed factual representation of the subjects but were also instrumental in upholding their wisdom, intellect and persona. He devised his unique style where the core of the subject was highlighted to the audience in the first few minutes of the documentary, for example- funeral procession of Rabindranath Tagore, the natural beauty of the then small kingdom of Sikkim etc. The things which remained constant with his documentary films are the beautiful presentation of the footages, the reenactments of the subject's lifestyles, their field of knowledge, expertise in each of their respective fields which provided a slice of life of that person or that place. The omnipresent narration is also noteworthy which in most cases done by Ray himself. The book also translated the role of India's first documentary film production unit i.e., the role of the Film's Division in financing Ray's documentaries, contribution of first Indian Premier Jawaharlal Nehru in choosing Ray to document the life of Rabindranath Tagore. Satyajit Ray also wanted to make a documentary of Jawaharlal Nehru which he tried to convey in his encounter with Nehru in Shantiniketan but the idea never reached Nehru because Ray was hesitant to explain the project due to Nehru's state of mind which was highly bothered by the 1962 Indo-China war. Ray also finds himself amidst multiple controversies particularly after making *Sikkim* where the film was banned by the Indian Government because the film portrayed Sikkim as a small feudal monarchy and many government officials find this documentary as a desperate attempt of Sikkim's ruler (Chogyal) as the film was commissioned by him. Ray clearly understood the importance of his subjects and accordingly chose a narrative structure that introduced audience with their eminence which kept them occupied every time [Robinson \(1989\)](#).

Sharif mentioned in his paper *'Postcolonial Indian Nonfiction Cinema: The Documentaries of Satyajit Ray'*, that Satyajit Ray was the key pillar in the Indian non-fictional cinema in the post-independence era. Previously in the colonial period Indian films were based on melodramatic and romantic stories. British political, economic, and cultural systems were generally portrayed through Indian films even after India's independence in 1947. Here, government-sponsored documentaries

played a crucial role by projecting India's national identity to the Indian masses. Although Ray was primarily involved in making fictional films, his documentary films were also considered as some of the finest portrayals of leading figures whom he admired on personal level. His documentaries fully resembled his cinematic standards, his aesthetics sensibilities, his innovative ideas, presentation styles even the music composition. Through his documentaries Ray carved out a new genre where he focussed on prominent personalities which other Indian documentarians followed later. Each one was *analytical, well-written, focussed and masterly articulated* [Sharif \(2018\)](#)

3. METHOD

The research methodology includes mixed method. Mixed method integrates qualitative and quantitative research techniques, data collection, analysis, and interpretation within a single study to provide a more complete understanding of the research problem. The researcher has conducted semi structured interview, gathering unique insights directly from individuals that are specifically relevant to the study. Semi structured interview helped the researcher to explore participant thoughts, feelings and beliefs about this topic while taking interview. In-depth interview of three prominent film and literary scholars were taken and analysed to understand Satyajit Ray as a documentary maker. Here, interview refers to information collected firsthand by the researcher for a specific research purpose, thus considering it as primary method.

Along with that, the two documentaries were analysed. The primary activity in film analysis is the interpretation of the content and its implications. Researchers synthesize their observations to draw conclusion, which is regarded as secondary method.

4. DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS

Film: Rabindranath Tagore

Release Date: 1961

Language: English

Director- Satyajit Ray

Producer- Films Division of India

Cinematography- Soumendu Roy

Edited by- Dulal Dutta

Narrated by: Satyajit Ray

Music by- Jyotirindra Moitra

Duration- 54 mins

Rabindranath Tagore released in 1961 was the first ever documentary made by Satyajit Ray. It was also a commissioned project from the Government of India to celebrate the centenary birth anniversary of Iconic Indian poet and Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore, Thus, this was a deliberate choice to present only an official and respectful portrait of the poet, avoiding the controversial aspects of Tagore's life in this documentary. It was purely intended to honour Tagore's contributions to literature, music, and education. It also highlighted his achievements, his role in the Bengali Renaissance, and his global influence as a Nobel laureate.

Omitted Controversies

Political Views: Tagore's complex and sometimes contradictory political views, including his criticisms of nationalism and colonialism, were not deeply explored. This allowed the film to sidestep debates over his political stances.

Personal Life: Aspects of Tagore's personal life, including his relationships and familial issues, were also not covered in detail. This choice helped maintain a respectful and idealized portrayal of the poet.

Criticism and Opposition: The documentary did not delve into the criticisms and opposition Tagore faced during his lifetime, both from contemporary critics and within his own family.

The documentary begins with the funeral procession of Rabindranath Tagore. Ray intentionally placed this portion in the commencement of the film. The logic and reason for that would be, that he wanted the audience to know the sentimental magnitude associated with His name, the legacy which he carried and his immense contribution to this nation. The opening is spectacular enough to persuade the audience that a national hero or a philanthropist may live on and be honoured by the public in this way after passing away [Maji \(2017\)](#).

It was a fairly detailed documentary as compared to the rest of the works made on the great poet. The documentary portrayed Old Calcutta's charm while depicting about Tagore's forefathers. Rabindranath's Grandfather Dwarkanath Tagore was a successful businessman. His business was diversified in numerous enterprises such as real estate, indigo, coal, sugar, exports, banking, newspaper. Dwarkanath was against the religious orthodoxy of the Brahmin-dominated society. This principle was later transmitted to the next generations. His son Debendranath was leading an unpredictable life but the death of his grandmother shook young Debendranath. He wanted to explore the existence of life and read many philosophies of both East and West. He eventually found his answer in a torn page of Isha Upanishad edited by Raja Ram Mohan Roy, for whom the boy had deepest respect from childhood.

The house of Tagore was always kept alive by the creative practices such as painting, singing, writing etc. Rabindranath Tagore also grew up in that kind of an atmosphere. From the beginning he never liked the formal education system. Rather young Rabi wanted to observe nature deeply and see the world outside beyond his conventional lifestyle. His brother Hemendranath ensured Rabi's education at home and exposed him to all sorts of creative exertions. In an attempt to properly educate the boy, Rabi was sent to England but he never completed his full course at London University. There, he felt attracted towards Western classical music which later influenced dramas, operas composed by himself, such as *Valmiki Pratibha*. He skilfully corresponds Indian ragas with Western Operas [Maji \(2017\)](#).

In the time of looking after his family estates, Rabindranath explored much of rural Bengal where he developed his passion for rural lifestyle, values and natural beauty. In his own literary works, nature and pure simplistic life forms, got reflected several times, influenced by his countless expeditions to rural Bengal. He was also a strong critique of social evils, pre conceived ideas of society particularly prevalent in Hinduism

It was very fascinating to see the way Tagore's own opera compositions, plays were used by Ray through re-enactments. Tagore's wide range of literary achievements, works, poems, songs, plays, dramas, short stories were put together in this documentary with an exceedingly solicitous observation. Rabindranath's childhood was indeed an interesting area of his life where he was imparted with a new holistic way of providing education irrespective of the previous school

education. A juvenile's sensitive state of mind was beautifully portrayed in way where he emphasized the conventional imposition of education, western based ideas of development to enlighten the youth in areas where they are truly lacking behind.

Satyajit Ray was not just a filmmaker he was truly a jack of all trades. Apart from his understanding of art direction, lighting, cinematography etc, he loved music from his core and was a staunch follower of Rabindra sangeet from his childhood. His love for Rabindra Sangeet prevented him to use any other music apart from Guru's original creations. The cut throat use of original compositions stood out the most and has beautifully blended itself with the narration.

Despite several personal losses, Tagore's approach towards life was optimistic till end. He kept faith in Humanity. In the final moments of the documentary, Ray shows a frail and elderly Tagore earnestly praying for the well-being of humanity. The final sequence in this film, which depicts dawn, alludes to the beginning of a new period of peace and prosperity that the visionary Tagore spoke of in his final message to the world, Crisis in Civilization. In this scene, a great soul from the East takes on the task of bringing Oriental philosophy to the West and the rest of the world, expressing the viewer's belief that the destruction caused by the clash of nationalist principles will eventually come to an end [Maji \(2017\)](#).

Upendra Kishore Ray Chowdhury, grandfather of Satyajit Ray, was a friend of Rabindranath Tagore and was close to his family as well. Ray's mother Suprabha always wanted Ray to learn art in Rabindranath's Visa Bharati, Kala Bhawan. Naturally Tagore and his ideas tends to have a deep impact in Ray's outlook and influenced him thoroughly. 'Charulata' one of his iconic works, highly praised for effortless storytelling, camera movements, visual representation of the subject was a big example of his approbation towards the poet. The film was released in 1964, three years after the release of documentary, based on Tagore's popular novel 'Nastanirh' or 'The broken Nest'. 'Ghara baire' (1984), a successful romantic drama with a compilation of intricate depiction of a number of issues, such as nationalism, women's liberation, the spiritual and materialistic perspectives on life, tradition vs modernism, was another film by Ray which was adapted from Tagore's 'Ghare baire' novel [Ray \(1961\)](#).

Film: Sukumar Ray

Release Date: 1987

Language- Bengali

Directed by- Satyajit Ray

Produced by- Government of West Bengal

Cinematography by- Barun Raha

Edited by- Dulal Dutta

Narrated by- Soumitra Chatterjee

Music by- Satyajit Ray

Duration- 30 mins

Satyajit Ray's *Sukumar Ray* was released in 1987. It was a 30-minutes short documentary film produced by the West Bengal Government to commemorate the centenary birth anniversary of great Bengali poet, essayist, illustrator, and writer Sukumar Ray who also happens to be Ray's father. The documentary attempted to highlight his field of expertise and his versatile areas of work. The film started by displaying a list of popular drawings drawn by Sukumar Ray and then slowly

revealed his enormous family, their educational prowess, social status, position in the society and the legacy that they've left. The documentary also covered his formation of the Nonsense Group and publication of his handwritten humorous magazine *Thirty-Two and a Half Fries*. Ray (1987).

Sukumar Ray's father Upendrakishore Ray Chowdhury came from a Zamindar family of Mymensingh (present Bangladesh). He was one of the eldest among his five brothers. He was a popular publisher, printer, painter, and musician and even though he was gifted with such unique qualities he was mostly renowned as a writer specializing in his child-centric fictional writings and folktales. 'Sandesh' magazine started by him in 1913 is considered as one of the popular Children's Magazines which is still running. Some of his other popular works included translation of the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and publishing a compilation of Bengali folktales named '*Toontunir Boi*'. Apart from his literary heritage, Satyajit Ray, in his documentary, also explored his family's relationship with printing. It was Upendrakishore Ray Chowdhury who established a printing press at Calcutta after his name in 1895, and later was renamed as U. Ray and Sons. He insisted his son Sukumar to learn printing and photography from abroad and obeying his father's desire went to London's County Council School of Photoengraving and Lithography and then went to Manchester for further studies in Chromolithography and litho-drawing. Sukumar Ray, after finishing his studies came to Calcutta and was fully committed to monthly magazine '*Sandesh*' started by his father. Sukumar Ray started to popularize Sandesh magazine with riddles, cartoons, sketches, pictures, illustration, essays and poems written by him and renowned personalities like Rabindranath Tagore, Abanindranath Tagore, Satyendranath Dutta. Even the quality of print in Sandesh magazine was so flawless that it distinguished itself from rest of the magazines at that time. His popular works included '*Abol tabol*', '*Ho jo bo ro lo*', '*Chalachitta chanchari*', '*Sabda Kalpa Droom*'. Sukumar's curiosities, rough sketches, half cooked ideas, notes, riddles, descriptions about his characters, his poems found their place in his '*Kheror khata*', an old red notebook. Distinguished performers from the theatre and film, including Utpal Dutt, Soumitra Chatterjee, and Manoj Mitra, perform two sequences from the two plays in this documentary. The two sequences, replete with wordplay, wit, sarcasm, and subtle humour, instantly demonstrate why Sukumar Ray is regarded as one of the most well-known humourists in Indian literature.

In the documentary, the influence of Soumitra Chatterjee and Utpal Dutt becomes especially significant. Renowned actor Soumitra Chatterjee lends his voice as the narrator, guiding the audience through the whimsical world of Ray's first published poetical "nonsense"-play, *Jhala Pala*. Chatterjee's narration adds a layer of depth and familiarity, connecting the audience to the playful absurdity of Ray's work. Utpal Dutt, an iconic figure in Bengali theatre and cinema, enacts the role of a teacher from *Jhala Pala*. His performance embodies the eccentric and surreal qualities of Ray's characters, capturing the essence of the nonsense genre that Sukumar Ray pioneered. Dutt's portrayal brings to life the chaotic yet structured world of Sukumar's imagination, emphasizing the literary and theatrical brilliance of Ray's nonsensical narrative.

The documentary also encapsulates the concept of mise en abyme, or a film within a film. The narrative structure, combined with the performances of Chatterjee and Dutt, creates a layered experience that mirrors the recursive nature of Ray's storytelling. The playful yet profound interplay between the actors and the text reflects the endless reflections and self-referential qualities inherent in Ray's work.

Sukumar Ray was a key member of Brahmo Samaj, India's most progressive reformist organisation. He was also the founder of Monday Club where he and other renowned members discussed on multiple topics such as politics, art, literature, culture, religion etc. Sukumar Ray used U. Ray and Sons as a tool for his creative expression, whether it is for his poems, essays or invitations for his Monday Club [Sharif \(2018\)](#).

As a child, Satyajit Ray never got the opportunity to spend time with his father following his demise at an early age of 35 years and 10 months when Ray was only 2.5 years old. Satyajit Ray was brought up by his Mother Suprabha Devi and relatives. For Ray this film was a careful exploration of his father's personality, discover his father as a popular child author, an introspection on emotional depth of his riddles, their inner meanings, iconic use of his illustrations, underlying humour of his compositions and many more. He carefully brings out his family's lineage and their immense contribution as writers, social thinkers and towards Bengali literature. In this documentary, Ray was very much particular to put forward the subtle humour which his father propagated in his writings. He, through this documentary, also tried to bring the sudden feeling of jubilation which every Bengali would get after reading his poems as a kid. That was the prime reason behind making this documentary in Bengali language. Moreover, he also tried to bring forth his father's role as a reformist of the Hindu religion particularly during his time spent in Brahmo Samaj.

One thing that all of Ray's documentaries have in common is that they conclude on a positive note. When it comes to the biographical ones, their message is that an artist's life is never stagnant or monotonous. The ending of this documentary is also not an exception. Ray was unable to portray Sukumar in action to wrap up this biographical documentary because there was no video footage of the artist. But as the story's turning point, he employs Tagore's elegy on Sukumar's passing: "I have seen many deaths." However, I have never met someone who, in the face of death, sung songs to bring himself back to life. I'm crying because I'm sitting next to his deathbed and I've heard that music. The final scene of the documentary features a portrait of Sukumar and images of his only son Satyajit Ray as a little child, suggesting that the father and son are passing on their artistic heritage. The way that Ray's childhood photos are portrayed implies that Sukumar's artistic path will start over with his young son's activities [Maji \(2017\)](#).

5. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

The expository mode of documentaries directed by Satyajit Ray has few common traits. First of all, the stories in these movies depict the biographies of the characters sublimely, without the main figures ever taking centre stage in the overall presentation of the movie. Second, Ray primarily discussed the works, accomplishments, contributions, and enduring influence of the individuals he represented. Thirdly, Ray made sure the movies were insightful, precise, critical, and expertly written with pertinent commentary.

In the 1960s, *Rabindranath Tagore's* documentary established a benchmark for personality-based documentaries in India. It was a distinctively researched work with a broader perspective. Ray used every cinematic device at his disposal to make Tagore's life story credible, noteworthy, distinct, and aesthetically engaging. Owing to the historical significance of Tagore's period, existence, and accomplishments, Ray was forced to search records and videos from various archives across the globe. In addition, he recreated the eras of Tagore, his forefathers, and their peers. In addition to telling the story of Tagore's development as a poet and Renaissance man,

Rabindranath Tagore's film featured cinematic elements from across the Indian subcontinent.

It also chronicled India's slow transition from a well-controlled country to a nation striving for independence. Ray's task as a filmmaker in *Rabindranath Tagore* was to retell history in a way that would clearly and consistently connect with the audience of a bygone era.

Rather than approaching the film's content or overall composition from a journalistic standpoint, he used a cinematic style, gathering anecdotes for a visual representation. As a result, Tagore's film evolved from a biography with numerous cross-references to a comprehensive cinematic work. A similar strategy was used in the movie *Sukumar Ray*, albeit it had a smaller budget and less visual effects.

'*Sukumar Ray*' started with a successive display of his unique sketches and on the other hand '*Rabindranath*' started with mournful, melancholic and desolate footages of Rabindranath's death. Ray in these two scenes tried to imply two separate emotions in a juxtaposed way. For him it was always important to evoke human emotion to clearly understand the essence of his documentaries.

6. INTERVIEW

Three prominent film and literary scholars were interviewed for this paper who focused particularly on Satyajit Ray films and more importantly on his documentaries--- Dr. Rajdeep Roy, Assistant Professor, Department of Film Studies, West Bengal State University, India, Dr. Spandan Bhattacharya, Assistant Professor at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, BITS Pilani (Hyderabad campus) and a PhD in Cinema Studies from the School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. and Dr Dibyakusum Ray, Assistant Professor, Department of English, IIT Ropar.

The researchers asked a series of insightful questions to understand Ray as documentary maker. The questions include their personal opinion on Ray as documentarian, approach and language of his documentaries, his influence in current documentary making tradition and so on.

Q. The first of which was whether Satyajit Ray's fictional works took precedence over his non-fictional works.

According to three of them, Satyajit Ray's non-fiction works are rarely explored because we usually link him with fictional films, even though his documentaries offer some of the best depictions of the genre.

Q. Where will you place Ray as a documentarian?

Mr. Rajdeep Roy claims that Ray did not view himself as a documentary filmmaker in the same way he considers himself a fiction filmmaker. Nearly all of his films are projects that were commissioned with specific instructions. For example, Tagore's film was made in commemoration of his 100th birthday in the year 1961, and the then-king of Sikkim commissioned the contentious film with a certain message in mind. He believes that Ray's social commitment drove the creation of the documentaries more so than the same level of artistic endeavour evident in his feature-length narrative.

Dr. Dibyakusum Ray said that Satyajit Ray's documentaries were not at par with his fiction films. The majority of parallel cinema filmmakers from the 1950s to the 1970s were not as good documentarians as they were throughout their careers making fiction films.

Dr. Spandan Bhattacharya claims that it is difficult and incorrect for him to rank Ray in terms of brilliance or talent for filmmaking. He went on to say that there is typically less discussion and writing about his documentaries. This is not just the case of Ray, I believe. He claimed that other Indian auteurs, such as Bimal Roy and Ritwik Ghatak, had also produced documentaries. However, there aren't many scholarly or journalistic articles about those documentaries too.

Q. Ray deeply believed in the phrase- 'dotting the I's and crossing the t's'. The direct cinema or cinema verité approach never really excited his creative brains. He always preferred a methodical way of making films and documentaries which he can dominate. What in your opinion might be the reason for that?

Direct cinema is one of the several methods available for making documentaries, according to Mr. Rajdeep Roy. Throughout Ray's body of work, there are several instances of documentary realism, such as the verité style, which is influenced by neorealism. Since Jean Rouch is just as much of an auteur as Ray is, he does not believe that traditional auteur-centric film is incompatible with direct cinema.

In response, Dr. Spandan Bhattacharya stated that this is how his auteur ship operates. He has always tended to work systematically on every project, whether it be an artwork, a story, or a video. This also applies to the documentary films he produces.

Q. Most of his documentaries were made in his narration that too in English unlike the last documentary that he made on his father 'Sukumar Ray'. Do you think that in case of non-fictional work he was more comfortable working in English than Bengali?

Mr Roy thought that there was no particular bias or inclination to any language. Most of his documentaries were commissioned projects for a pan-Indian and international viewership so English was the chosen language. *Sukumar Ray* was in a way personal to the director and funded by the West Bengal Govt for a niche Bengali viewership. So, he thinks that Bengali was chosen in that case.

Dr Dibyakusum in his interview articulated the fact that Satyajit Ray's background, his cultural proclivity, his education, in which he held shows that he was very much inclined towards the anglophone world. He was a voracious eater of Hollywood films and was also influenced by the French new wave films to a large degree. The influence of Hollywood films as a stylistic genre upon his style is far more pronounced than any other non-anglophonic medium and in many instances, it seems that he was thinking in English or imagining the scenes in English. That might be the reason why he was more comfortable working in English.

Dr. Spandan Bhattacharya on the other hand suggested that when it comes to the language of the film, it's not always about the choices a director makes. Many times, these are conditioned by the production-distribution-exhibition circuit.

Q. There are arguably two kinds of audience for his documentaries, the first who don't consider his documentaries quite as sturdy as his mainstream work and the second who finds his documentaries a very precise representation of the subject matter and also believed that he had carved a niche for his films. Which side do you belong to?

Mr Roy doesn't belong to either of the two. To him, Ray primarily considered fiction film making as his bread and butter and documentary mainly as part of his social responsibility as a film professional. His documentaries are brilliant but he is not documentary filmmaker in its terms.

Dr Dibyakushum said that he belongs to the school which thinks that his documentaries were not as sturdy as his mainstream work because stylistically his documentaries were very confusing. His transitions from fiction films to non-fiction films were not very convincing. He further points out certain issues with his documentaries like in 'Bala' the dancer Balasaraswati wanted Ray to document the biographical film. Ray was simply not in his creative best and was primarily doing that for monetary reasons. At the time of making *Sikkim and Sukumar Ray* he was considerably ill which seriously affected his filmmaking skills. So, in some cases documentaries were more of a commercial venture for him than compared to fiction films where there was some amount of passion involved.

Spandan Bhattacharya neither considered his documentaries quite as sturdy as his mainstream work nor did he find his documentaries a very precise representation of the subject matter.

Q. Satyajit Ray was an imaginative writer who was very focussed on writing fictional content. Do you believe that his imagination and artistic soul got sort of restricted while making films which was based entirely on real life facts and incidents?

Rajdeep Roy said that Ray's central style was realistic. He never had problem to work with real facts and subjects that is most evident in his city centric films. All his fictions have strong neorealist, documentary naturalism, so working in documentary would have been a natural progression had he chosen to do it full time.

Dr Dibyakusum agrees with the statement that his imagination was restricted in his documentaries because Satyajit Ray was a storyteller. Satyajit Ray was not a radical filmmaker as compared to his contemporaries like Ritwik Ghatak and other non-formal filmmakers such as Mani Kaul, Kumar Sahni. His form of cinema was described by him as a literary fiction form which consists of certain plot, certain advancements through the plot, certain engineering that generally constitute a novel and Ray never got out of his formalistic sensibilities.

Spandan Bhattacharya in response to this question stated that he was an excellent writer of many short essays also along with fiction. The book-length work of 'Our Films Their Films' and many other writings in Bengali and English are good testimonies of that skill.

Q. Don't you think that if Satyajit Ray was really that much determined to execute his documentaries, he would've selected topics which were based on real life problems and social issues much like the themes which he himself often reflected in his fiction films, for e.g.- employment crisis, labour strike in 'Calcutta Trilogy', Bengal famine in *Asuni Sanket*. Rather he preferred making biographical documentaries.

Mr Rajdeep Roy totally agrees with this point and also enunciated that he was never a professional documentary filmmaker, because that requires a very different skill set than a fiction film maker.

Dr Spandan Bhattacharya thinks that he was equally serious about the documentary subjects, perhaps the subjects differ from the fictional films.

Dr Dibyakusum stated that Satyajit Ray documentaries were very apolitical and safe. He also mentioned the names of Indian filmmaker Anant Patwardhan and German film director Leni Riefenstahl who were very stern in taking a very progressive political and ideological standpoint unlike Ray. Satyajit Ray in his feature films and documentaries never upheld any political ideology and was pretty much a safe player. This can be a reason why many people saw Satyajit Ray as a humanist or it can be his conceptual escapism which never allowed him to

inherently support a political ideology. He also pointed out that the experimentation was not his forte, he was essentially a linear storyteller of the highest order and whenever the fact is presented in a naked and denuded manner, he shy's away from that.

When asked about the things which they personally find the most promising, unique and distinct in his documentary films and which gives it a Satyajit Ray hallmark.

Mr Roy mentioned the care and diligence in portraying the subject is the most distinguishable thing.

Mr Bhattacharya finds the rigour as something which is very fascinating. And that came from an engagement with his subject which is very thorough and demonstrates very good research.

Dr Dibyakusum opined that the way he presents his stories, the glacial movement, the way it looks history from an apolitical sanitized manner, the way it slowly unfurls in front of the audience, the way actors play parts are certain interesting aspects of his documentaries.

Q. Which one documentary film do you find the most captivating and why?

Mr Roy find Bala the most interesting because Ray was working with a dancer and abstract codes of classical dance are the hardest to portray through a lens. He further mentioned a remarkable use of the dance form in cinema in a ghost dance sequence of *Gupi Gayen*. Ray always wanted to make a film based on a particular setting, dance sequences / dance performance.

According to Dr Dibyakusum he finds *Sukumar Ray* the most captivating because it's his most personal one and it has a unique emotional honesty.

According to Spandan Bhattacharya, he is not sure of any film as the best.

Q. Three out of five of his documentaries were produced by Films Division of India. Do you feel that financial restrictions from the Govt sponsored FDI can be a limiting factor in distributing the films into a wider audience belt, and can there be any influence of FDI over Satyajit Ray's sense of judgement, content and creativity?

Mr Rajdeep Roy don't think that financial constraints would have been a deterring factor for all his documentaries except probably 'Sadgaati' a short television film produced by Doordarshan and released in 1981. Ray was famous for his careful management of money. For all the state sponsored projects he chose a very simple expositional style with a clear message. He thinks that's a financially viable step for dealing with the said subjects.

Dr Dibyakusum Ray stated that its more than probable that just like any government funding, FDI funding also had a certain influence over his films. Because every governmental agency wants to propagate their own political agenda and the way Satyajit made movies following a centrist path was actually preferred by the then government even after the heydays of Indira Gandhi. It was a case of hand and gloves fitting perfectly well for each other. It was not like that he had to make compromises it just came to him naturally.

Dr Spandan Bhattacharya agrees with the first part of the question that financial restrictions from govt sponsored FDI was a limiting factor in distributing the films into a wide audience belt. But this is not just the case of Ray. Almost all of the films produced by FDI faced this difficulty. For the second question he mentioned that it's difficult to get a no/yes answer. One could engage with the film texts and see if there were self-censorships.

Q. How much influence do you think can Ray's work pose on current documentary tradition? (Here influence means artistic influence)

According to Mr Rajdeep Roy he hasn't come across any documentary filmmaker who has explicitly mentioned Ray's influence as a documentary filmmaker, however almost anyone who does anything serious in film business in India will acknowledge the contribution of Ray as a fiction filmmaker.

According to Spandan Bhattacharya his influence is huge in the Indian context if you consider till the emergence of the digital phase of film making. But he is not sure how much of Ray's legacy continued after the digital take over.

Dr Dibyakusum mentioned that his documentaries don't have much influence over current documentary tradition because Satyajit Ray documentary form has already been called outdated and currently documentary with its conventional and formalistic approach has progressed a lot over and beyond the horizons of normal storytelling. He also mentioned some popular documentary films such as 'Arrival' and 'Mati Manas' of Mani Kaul and a semi documentary feature named 'Amma Ariyan' by John Abraham who were almost contemporary to Satyajit Ray were also very different documentaries than his. He also described this particular age/period of documentary filmmaking as one of the greatest phases in India even after discounting the works of Anant Patwardhan and canonical famous films like Kartiki Gonsalves's 'Elephant Whisperers' and Shaunak Sen's 'All that Breathes' who were nominated for Academy Awards. Even documentary films like 'Superman of Malegaon' by Faiza Ahmed Khan and Payal Kapadia's 'A Night of Knowing Nothing' are surpassing the conventional storytelling modes.

7. INTERPRETATION OF INTERVIEW

The following are the outcomes that have been interpreted from the interview.

Satyajit Ray's Standing as a Documentarian:

Mr. Rajdeep Roy suggests that Ray didn't view himself primarily as a documentary filmmaker but rather as a fiction filmmaker, with documentaries often being commissioned projects.

Dr. Dibyakusum Ray believes that Ray's documentaries were not as remarkable as his fiction films, citing the lack of convincing transitions and occasional commercial motivations.

Dr. Spandan Bhattacharya indicates that Ray's standing as a documentarian is difficult to rank due to less discussion and writing about his documentaries compared to his fiction films.

Ray's Approach to Documentary Filmmaking:

Ray preferred a methodical approach to filmmaking, emphasizing careful planning and execution, which may have led him away from the spontaneous style of direct cinema.

Dr. Spandan Bhattacharya suggests that Ray's systematic approach extended to his documentary filmmaking as well.

Language Choice in Documentaries:

The choice of language in Ray's documentaries varied based on factors such as the audience and funding sources.

While Mr. Rajdeep Roy believes language choice was driven by the intended viewership, Dr. Dibyakusum Ray suggests Ray's cultural background and influences might have played a role.

Critical Reception of Ray's Documentaries:

There seems to be a divide in opinion regarding the quality and impact of Ray's documentaries.

Mr. Rajdeep Roy sees Ray's documentaries as brilliant but primarily views him as a fiction filmmaker.

Dr. Dibyakusum Ray criticizes certain aspects of Ray's documentaries, including their stylistic confusion and occasional lack of passion.

Dr. Spandan Bhattacharya suggests that Ray's documentaries may not be as sturdy as his fiction films and lack a precise representation of their subjects.

Imagination in Documentary Filmmaking:

There's a discussion about whether Ray's imagination was restricted in documentary filmmaking due to his background as a fiction writer.

While Mr. Roy and Dr. Spandan Bhattacharya believe Ray's central style was realistic and he could work with real facts effectively, Dr. Dibyakusum Ray feels Ray's formalistic sensibilities restricted his imagination in documentaries.

Choice of Documentary Subjects:

There's debate over whether Ray's choice of documentary subjects reflected his passion or was influenced by commercial considerations or societal pressures.

Mr. Roy agrees that Ray's documentaries tended to focus on biographical subjects, while Dr. Dibyakusum Ray criticizes apolitical nature and lack of experimentation.

Dr. Spandan Bhattacharya suggests that the subjects of Ray's documentaries may differ from his fiction films, indicating a deliberate choice.

Legacy and Influence:

The interviewees have varying opinions on Ray's influence on the current documentary tradition. While Mr. Roy doesn't mention explicit acknowledgment of Ray's influence among contemporary documentary filmmakers, Dr. Spandan Bhattacharya sees his influence as significant in the pre-digital era.

Dr. Dibyakusum Ray suggests that Ray's documentary style may be considered outdated, with contemporary documentaries moving beyond conventional storytelling modes.

8. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is seen that the interviews shed light on the multifaceted nature of Satyajit Ray's documentary filmmaking legacy. While opinions vary regarding the prominence of his non-fictional works compared to his fictional oeuvre, it's evident that Ray approached documentary filmmaking with a meticulous and systematic methodology, often driven by commissioned projects and societal obligations rather than a dedicated passion for the form. The critical reception of Ray's documentaries is thus, divided, with some lauding their brilliance while others criticize their perceived shortcomings, such as stylistic confusion and apolitical themes. Moreover, debates arise regarding the extent to which Ray's imagination was constrained in documentary filmmaking, as well as his choices of subjects and linguistic preferences.

In a nutshell, both the documentaries reflect Satyajit Ray's versatility and sensitivity as a documentary maker. While the Tagore documentary is a respectful homage that focuses on the poet's celebrated achievements, the Sukumar Ray documentary embraces the whimsical and playful nature of its subject, offering a

more dynamic and layered narrative. Ray's ability to tailor his directorial approach to the unique qualities of each subject is a testament to his mastery as a filmmaker. The use of different narrative techniques, such as mise en abyme in the both the documentary, showcases his creativity and willingness to experiment with storytelling methods. Ray's documentary on Rabindranath Tagore is a respectful and celebratory homage, emphasizing the poet's monumental contributions to literature, music, and education. By focusing on Tagore's universally acclaimed works, Ray ensures a broad, accessible portrayal suitable for an official commemoration. However, this approach inevitably results in an idealized image that skirts around the more controversial and complex aspects of Tagore's life. While this may align with the documentary's commemorative intent, it sacrifices some depth and critical engagement, leaving a less nuanced portrait. In contrast, the documentary on Sukumar Ray embraces the whimsical and playful nature of its subject. By incorporating performances from Soumitra Chatterjee and Utpal Dutt, and employing the concept of mise en abyme, Ray captures the essence of Sukumar Ray's literary style with a dynamic and engaging narrative. This documentary stands out for its innovative structure and faithful representation of Sukumar Ray's unique contributions to Bengali literature, particularly the nonsense genre. It feels more authentic and vibrant, reflecting Ray's personal connection to the subject.

Satyajit Ray's documentaries on Rabindranath Tagore and Sukumar Ray, though different in tone and approach, reflect his deep respect for their legacies. While the Tagore documentary may be seen as an idealized official tribute, the Sukumar Ray film stands out for its faithful and engaging portrayal. Together, they underscore Ray's versatility and his significant, albeit complex, contribution to documentary filmmaking.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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None.

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