



SATYAJIT RAY: THE LANGUAGE OF FILM

Kanchenjunga

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away the film's ending.

In Satyajit Ray's view, *Kanchenjunga* differs from all his previous work: the story being his own, 'the difference is between interpretation and creation.' Of necessity, the structure is also different from his usual leisurely tempo, since the action is much tauter and covers only one-and-a-half hours on the last afternoon of the holiday – the duration of the film itself.

Ray's film is a kaleidoscope of contemporary Indian life, from the nomadic Tibetans moving their packs of shaggy donkeys to Darjeeling's college girls in their drainpipe slacks, sneakers and brilliant knitted cardigans. Its focal point is the rich, Westernised Bengali family dominated by Indranath, chairman of six companies and a man entirely given over to acquisitive purposes. He has suppressed his wife's intelligence and talents; he has married off his elder daughter, Anima, to Sankar, a business man she did not and cannot love and to whom she has been unfaithful with the man her father prohibited her from marrying. Manisa, the younger daughter, is now to be married to the heavy-handed engineer who will benefit Indranath's enterprises. All his plans would probably mature, but for an accidental meeting with the unemployed, independent-minded Asok, nephew of his son's former tutor. A highly civilised assault upon the citadel of Indranath's world ends with the business man bewildered, deflated, his values undermined.

'Indranath is not a villain in the conventional sense. He's highly cultured and civilised. He was given the title of Bahadur by the British and he looks back to those days with longing. I had Chhabi Biswas in mind when I wrote the character,' said Satyajit. 'It calls for a professional actor to develop nuances and sustain the dialogue.' Biswas is the Bengali stage actor who also appears as the two obsessive landowners in Ray's *Jalsaghar* and *Devi*. His wife is played by Karuna Banerjee, the mother in *Pather Panchali*. Had Ray's methods of direction changed at all since his first film, I asked her one day? She thought a moment, then said: 'I don't know. The only thing I notice is how much more certain he is today of what he is going to do...'

In selecting a player – professional or non-professional, for a major or minor role – Ray ignores proved ability to act. For example, Arun Mukherjee, who plays the crucial role of Asok, was acting with a semi-professional theatre company in Calcutta. But Ray had no interest in seeing Mukherjee on the stage, since he considers that a theatre performance is no criterion of an effective screen interpretation. Mukherjee has turned out to have a captivating screen personality, lending Asok the necessary dynamism to explain his influence upon the girl Manisa, her mother and Indranath himself.

For the subtle character of Sankar, the elder daughter's husband, Ray persuaded the union leader Subrata Sen, whom he had heard speak at a dinner, to take the part. The heroine, Manisa, is played by a Presidency College girl, Alaknanda Roy, whom Ray heard of from a friend. He virtually decided upon her from a photograph, then persuaded her rather unwilling parents to let her act. Her father says he finally agreed because 'of the respect middle-class Bengalis have for Satyajit Ray.' Mr Roy told me that since so much of Indian middle-class life is dull and routine, he wanted his daughter to have an exciting memory to carry through her life. Alaknanda said she would never act in another film. That, of course, remains to be seen.

The shooting script of *Kanchenjunga* begins with a carefully drawn map of Darjeeling's Observatory Hill, with its focal point of The Mall, to which all paths

lead and on which all the people of the town converge. There are 17 numbered circles on the map, each marking a location. The only location away from the Hill is the teeming market on the lowest level of the many-tiered town. This is near the impoverished quarter where Asok and his uncle live. So Ray has linked the bottom of the town to the top through the movement of his characters.

As the action develops, each pair have their own special location-except for Asok, who traverses the town from the bottom to the top. Indranath's route is from the elite hill-top hotel, the Windamere, to the Mall, where much of the action is set. Anima, her husband Sankar and their only child are first seen in the holiday cottage of the hotel- the Snuggery. But the grim scene of their marriage break-up is set against the background of the charming children's park overlooked by the church with its glistening spire.

Scenes in which Manisa has to choose what she will do with her life are worked out on the long road on the opposite side of the Hill. Her scenes with Asok are played on the wooded part of this road and shot in dappled sunlight. But her scenes with the engineer are set on a barer section of the road, with a vast and magnificent view of the Himalayas. These episodes were shot in the afternoons, and the white, swiftly drifting mist characteristic of Darjeeling in October and November became an integral part of their emotional content.

Anil, the playboy brother, also has a special location to reflect his preoccupations – the roof cafe of the dairy products establishment of Kaventers, where the young socialites of Darjeeling come to sip bottles of chocolate milk overlooked by the exclusive Planters' Club. Far below, and appearing in some shots, is the market. Against this background, Anil's drainpipe set look terribly cute. Clothes play an important part in Anil's sequences. Ray found two college girls to cast as his girlfriends, and they appear in the black slacks and vivid cardigans which first attracted Ray's attention. Anil is played by Anil Chatterjee, the professional who plays the Postmaster in *Three Daughters*. He had been supplied by Calcutta with a pair of natty trousers for his playboy role. But these were not quite smart enough to stand up to the local girls' slacks, so an appeal was made to a Darjeeling tailor who in 24 hours turned out a more dashing pair in silver-grey corduroy. The girls and he parade the brightest colours in the film.

The colours in clothing, which appear so casually introduced on the screen, were as carefully planned as every other detail. The foreground action of all the main characters was sketched into the shooting script shot by shot, so that Satyajit came on location each day with the most thoroughly planned schedule and a very accurate idea of how much could be accomplished. This is a unique procedure in Indian film production, where scenarios are generally sketchy in the extreme and subject to last-minute alteration. On one day, with five different locations and all equipment hauled by hand up and down hill for half a mile or more between each, 2,000 feet of film was shot. Ray estimated that this would represent 900 feet when edited. He neither wastes a minute nor a foot of film.

Darjeeling reflects the cosmopolitan character of modern India; and Ray's film – 'like all my previous films', he says – concerns the old and the new. Indranath belongs to the past, despite his power in terms of the present. Cynicism and opportunism have played, and still play, a role in Indian life and history. Asok, who is a modern man, is also of ancient spiritual lineage, in as much as the line in Indian thought and action which has always brought about regeneration depended upon those who snapped their fingers in the face of material power. This is the climax of Ray's portrait of a prosperous family. Asok, earning his five hundred rupees a month from free-lance teaching, has the power of character to disturb and deflate Indranath with his millions.

The implication of the last shots of the film is that Indranath has somehow been routed by this attractive young man with his optimistic confidence in his own standard of values. Suddenly, it seems that Indranath has lost his grip on his family, whose functioning, like that of the companies of which he is chairman, he has manipulated without feeling for so long. They have failed to meet him at the appointed time. He is left alone, surrounded by the world’s most eternal and mystic landscape. He moves out of the last shot calling to his vanished family...

Marie Seton, *Sight and Sound*, Spring 1962

KANCHENJUNGHA

Director: Satyajit Ray
Production Company: N.C.A. Productions (Calcutta)
Screenplay: Satyajit Ray
Director of Photography: Subrata Mitra
Editor: Dulal Dutta
Art Director: Bansi Chandragupta
Music: Satyajit Ray
Sound: Durgadas Mitra

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

Cast

Chhabi Biswas (*Indranath Roy*)
Anil Chatterjee (*Anil*)
Karuna Banerjee (*Labanya*)
Anubha Gupta (*Anima*)
Subrata Sen (*Sankar*)
Sibani Singh (*Tuklu*)
Alaknanda Roy (*Manisa*)
Arun Mukherjee (*Asok*)
N. Viswanathan (*Mr Banerjee*)
Pahari Sanyal (*Jagadish*)
Nilima Chatterjee, Vidya Sinha (*Anil’s girlfriends*)

India 1962
102 mins

SATYAJIT RAY: THE LANGUAGE OF FILM

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

Teen Kanya (Three Daughters)

Sat 13 Aug 14:50

Devi (The Goddess) + Pikoo

Sun 14 Aug 14:45

The Music Room (Jalsaghar)

Sun 14 Aug 18:15

Charulata (The Lonely Wife)

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

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

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.

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