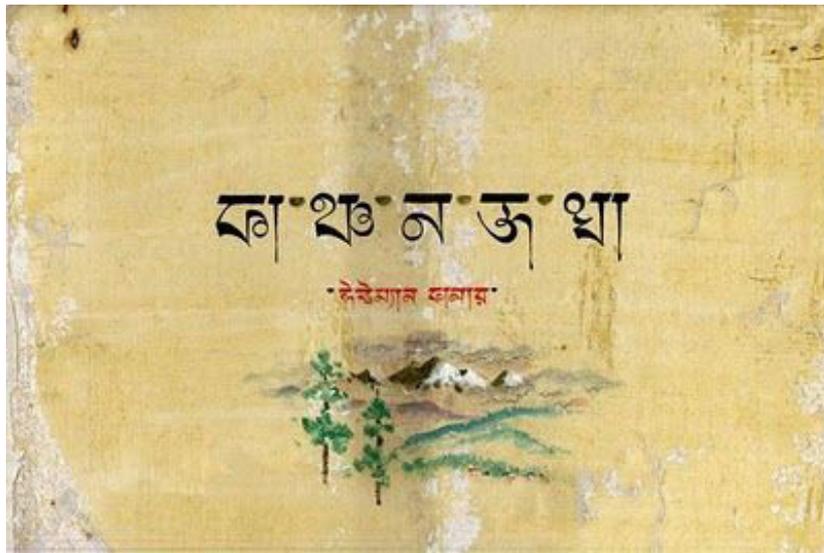


Article

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## ***Kanchenjunga: The Multi-Layered Story of Confessional Characters: Nature's Story***



One bird watcher keeps close observation to rare birds and with his coveted binocular, spends time with birds while the least-interested-in-birds, Raibahadur asks “Can you get roasted?” This one liner is sufficiently powerful to depict the image of the colonial patriarch who praises the British for making Darjeeling a hill station.

*Kanchenjunga* remains one of the most multi layered masterpieces of Ray, that pinches the egoistic institutions made by man to rule the rest of the world. The scenario of Darjeeling has gone through drastic and dramatic change since then. But Ray has dealt with those aspects of the place which were there, and which are there. He has worked with eternal Darjeeling. The mall, the back mall, The Keventers and the most eternal, the snowy peaks of Kanchenjunga.

The pandemic has given us enough time and space to look back and forward. Being isolated at home, we think over and over again and studying a masterpiece becomes a lesson. A

filmmaker is a storyteller and the finest thing with Ray is that he keeps the story focussed, detailed and simple.

Then again, we find the conceited Raibahadur championing Darjeeling in his own way, with nobody to make a single protest. The sulky wife listens to his dictates and he is happy. The tragedy of their conjugal life is most well portrayed when the Raibahadur notices the unhappy face of his wife and says, why do you look so grumpy? Smile, smile. The wife makes a hesitant smile, a very forced one and that one look is a statement of a loveless married life where the patriarch demands nothing but mindless obedience. Who else but Chhobi Biswas could portray the role so very accurately? As the wife hesitantly says that Moni, the marriageable daughter has a mind of her own, the patriarch comments, “She is a mere girl. How can she understand her own wellbeing?” When the Raibahadur wants the opinion of his wife regarding the suitable boy, it is not asking her views. He simply needs an obedient “yes”.

*Kanchenjunga* is the only feature film that Ray had chosen to be shot entirely in Darjeeling. Why was the hill station suitable for the plot which is a relevant discussion on colonialism, patriarchy, and protest? At that point of time, Darjeeling was not overcrowded, not turned to a big bazaar. The mall was a quiet place, mainly meant for horse riding. The long shots capture Oxford bookstore and Habibs only while the back mall is essentially bare, serene, without the boutique hotels and local hawkers.

This “far from the madding crowd” locale, the serenity of the hills were just perfect for a story that had to do with the revealing of human psychology and exposing the fragility of patriarchal ego that seems so petite in the background of the vast Himalayas. The story needed the ambience and sublimity of the mountains, an occasional glimpse of the Kanchenjunga and the blow of mists on the city bred humans.

Does the city spoil the humans? In the films of Ray, the city is metaphorically corrupt. The country sides are greener, physically, and spiritually. If we make a quick survey of the locales of the films of Ray, *Pather Panchali* is essentially rural. *Tinkanya* too with all its Tagore associations rural and simplistic. *Jalshaghar* has the countryside in background. *Aparajita* is half rural half Calcuttan and life for Apu is harsh as he enters the big city. In *Apur Sansar* the young couple is under pressure in the city. *Debi* once more takes us to rural Bengal.

In *Aranyer Din Ratri*, Ray has clearly shown the city menaces invading the rural peace and sanctity. The four city men come to the forests and spoil the serenity of the dark and deep jungles. Aparna reminds them of their city bred greed and sins. *Seemabaddho* is all about corporate life, very much city oriented and claustrophobic. The corrupt claustrophobia of the city is most dominant in Ray's *Jan Aranya*. Here the city is crueller than the jungle.

*Piku* is set in the city and exposes the corruption of adultery. In *Agantuk* the city people are suspicious, mean, selfish and corrupt, just like the family members of *Shakha Proshakha*. Even in that film, Ray chooses a “far from the madding crowd” locale, where the characters can open up, can confess their weakness and their sins, the guilts that never leave them.

Getting back to *Kanchenjunga*, a group of city bred people visit the hill station. The very well to do family of the Raibahadur along with the would-be groom of Moni creates one particular structure. The structure is hierarchical, on the top of which the Raibahadur reigns. Totally unaware of his own oppressive nature he has his lordly ways with everybody. No



one protests, no one disobeys, and he thinks, rather he loves to think that everybody is fine. This is urban culture. This is colonial orientation that is epitomized by the Raibahadur with an unhappy wife and two unhappy daughters, one unhappily married and the other about to enter in a forced marriage. The urban pedigree and sophistication are found in the groom to be, a gentler and kinder version of the Raibahadur. The spoilt city boy and his innocent flirtatious activities also reflect typical city

culture, so do the beautiful calorie conscious girls at the roof top of Keventers. Even the bird watcher maternal uncle who keeps an eye on his niece and the groom to be and prevents the entry of any third person has a colonial air around him. The hobby of bird watching is essentially European, the binocular symbolises the essential city type, as is the attire of the speaker.

In the midst of all these conceited city types, Monisha is the young and erudite girl with a mind of her own. She is not the typical city type, neither is her elitism crudely exhibited like her father. She is a moderator. Between her stubborn patriarch father and the jobless young man, accompanied by his modest uncle, Monisha stands like one who accepts the best of both the worlds. And the mountains act as the catalyst, silently helping the protagonists to transform, to uphold their own views, to protest.

In an interview, Soumitra Chattopadhyay said that he had read the script of *Kanchenjunga* and aspired to do the role of the young unemployed man. He was shocked when Ray said that he was not suitable for the role. Ray needed a fresh face, somebody who looked naive and unheroic and simple. Soumitra was already an established star and his appearance on screen would make the audience feel that this man is going to get married to Monisha. That was explained by Ray and Arun Mukhopadhyay's entry was just perfect. The way he looks, the hesitant way in which he speaks, the way he walks are just opposed to the sophistication of Banerjee, played by N. Vishwanathan. He hails from the city but is not the city type, probably because of his lower middle class status.

So, finally it is class versus class and city like versus not so city like. Curiously enough, Ray's women are balanced. In *Aranyer Dinraatri*, Aparna in spite of being quintessentially city girl, has an earthly poise and stability that cannot be defined by simple connotations like "city" or "country". So is Monisha

in *Kanchenjunga*. She is soft spoken but upright, emotional but balanced and delicate but strong ethically. Aparna had the forests of Chotonagpur in her background and Monisha has the Himalayas.

The story is felt through dialogues. Both Aparna and Monisha enjoy loneliness. They are loners. The men on the other hand seek company. Aparna has her treehouse in the forest bungalow, where she spends time alone, reads, listens to music, and meditates. An astonished Asim wonders, "You prefer to stay here alone?" Moni in *Kanchenjunga* asks her groom to be, "You do not like to be on your own?" "Her nature, it seems is that of an introvert, and Banerjee retorts, "Who wants to stay alone?" His workplace residence, in spite of its rich natural surroundings, the lake makes him feel bored. He embodies the essential



boredom of the townsmen who have never learnt to appreciate nature in her loneliness.

Ray's women can do that. The wife of Rai-bahadur prefers to sit alone instead of walking with her husband. The Tagore song "*E parobaas e rawbe ke*" expresses her disgust and anguish. Wifhood has betrayed her of her essential existence, and she does not want the same thing to happen to her own daughter. When she says to her brother, "Dada, please hurry up, go and tell Moni that she has no

pressure on her. She can act freely, according to her own will”, she comes out of her own repressions that had withheld her since many years of conjugal life. Moni’s liberation is the liberation of her mother and she could not do it in the hustle bustle of the city life. The mountains release her spirit and she speaks of freedom, if not for herself, for the daughter. Moni’s brother-in-law had said the same to her in the morning before she left to meet Banerjee formally “Moni, do not get married unless you fall in love”. As a brother-in-law, he could have said it to Moni before. But it is not a joke. Not a piece of advice only. It is an experience of life that this man is sharing with his sister-in-law, he knows where the shoe pinches.

*Kanchenjunga* was and is, still now a multi layered film that spits at colonial snobbery and champions the spirit of youth. Manisha invites the young unemployed youth at her place and assures him that her friends are welcome at Raibahadur’s place. Cultural and financial snobbishness are repeatedly attacked, without any violence or unnecessary jerk. The Raibahadur is not supposed to change

but Moni starts her journey against the will of her father. It all happens as the mist covers up and then disappears Nature continues to play a sublime role in the background.

Pollution is less in the mountains. It is easier to open up in the lap of nature. In many of Ray’s films we have found that outdoor plays a vital role. The contact of nature makes human beings’ confessional, honest and progressive.

In *Shakha Prashakha*, the only outdoor event is the day out of all the family members and the revelations, the outbursts come forward. In *Agantuk* the confessions of the maternal uncle, his realizations and opinions get exposed in the village of the Saontals, the community living. Open air releases the stress as the song in *Gupi Gayen Bagha Bayen* went thus:

If the king leaves the palace and goes down to the field, he will get peace.

The king in *Kanchenjunga* is essentially a vacant soul. His emptiness is laughed out by the young protagonist, the highest kind of rebellion against a fascist view. The mountains of course are responsible.

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