

Rabindranath Tagore as Film Director: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract

Rabindranath Tagore used to be inquisitive about everything happening around him. Apart from his writings, Tagore also experimented with various media to satisfy his creative thirst. Tagore was fascinated by motion pictures. It is a little-known fact that Tagore also directed a film. That particular cinema was a commercial flop then but would be treasured as a gem today, not only because it was directed by Tagore but also he played a role in it along with his students, including females from aristocratic families. Also, the advertisement of the film was made to encourage housewives to go to the theaters along with their husbands. These were not so common in the society at that time. Thus, a silent cultural reformation started with this cinema simultaneously. Another aspect of the film was its uniqueness in cinematography, which influenced international directors of his time. This paper explores these aspects of Tagore's directed film.

Keywords: Rabindranath Tagore, Film, Film director, Cinema, Cinematography, Santiniketan.

1. Introduction

Rabindranath Tagore is worldwide acclaimed for his literary works. Ever-curious Tagore experienced and experimented with other forms of art in various media to quench his thirst and express his creative ideas. People all over the world adore Rabindranath Tagore for his creations, either be literature or painting. Followers are eager to know about every little work of Tagore. Motion pictures or films were one of the media that fascinated Tagore. He not only composed many dramas but also played roles for characters in theaters and even in cinemas. Tagore's creativity can be observed in different sub-fields of film making, but only a few know him as a film director. When he came

into film direction, he was in his 70s, but his mind was as curious as that of a youth.

That's a forgotten phase of Tagore's life, and this research is to discuss that phase. The film was significant also for its cinematography technique, which influenced the then directors of other parts of the globe, also for its early silent awareness of women's rights in Indian society. Thus, preservation of such an event is necessary, because if not, then this history of Bengali cinema during its beginning era and Rabindranath's contribution to it could not be preserved and might get lost. Though some blogs and videos related to Tagore's films are available on the internet, repetitive conversion is necessary for more awareness. Moreover, such an approach as this paper does presently does not seem to be in discussion among the masses.

2. Objective

This paper is intended to highlight Tagore as a film director. His involvement in various sub-fields of film making is very well known, but as a director, he is not known at all. By this research the authors are purposefully trying to explore the two different social and cultural impacts of a single film on the society, which are highlighted as :

- The one-shot cinematography technique that was used by Tagore for film direction. This unique technique had influenced the then-international film directors.
- The film had many impacts on the society of that time. It was a time when women from elite families were not allowed to pursue careers in film, but Tagore took the initiative to involve his female students in film-making.

3. Methodology

Historical Methodology is generally used to analyze historical data and evidences to conduct research. This methodology has been adopted here to figure out information about Rabindranath Tagore's film direction from primary sources such as newspapers and news blogs in-order to collect evidences particularly on the uniqueness of Tagore's directed film.

4. Discussion

In the year 1929, 'Dominion Films Limited' decided to make a film based on the drama 'TAPATI' written by Tagore. The shooting took place in Santiniketan, and the poet played a chief character in the film. Tagore first appeared in front of the camera by himself on a feature film named 'Sriniketan' jointly made by Elmhurst and

Gretchen Green in 1923. ^[1] That film was based on the philosophy and works of Tagore in Sriniketan. Film production based on Tagore's literature started in 1923, pioneered by Naresh Chandra Mitra. 'Manbhanjo' was the first to be converted into a film. Later, more films were also made based on Tagore's literature, such as the silent film name as 'Dalia', which was produced in 1930, followed by a talkie film that was produced in 1932, 'Chiro Kumar Sabha'. ^[2] All these connections prove his affection for cinema, and this might have triggered him to move in the film direction even at such an older age.

According to the Bengali calendar, it was on the 18th of Ashwin, 1306, when Rabindranath wrote a poem named 'Pujarini' which describes a historical event from about 2500 years ago. The cruel king of the Haryanka Dynasty, Ajatashatru, was an anti-Buddhist. Shrimati, who was a dancer in the royal court, denied the king and worshiped Buddha. Hence, by the king's order, she was sentenced to death.

The poet himself never thought to reconstruct the poem into a drama, but Tagore's daughter-in-law Pratima Debi, once requested him to do so. The reason being that it was a tradition of the Tagore family to celebrate their special days with cultural performances, Pratima Debi wished to perform some portion of 'Pujarini' on the occasion of Tagore's seventieth birthday. And obviously, Tagore didn't deny. As a result, in 1927, the poem 'Pujarini' reformed into the drama version, named 'Notir Puja'. ^[3] This was the first stage in Jorasako Thakur Bari; later, on the occasion of Tagore's birthday, this drama was staged in the 'New Empire' theater.

Birendra Nath Sircar, the owner of 'The New Empire' then, was present among the viewers and saw the play that day. He was also a film maker. After seeing the play, he directly proposed to Tagore that he would make a film based on the

story of the drama. Hence, what else 'Notir Puja' got reconstructed into a cinema from a drama.

The New Empire was one of the famous theatre halls in the Esplanade area. Earlier, drama and ballet used to be performed here. In 1931, Talkie Films began its journey, and in 1932, a cinema auditorium was set up in the New Empire. ^[4] And this was the place where the shooting of the only cinema that was directed by Rabindranath was done.

Rabindranath Tagore is often addressed as 'Gurudev' by his admirers in Santiniketan, also throughout the world. There was a time when Santiniketan was suffering through an economic crisis that made Gurudev worried. Moreover, at the time of this economic crisis, Birendra Nath Sircar proposed Gurudev to make the film. The proposal had a condition to share half of the money to be earned by selling the tickets. Tagore agreed to such a condition to direct the film.

Dinendra Nath Tagore was the music director, Mukul Basu was the sound editor, Nitin Basu was the cinematographer who got Yusuf Mulaji by his side, and Subodh Mitra was the editor, who all joined hands to make the cinema. ^{[5][6]} This is where this paper is concerned about as the film led to cultural exchange across border. The film was made with unique cinematography. The whole film was shot in a one-shot technique where performers continued to act for a long time, which got captured in a single shot. It was a unique creation of Tagore where the dance-drama performance that was not so common. This creation crossed over the country border and influenced international directors. Russian film director Sergei Solovyov found the technique so interesting that he used it for a film that was based on the drama 'Three Sisters'.

It was summer when the film was in the making, and there used to be no air conditioner in the film

set, which troubled Tagore a lot. Looking for a solution, a house was built out of straw under the shade of a mango tree. Tagore used it as a rest room during shooting and often used to address this place as 'His Second Santiniketan'. ^[7] This place was popular by the name 'Gol-ghar' but, at present, that has no existence.

The cinema was 10,599 feet long (*Scenes of the total Film* - Figure 2) and got its sensor certificate on March 14, 1932. And finally, it got released on March 22 in Chitra Cinema Hall. ^[8] The actor-director of the cinema, 'Gurudev' Rabindranath Tagore, was himself present there among the viewers in the premier show. Gurudev played the character of a Buddhist monk named 'Upali' (*Tagore playing the role of Upali* - Figure 3).

The female characters in the cinema were played by the girl students, who belonged to posh and sophisticated families. This was not so common at that time in the society. Gouri Basu, daughter of Nandalal Basu, was a member of the team 'Notir Puja' (*Poster of Notir Puja' and a shot* - Figure 1). Lolita Sen played the character of dancer Shrimati. Sumita Chakrabarty played the character of Queen Lokeswari. The famous Lila Majumdar played the character of Utpala. ^[9] About 25 members of New Empire Theatre were involved in the process. The shooting on Floor 1 of The New Theatre Studio began. Rabindranath had to travel abroad to collect funds, so his schedule was preoccupied, and hence the entire shooting was done in a hurry and completed within 4–5 days. Moreover, actors were women of sophisticated families that was not so common in those days.

Another important fact needs to be enlightened here: in the advertisement for the cinema, it was mentioned that gentlemen should come along with their better halves to see the cinema; separate services for women were available.

"Maa Lakshmidar Sange Anite Vulibenna-Swatantra Byabostha Achhe." [10]

This kind of approach was not common in society then, because at that time, cinema as a medium of entertainment was not easily acceptable to all as a profession within society. Both events—the elite girls playing in a film and house wives getting invitations along with their husbands to watch a film—were against society's typical norms. Thus, the reformer within Tagore silently did his duty, which speaks about women's right to create awareness in society. Thus, the single film then had a deeper social impact on Indian society in favour of women and on other hand had a deeper cultural impact on influencing the film making of other countries as well.

5. Conclusion

That cinema did not count profit in commercial terms, but its importance could be counted in a variety of other aspects.

- At present, often it is heard that 'Age is just a number'; generally, this is used to describe the extraordinary works of old people. However, decades ago, Gurudev proved it himself. He was in his 70s when he not only opted for film direction but also completed it.

- One of the reasons that were considered for the film to be flop was that it was shot in the form of a dance-drama, which was not usual, and films made prior to this were not shot in this format. On contrary, it was a unique creation of Tagore where the dance-drama performance was captured in one shot was not so common. Russian film director Sergei Solovyov found the technique so interesting that he used it for a film.
- The earlier craze for films was very different. Women's were not allowed to get involved in such things. However, the reformer inside Tagore chose the path less travelled. Female students of sophisticated family backgrounds played different characters in the cinema, as described before. And moreover, film posters were made intentionally as such, which requested gentlemen to come and watch the cinema along with their wives. Overall, cinema stood out as the epitome of a silent feminist movement. Tagore understood that and played a character himself in the cinema.

This research is a simple attempt to pay homage to the creative youth that lived within Tagore forever.



Figure 1 Poster and a scene from the film 'Notir Puja'.



Figure 2 Different scenes of the film 'Notir Puja'.



Figure 3 A scene of Rabindranath Tagore in the film.

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