

Rural Development through Film and Literature: Impact of Satyajit Ray's Films, *Pather Panchali* and *Sonar Kella* in Boral and Jaisalmer

Meghna Ghatak

Assistant Professor

School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Jagran Lakecity University,
Bhopal, India

Satyajit Ray (1921–1992), a Bengali film director from India, is well known for his contributions to Bengali literature. He created two of the most famous characters in Bengali: Feluda the sleuth, and Professor Shonku the scientist. He wrote several short novels and stories in addition to those based on these two characters. His fiction was targeted mainly at younger readers, though it became popular among children and adults alike. Most of his novels and stories in Bengali have been published by Ananda Publishers, Kolkata; and most of his screenplays have been published in Bengali in the literary journal *Ekshan*, edited by his close friend Nirmalya Acharya. During the mid-1990s, Ray's film essays and an anthology of short stories were also published in the West. Many of the stories have been translated into English and published.

His meeting with French film director Jean Renoir, who had come to Calcutta in 1949 to shoot his film *The River* (1951), and Ray's 1950 visit to London, where he saw Vittorio De Sica's *Ladri di biciclette* (*Bicycle Thieves*) (1948); inspired Satyajit Ray to become a film-maker. In a prolific career spanning nearly four decades, Ray made his directorial debut in 1955 with *Pather Panchali* (*Song of the Little Road*) and directed 36 films, comprising 29 feature films, five documentaries, and two short films. His films have received worldwide critical acclaim and won him several awards, honors and recognition — both in India and elsewhere.

Satyajit Ray's epic masterpiece *Pather Panchali* has been included by BBC's 100 best foreign

language films but it is the only film from India to feature in the list. *Pather Panchali* is the first film of what has come to be known as the Apu Trilogy - the second was *Aparajito*, in 1956, and the third, *Apur Sansar*, in 1959 otherwise known as *Apu Trilogy*. Based on Bibhutibhusan Bandyopadhyay's 1929 Bengali novel of the same name, the film was completed with a loan from the West Bengal government. The film traces the poverty stricken journey of Apu through Bengal famine, the loss of his sister, Durga to helplessness and the pictographic life of a villager. In 1965, when he began to work on a children's detective that he named Prodosh Chandra Mitter aka Feluda, modeled on Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes for his magazine, *Sandesh*; Feluda series was born. In 1974, Ray adapted one particular book from this series, namely *Sonar Kella* (*The Golden Fortress*) into a successful commercial film, produced again by the West Bengal government. The film received multitude Awards at national and international forum for its screenplay, direction and cinematography.

While Ray chose Boral in West Bengal to depict Bibhutibhusan Bandyopadhyay's Nischindipur in *Pather Panchali*, he choose Jaisalmer's fort to depict the much anticipated golden fortress in *Sonar Kella*. Boral is a presently a developing locality at the edge of Kolkata, the capital city of West Bengal and belongs to its Presidency Division. Satyajit Ray wrote about choosing this particular location for the shoot, in his book, *My Years with Apu: A Memoir*;

"The village that we selected for the film was recommended to us by one of the founder members

of the film society [the Calcutta Film Society]—Manoj Mazumdar. It was only four miles from the city limits and this meant that we could make daily trips..." (1)

Many feel that due to its proximity to the biggest city of India, Kolkata, the locality of Boral has developed, while others feel that the erecting a burst of the director had drawn publicity to the city which has led to the development. The statue was inaugurated by His Excellency Saiyid Nurul Hasan, Governor of West Bengal in 1990.

According to Andrew Robinson, Ray's biographer, the location demanded a decrepit house, a pond nearby, a river, fields, and a railway line. In his search for the setting of Nischindipur, Ray did not consider Jadavpur and Garia villages and finally settled for Boral almost 10 kms from Ray's residence at Tollygung. In the immediate aftermath of partition Jadavpur, Garia, Baghajatin, Bijoygarh villages were experiencing developmental changes. New refugee colonies had mushroomed. Boral had

in the 1950s remained relatively unaffected. However, subsequently Boral was also to fall to the refugee influx.

'In an interview with James Blue in 1968, Ray mentions "it (Boral) is unrecognizable now from the days of Pather Panchali. It is no longer pure, it's spoiled. It was once very nice indeed, with long areas of no huts (refugee huts)".' (2)

Boral is now a municipal town with pin code 700154, far removed from the mango groves and large expanse of greenery with pathways as seen in the film where bill boards of mobile phone companies and political posters vie for attention. The below picture featuring the location as seen in the film in 1955 on the left and the present condition on the right throws light on the rural development of the village. Only the people who have been featured in the film and the people who have seen the film have remained nostalgic of its rustic beauty.



Picture 1

(Image - Sengupta, Sudipto. 'In Search of Pather Panchali's Nischindipur at Boral Village'. *Probashi*. Kolkata. 2 October, 2015. 1 February 2019. (epaper))

Today, the reports are that the Union ministry of tourism has asked the West Bengal government to develop Boral, the village where the film was shot, as a rural tourism site. The ministry is of the view that the place can attract a huge number of national and international tourists. Developing the village as a rural tourism site would mean preserving the film locations, creating basic infrastructure and places for accommodation which means rural development at its fullest.

'The tourism department is planning to send its proposal to develop such sites as the "Satyajit Ray trail"... "The trail will begin with Boral, where Ray shot parts of Pather Panchali. It will move on to

Birbhum and Burdwan, where many of the legend's works were also shot," said a Writers' official.' (3)

The Jaisalmer of 1965, when Ray used it as the place the principal character, Feluda finds the golden fortress is situated at the heart of the Thar desert and is a former princely state. Jaisalmer fort, the hill fort of King Jaisal, a Bhatti Rajput tribe ruler; is made up of golden yellow sandstone and hence the name – golden fortress. The massive sandstone walls of this only living fort are a tawny lion color during the day, turning to a magical honey-gold as the sun sets. Declared a UNESCO world heritage site only in 2013, the ancient city has seen both the battle pangs of 1971

and the project of conservation and resuscitation, which started under the initiative of Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi in the middle of the 1970s. The city when it was being immortalized in the film by Ray in 1971 was not a very commercial one and the living monument of the famed fort was dilapidated. Very few vehicles could be spotted around and the local commute was carried out on camel as is seen in Ray's film. The local musicians, thugs and beggars who find mention in the book, through the city and some sell yellow sandstone cutlery that nobody knew about before the film. The audience of Ray's film, primarily hailing from West Bengal as the film was shot in Bengali, had seen a new world and since then have rushed to the city to experience firsthand the locale of the film in Jaisalmer and about.

The once sleepy town has been transformed into a tourist spot where 2.35 lakh Indian tourists visited it in the year of 2015 itself and 60% of them hailed from West Bengal. The rural development has increased due to the cultural representation of the city and the local tourist guides are the most rejoiced about it. They have had a better income

due to the Bengali tourists and have even learnt to speak Bengali to woo them.

“We owe it to Ray for making this fort so popular with Bengali tourists. I am a native of West Bengal and have been working as a tourist guide here for the last five years. Since I am a Bengali, there's an extra advantage that I have when it comes to wooing the tourists. But the Rajasthani guides give me tough competition as they speak Bengali almost as fluently as me,” said guide Surya Mandal.

“It is almost a compulsion for all the guides in this fort to watch the film directed by Ray at least once, when they come into the profession. Since the Bengalis coming to the fort are extremely curious about the places mentioned in the book and where scenes from the film were shot, we need to do our homework,” said Pratap Singh, another guide.’ (4)

One can find Bengali cuisine to woo the tourists coming from that state and shop owners there have reported rise in the cost of land there due to the increased tourism. The following picture with a movie scene on the left and a present day scene on the right depicts the rural development of Jaisalmer in the last 60 years



Picture 2

(Image – Google images from Youtube and Newsroom 24x7)

In conclusion, both Boral and Jaisalmer along with their surrounding districts weren't developed in the time zone that Ray filmed them in his movies. But time and popularity have partially led to the rural development of the above mentioned places. It must be noted that, the films are not the sole reason but partially the reason as they have benefited tourism from a particular community. But better connectivity, proximity to bigger cities, rise of tourism advertisement have led to increased

functionality of commerce and trade which have lead to rural development of the two districts.

Works cited

- [1] Ray, Satyajit. 'Birth Pangs'. *My Years with Apu*. Penguin Books India, 1994 (ebook)
- [2] Sengupta, Sudipto. 'In Search of Pather Panchali's Nischindipur at Boral Village'.

- Probashi*. Kolkata. 2 October, 2015. 1 February 2019. (epaper)
- [3] Chakraborty, Ajanta. Pack your bags for a Satyajit Ray 'filmgrimage'. *Times of India*. Kolkata. 3 May, 2013. 1 February 2019. (Epaper)
- [4] Mukherjee, Deep. At Jaisalmer's Sonar Kella, tourist guides owe it to Satyajit Ray. *Hindustan Times*. New Delhi. 14 Oct 2016, 1 Feb 2019 (epaper)