



FRESH APPEAL: In black and white, *Mahanagar* documents with splendid sensitivity a changing Calcutta of the mid-1950s.

Ray's *Mahanagar* relevant to this day

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

One of my greatest fears has been that much like India's architecture, the nation's cinematic heritage will also suffer. A country which takes immense pride in its language, literature and culture has often been unfeelingly reckless about its archaeological treasures. Be it the wonder called Taj Mahal or Qutub Minar, be it Mumbai's grand Gateway of India or the fascinating ruins of the Vijayanagar Empire, administrative apathy and the common man's disdain have been ruining these marvels of history.

Much like these edifices in stone, films made over the past 100 years have vanished, falling prey to the ravages of time. Let us not even think about movies like *Raja Harishchandra* or *Alam Ara* produced very early on in the last century. Hardly anything from these two exists today. But even films made much later in the century by masters like Aravindan and John Abraham (both from Kerala) have been either destroyed or rotting away in some lab.

Even the government-owned National Film Archives in Pune has not been of much help in preservation. Lack of space, inadequate funds, uninterested officials have all contributed to the decline and disappearance of India's cinematic

treasure. Or at least a lot of it.

While some of Adoor Gopalakrishnan's movies like *Elippathayam* (Rat-Trap), *Kathapurushan* (Man of the Story) and *Nizhalkkuthu* (Shadow Kill) — all in Malayalam — have been converted into a disk format (with copies being sold and preserved), many of Satyajit Ray's works have been restored and can now be viewed on DVD. Great news of course.

Last year at Venice, I saw Ray's *Mahapurush* (The Holy Man) and *Kapurush* (The Coward) made as a double bill. Digitally restored to its original black and white brilliance, the films were a delight to watch. What is more, both stories (one of a conman posing as a holy sage, and the other, about a lover who dithers taking on marital responsibility, forcing the girl to wed someone else) have been treated in a way that they appear as refreshingly relevant today as when first made in the 1960s.

In a happy follow-up to this, yet another of Ray's classics, *Mahanagar* (The Big City), has been restored, and was theatrically released in India some days ago. What surprised me when I watched it all again was the relevance of the plot to the times we live in. The story could have unfolded in today's India or even elsewhere.

Incredible as it may sound, *Mahanagar* (1963) faced similar roadblocks that some of the Indian movies run into today! Much like Kamal Hassan's *Viswaroopam*, Santosh Sivan's *Inam* and most recently the Vadivelu starrer,

Tenaliraman — an Anglo-Indian Member of Parliament accused *Mahanagar* of being prejudiced against his community.

Indira Gandhi (then heading the Information and Broadcasting Ministry), who was asked to probe, felt that the allegation was baseless. Even then, *Mahanagar* took a hit and missed winning India's top film award. But — like Ray's first work, *Pather Panchali*, whose honour at Cannes led to its recognition at home — *Mahanagar* clinched the Best Direction Prize at Berlin. And later, accolades in India.

In black and white and looking superb as if it has just popped out of the cans, *Mahanagar* documents with splendid sensitivity a changing Calcutta of the mid-1950s (though Ray shot it in 1963). Based on Narendranath Mitra's short story, *Abataranika*, Ray's screenplay delves into the agony and ecstasy, the turbulence and excitement of shifting social mores seen through a lower middleclass Bengali joint family. The ageing, retired and virtually penniless school-master and his wife live with their son, Subrata Mazumdar (Anil Chatterjee) and his wife, Arati (Madhabi Mukherjee). Jaya Bahaduri (who debuts as the teenage sister, Bani, of Subrata) along with the young couple's little son forms part of this household.

As a lowly employee in a small bank, Subrata is perennially anxious trying to grapple with the needs of his father (who has broken his spectacles and requires a new pair if only to

spend his evenings working crossword puzzles) and those of the other members of his family. There is a telling scene where Ray takes us from the old man's lament about being unable to read to Bani who is sporting glasses! In just about this singles sequence, the movie sets the tone for clashes of varying kinds, the most important being the temptation and the reluctance in letting Arti take up a job to supplement the family income.

Although Subrata helps his intelligent and beautiful wife find employment as a sales girl in a company selling a new knitting machine (targeted at the rich), her quick economic success is resented by Subrata (We would see such a clash of ego years later in the Jaya-Amitabh film, *Abhimaan*, where the singer husband's ego gets the better of him when he finds his singer wife reaching the skies). He in the heart of his heart believes — much in the Victorian tradition that India refused to let go for decades — that a woman's place is at home. He tells this to Bani, asking her what good it is for her to study when she would like her sister-in-law, land in the kitchen!

However, when Subrata's bank closes down and he loses his job, and is forced into idleness, he is wracked by guilt as he is by suspicion and jealousy — particularly when he finds a tube of lipstick in Arti's handbag, when he sees her boss dropping her home in his car. But he cannot stop her, because of the precarious financial position at home. *Mahanagar* epitomises this predicament in a very simple and touching manner. No melodrama here.

Suffering through this emotional upheaval — which includes a cold war between the school-master and his son/daughter-in-law, with the old man dead against Arti going to work — is the young woman. At one end is the sheer economic compulsion and at the other, the familial objection and anger. She is not even sure that her husband wholeheartedly supports the idea of her going to work, although he had helped her get it in the first place. A point comes when pushed by home pressure, Arti is about to quit her job, when Subrata telephones her asking her to stay on, because he has just lost his.

Ray captures the essence of shifting social mores — brought on by consumerism and its effect on personal relationships — through the dreams and desires of a family. Bani tells Arati to become a cinema star and earn pots of money, and is disappointed when the girl learns that her sister-in-law's salary is a mere Rs 100. The elderly teacher visits his old students, now in good positions, and bad mouths his son, hoping for sympathy and money. He longs for that day when he would earn a handsome prize that can take him and his wife to Cape Comorin. As the bonds and ties in *Mahanagar* wax and wane, Ray's classic narrates a story whose timelessness cannot be disputed at all.

For, it deals with the most basic of human emotions which continue to be shaken by the pulls and pressures of the community. Adding to the movie's richness are the excellent performances by Mukherjee, Chatterjee and Bahaduri. She is just delightful as the teenager, and so in the little boy, Pintu (Prasenjit Sarkar). Madhabi disappears into Arti, as the woman tormented — as she takes her first faltering steps outside her home and into the big city.

And *Mahanagar* begins with one of Calcutta's undying symbols, the tramcar.

The film begins with the moving tram connector as the cast list rolls on, and ends with two street lamps in the foreground and the couple merging with the city's teeming millions. Would they mingle into passive anonymity or continue fighting forces of change? A question that still haunts today's Indians.

● *Gautaman Bhaskaran grew up in Calcutta watching master movie-makers like Ray, Ritwick Ghatak and Mrinal Sen, and may be e-mailed at gautamanb@hotmail.com*