



Research Paper

Class, gender and race: The portrayal of power relationships in Satyajit Ray's films

Dr. Ravi Shankar

Associate Professor & Head,
Department of Mass Communication & Journalism,
Government P.G. College for Girls, Cheeka (Kaithal)

Abstract

A Film is a "system of representation" that both produces and reproduces cultural signification. Thus, power relationships have often been portrayed in films since the very beginning of film making. Foucault argues that power is not hierarchized from the top down, but is omnipresent. That is, he emphasizes that every social relationship is a power relationship and resistance to power relationships is present at all stratification of power. Films are bound up with considerations of power relations related to issues of class, gender and race. Similarly, the Indian filmmaker, Satyajit Ray, has represented a wide range of social and political power relationships in his films and depicted experiences of injustice and oppression of the certain groups, like the economically and socially disadvantaged, at the hands of the economically and socially privileged groups. The present paper tries to bring out the power relations as portrayed in the great filmmaker's works.

Keywords: Satyajit Ray, Class, Gender, Caste, power relationship.

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I. INTRODUCTION:

Indian film director, Satyajit Ray's films have been discussed in a myriad of ways by the scholars. He has represented a wide range of social and political power relationships in his films and depicted experiences of injustice and oppression of the certain groups, like the economically and socially disadvantaged, at the hands of the economically and socially privileged groups. The present paper tries to bring out the power relations as portrayed in the great filmmaker's works such as *Goopy Gayen Bagha Bayen (Adventures of Goopy and Bagha 1968)* and its sequel *Hirak Rajar Deshe (The Diamond King 1980)*. Even when discussed by Indian or western scholars, these two films have been considered as children's film or fantasy films with very little discourse on the social or political elements. In both these films, the economically and socially disadvantaged groups are depicted as particularly vulnerable to cultural, political and economic imperialism, violence, exploitation and powerlessness. The films are examined within the framework of Foucault's conception of power. Different roles and interpretations of power relationships between humans through kingship, class, caste, religion, gender, are analyzed in in order to investigate the historical, social, and political background that inspired Ray to make these films.

Film is a "system of representation" that both produces and reproduces cultural signification. Thus, power relationships have often been portrayed in films since the very beginning of film making. Films are bound up with considerations of power relations related to issues of class, gender and race. Similarly, the Indian filmmaker, Satyajit Ray, has represented a wide range of social and political power relationships in his films and depicted experiences of injustice and oppression of the certain groups, like the economically and socially disadvantaged, at the hands of the economically and socially privileged groups.

In the film *Hirak Rajar Deshe (The Kingdom of Diamond, 1980)* the king of *Hirak* is a thinly disguised version of the modern political tyrant. His diamonds mines are manned with forced labor. His peasants are poverty stricken and cruelly taxed.

In another film, *Goopy Gayen Bagha Bayen (Adventures of Goopy and Bagha, 1965)* a cruel prime minister tries to use his military power to expand his country territories through war. I argue that in no other film of Ray's does one find the different roles and interpretations of power relationships between humans, through kingship, class, caste, religion, and gender, as apparent and creatively depicted as in these two films. In both of

these films, economically and socially disadvantaged groups are depicted as particularly powerless against imperialism, violence, and exploitation.

Ray's perspective on the class system is visible in multiple sequences in his films. For example, greatly influenced by Italian neorealism, Ray's first film, *Pather Panchali* (Song of the Road, 1955), was a realist narrative on issues of poverty in Bengal. In the films *Goopy Gayen Bagha Bayen* and its sequel *Hirak Rajar Deshe*, Satyajit Ray demonstrates himself as a social and political narrator. His ideology is demonstrated in the films as the power of the upper class or the ruler; which prevails not only in Bengal but all over the world. Both of these films by Ray illustrate the change and demolition of the power he witnessed in the society around him. These films are political reactions which mirrored the social-political tensions of Bengal in the 1960s -1970s and are still visible today.

The paper analyzes Ray's two films, *Goopy Gayen Bagha Bayen* and its sequel *Hirak Rajar Deshe* in order to demonstrate how kingship, class, caste, and gender, inform the roles and interpretations of power relationships between the powerful and powerless. As we know that Satyajit Ray's films are mostly set in Bengal; describing its politics, its poverty, its landscape, its rulers, its people, its religion, its language, and its situation in particular time periods. Ray had witnessed India both in colonial and post colonial times. He had seen the citizens give their life for independence and also the chaos or instability of the government of India after the independence. Ray's first film, *Pather Panchali*, was his reaction to the existence of people living in their own land in the midst of much poverty and discomfort. Ray said in an interview that "I find politicians and their game of politics extremely dishonest and they change colors like chameleons." The reflection of his words is presented in the two films *Goopy Gayen Bagha Bayen* and *Hirak Rajar Deshe*. These films are deeply engaged with the political conflict in Bengal at that time. According to Ray scholar Moinak Biswas, when *Goopy Gayen Bagha Bayen* was produced, "a new political language appeared that showed a deep dis-identification with the discourse that built a bridge between pre and post independence political cultures." Before going further, let's have a look at the film synopsis.

Film Synopsis

Goopy Gayen Bagha Bayen

Goopy Gayen Bagha Bayen (1968) was written by Upendra Kishore Roy Chowdhury, a well known children's fiction writer in Bengal and also grandfather of Satyajit Ray. *Goopy Gayen Bagha Bayen* demonstrates the war between the powerful and the powerless, same as in the film *Hirak Rajar Deshe*, which was written by Ray himself. *Goopy Gayen Bagha Bayen*

(1968) is set in rural Bengal and revolves around the lives of the two male protagonists Goopy and Bagha. Goopy is a young villager with an unimpressive voice, but with great ambitions to become an accomplished singer. The villagers are unable to tolerate his singing and so decide to ostracize him. After being driven out from his native village, Goopy ends up in a forest where he meets Bagha, a drummer with a similar fate. At night, the King of Ghosts, is extremely pleased with their song, and grants them three boons - limitless food, boundless travel, and musical talent.

Goopy and Bagha travel to the kingdom of Sundi for a music competition. The king of Sundi, pleased by their musical talent, appoints Goopy and Bagha as court musicians. The neighboring king of Halla, a brother of King of Sundi, under the spell of his wicked prime minister, plans to attack Sundi. Goopy and Bagha travel to Halla, stop the war with their magical powers, and each marry one of the King's daughters.

Hirak Rajar Deshe

In *Hirak Rajar Deshe* (1980), the sequel to *Goopy Gayen Bagha Bayen*, Goopy Gayen and Bagha Bayen grow bored with their luxurious, but monotonous lives as crown princes of Shundi and Halla. Looking for a challenge in the form of an invitation to the land of Hirak they set out to demonstrate their musical skills that were acquired as a boon from the King of Ghost. The image portrayed of the King of Hirak is that of a modern political dictator. His diamond mines are manned with forced labor. The citizens in his country are poverty stricken and cruelly taxed. The King with his minister and army, abuse poor farmers, diamond-miners, and even an old singer. However, the only overt enemy the king has in his land is a local school teacher who wishes to create awareness among the people of the king's injustices. The school teacher flees from the king's army to hide in the mountains. By coincidence, Goopy and Bagha meet the fugitive school teacher who informs them of the king's true nature. At the end, three of them, along with the people of the kingdom, dethrone the king through their magical power and trickery.

Power of the Ruler

The intensity, concentration, and the demonstration of power of the ruler has evolved over centuries. Kings around the world enjoyed unquestioned power in the 18th century. Penal torture and execution, a display of sovereign power, were aimed to publicly punish offenders and to set an example for the others by arousing and encouraging the crowd to participate by insulting and attacking the criminal. However, by the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th century, physical punishment staged as a public spectacle started to disappear. Foucault acknowledges that the process of the punishment have changed through times due to the improvement of technology which helps new techniques of surveillance and social control. The changing power of the ruler is demonstrated in both the films. The public ceremony surrounding punishment started to vanish and in time to gave way to a short legal and administrative ritual. "Punishment became more reticent, no longer concerned with the infliction of horrible physical pains." Thus the relation between punishment and the body of the condemned underwent a radical change.

Similarly, this difference and evolution in exhibition of power and punishment is very evident in the two films. *Goopy Gayen Bagha Bayen*, written in the 19th century, utilized this public demonstration of punishment as illustrated when Goopy was run out of his native village, Amloki, on the back of a donkey. The villagers gathered to see him be punished by the king- as they cheered and beat their drums. Applying Foucault, the ceremony functions as a display of the King's power to the public, making an example of Goopy so that in the future others would not defy him. Foucault points out, the public execution was a state occasion; it performed a juridico-political function. It was a ceremonial, equated to other grand rituals of royal power such as a coronation, by which strength of the king can be glorified. The king was the source of all justice, and hence any violation of the law was an injury to the king.

Thus, in *Goopy Bagha* power is presented as operating via divine right, and public ceremony make examples of those who transgress authority. Foucault argues that forms of sovereign power began to become less and less efficient as a way of regulating the behavior of populations towards the end of the eighteenth century leading to the development of new techniques in social control. However, *Hirak Rajar Deshe*, a film written and produced in 1980, utilized new techniques of machinery power such as "brainwashing machine" to control the people of the state. Thus, the character of King Hiram uses more modern techniques to control his dissenting subjects. Instead of slitting throats, Hiram Raja uses the brain washing machine to control the rebellious citizens and change their views. The king also uses equipments like the "binoculars" to monitor the activities of his subjects from atop his castle.

According to Foucault, a king is only a king if he has subjects. "Powers are strategically deployed by groups or individuals. Institution and the government are simply the ossification of highly complex sets of power relations which exist at every level of the social body." Further, "governmentality is the rationalisation and systematization" of a particular way of exercising political sovereignty through the government of peoples conduct. Thus, focus of the government is not solely to rule over a territory but to govern a population to maintain their power. For example, in *Goopy Gayen Bagha Bayen* the King of Halla, who was charged with the power to rule his kingdom, was in reality a puppet of the brutal prime minister. The prime minister controls the land of Halla by drugging the original king. The prime minister persuades the king to go to war by falsely telling him it is for the benefit of the kingdom and its people. The king, under the influence of drugs, decides to invade the land of Sundi to expand his country's territory.

Furthermore, Foucault describes power as being purely located in the state or the administrative and executive bodies which govern the nation State. The governmental services, such as the police or the education services can only be enforced because every individual is tied in to a whole network of relations. These services rely on the "cooperation of a whole network of local and individualized tactics of power in which everybody is involved." It is important for every department in the government to work in harmony for the betterment of the country and its people. However, contrary to working for the benefit of the people, the heads of the departments can work in harmony for their own personal benefits as well, as is witnessed in both *Goopy Gayen Bagha Bayen* and *Hirak Rajar Deshe*. The prime minister in *Goopy Gayen Bagha Bayen* used his scientist to prepare a medicine which will help the Sundi people speak (they lost the ability in an epidemic), and thus enable him to rule the country. The people who fail to pay taxes are queued and imprisoned by the Halla king with the help of the military. In *Hirak Rajar Deshe* too the health minister; education minister; finance minister; broadcast minister are busy working in synchrony utilizing their power to rule the country. The finance minister forcefully, with the help of the state's military power, collects taxes from the poor. The Diamond King knows that gaining knowledge helps the school children to judge between right and the evil. Thus, he ordered the education minister to close the village school with the help of the state police forces.

In addition, Foucault mentions that power can only be exercised over free subjects. If a man is chained up, beaten, and subjected to external force exerted over him, then it is no longer "relationship of power but of limits." "There is no power without refusal or revolt." This has been portrayed exceptionally well in the film

Hirak Rajar Deshe, where the King wants to silence an old singer Charandas, who's lyrics create awareness among the people about the king's exploitation and malicious behavior. Upset and angry, the Diamond king commands his armed forces to shut Charandas's mouth, tie him, and throw him in the well. Instead of holding his tongue and possibly save his life, Charandas continues to sing against the cruel king until his last breath. Charandas's final comments to Goopy and Bagha in the film are that he will sing this song as long as he is alive.

Hirak Raja's other characteristics of power is his self glorification. He decides to install a giant statue of him towering over the people in a central place in his kingdom; symbolizing a central tower from which he would monitor the behavior of the people of Hirak like Bentham's Panopticon. The gigantic stature of the king of diamond metaphorically demonstrates the power of the king and suggests that the king is watching them at all times. Hirak Raja was extremely pleased with his own statue and the inauguration arrangements for his statue. Gloating with self-satisfaction, he comments in the film that after looking the statue people will say how powerful the king of Diamond is.

Both the films emphasize non-transparency and double talk in the creation and maintenance of power. The protagonists enter a diamond mine after fleeing from the village school master, Udayan. The King was trying to create an image of being a kind and benevolent king in front of the foreign visitors. When Goopy and Bagha say that diamond miners should not get diamonds because they belong to the king, the king slyly remarks that after all these are human beings and it was because of them that the king was able to mine the diamonds. The workers were in reality whipped and tortured by the king's military power and were punished harshly for the slightest of oversight in the mine. Similarly, the people of Sundi had lost their power to speak because of an epidemic. However, the prime minister of Halla wants the common people to speak in order to help the king rule the kingdom. Of course, in reality, the prime minister wants people of Sundi to have 'speech'—but no real 'voice' in political terms. What the greedy prime minister really means is to collect taxes and implement his power on the citizens and increase the king's treasury and his own wealth. Should anyone actually use speech to talk or plan against him, their throat would promptly be slit by the king's army. Ray was greatly influenced by the prevalent political and social scenario of India, and specifically Bengal. In *Hirak Rajar Deshe* there is no brutality in the king of Hirak's actions. He controls his people by brainwashing, so that the citizens lose their power to think critically and do not bear any ill-will against the king. Ray mentions that one of the few violent scenes in the film was inspired by his own observation of the government's attempt to cover up scenes of urban poverty along the route taken by Soviet leaders during a state visit in Calcutta. This violent act in the film occurs when soldiers destroy a shantytown of poor people. Before the coming of the outside delegates, the king's army cleans up the city by putting the poor citizens in cage-like camps and burning their little shanty houses so no outsiders could see the poverty, poor governance within.

The late Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi, had called the emergency in 1975 on the grounds that the security of India was threatened by internal disturbances. With the emergency rule, long after the independence, the country India was not free. The bourgeoisie were the owners of capital, purchasing and exploiting labor power, using the surplus value from employment of this labor power to accumulate or expand their capital. These experiences had prompted Satyajit Ray to develop a Marxist approach to class. In both these films we can see difference between classes of people mainly bourgeoisie and the working class. In *Hirak Rajar Deshe* the evil king uses his military power to dominate his countrymen and establish the dictatorship. As Robinson mentioned, some Indians sensed the political content of the film ground behind the fantasy. For example, Utpal Dutta, the Marxist producer, playwright and actor who played the king, in *Hirak Rajar Deshe* said that the film was out-and-out political.

To conclude, the king or the ruler established and maintained their power in multiple ways. Self-glorification, physical and mental punishment and torture over subjects, reliance on the administrative units and executive bodies to exercise power, and non-transparency, have been cited as characteristics of power. As mentioned previously, power relationships can be experienced in groups, as well amongst individuals, as an instrument for domination. The synopsis of the two films presented in the chapter and the understanding of the royal and authoritarian power, sets the stage for the next chapter on the power of class, caste and religion.

Power of Caste, Class, and Religion: Class and caste both intermingle with each other. Caste often represents the biological connotation of the expression but the term class signifies as economical connotation. Caste, is a system of rigid social stratification characterized by hereditary status, endogamy, and social barriers sanctioned by custom, law, and religion. But the basic socially constructed class distinction is between the educationally and economically powerful and the powerless.

Alongside the power of the ruler, the conflict of caste and class and the interplay of the power between them have been depicted masterfully in Ray's films. Goopy and Bagha come from the lower economic class as well as low caste background. The film *Goopy Gayen Bagha Bayen* begins with Goopy walking in the rice field with a tanpura on his shoulder. He spots a farmer working in the field in a distance. Goopy loudly accuses the farmer of lacking any idea about classical music (*tumi chasa ami ostad khasa*). Goopy uses the term '*chasa*', a

derogative word for farmer, which can also mean one who is foolish. He also uses the term '*ostad*' which means the opposite someone who is intelligent or wise. Thus, in the first scene, the class difference is vividly represented in Ray's film through the language that the male protagonist uses. According to Sociologist Elaine Leeder, when it comes to relation between classes and cultures, a conflict perspective would hold that different groups have different values and that there is a hierarchy of cultures that defines who will be excluded and who will be assimilated into the dominant pecking order. Thus there is major segregation in most societies that may lead to possible conflict amongst them.

Earlier in the film, to obtain a musical instrument *tanpura*, Goopy had tried to please his elderly uncle (*Josti khuro*), by kneading his body and legs, fetching water from well and killing some big rats. But now, with the help of the king of ghosts he received treatment reserved for those in high economic class and caste. After they won the heart of the King Sundi, both Goopy and Bagha were boarded in the king's castle as court singers. They were treated lavishly. They now had a roof above their head, something that Goopy and Bagha had forgotten to ask for, as one of the three boons, from the king of ghost. They had lavish arrangements, which they had never experienced in their life before. Two servants fanned the two crown princes while they nibbled on fruits and admired the fountain in the middle of the room. They were the very important guests of the king and therefore they could have those unusual things which a common person could not imagine of in their wildest dreams. Ray uses other subtle ways to demonstrate the class differences. For example, in the film *Hirak Rajar Deshe*, the dwarf is seen holding the king's robe and doing menial chores. The small stature of the person is used to symbolize someone who is in low occupation job, and also emphasizes the king as powerful and of higher status.

The exercise of power by the upper caste on lower caste or the weak to humiliate for pleasure is demonstrated well in *Goopy Gayen Bagha Bayen*. Goopy was walking down the village roads and meets the Brahmins sitting underneath the great banyan tree. The Brahmins demand that Goopy sings a song for them, not because they were charmed by his good voice but rather to humiliate him. They are the upper caste Brahmins in the Hindu society with the power to control people from other caste and thus found pleasure in exercising that power. Goopy declines to sing because the only song he knew was a morning raga, *Raag Bhairavi*, sung at dawn. But the Brahmins convince Goopy that morning was not gone. One Brahmin even claims that until the shadow of his walking stick touched the nearby rock, it was still morning. As Goopy begins to sing, the Brahmin moves his walking stick so that the shadow touched the rock, claiming that morning was over and time to stop the *raag*. This scene was Ray's critique of the power that the Brahmins felt they had—they could even control the planetary system. This scene was nothing but the demonstration of power relationship to control the subaltern class of people. Goopy was not so foolish as to believe the Brahmins, but coming from a lower caste, and having been subjugated by the upper caste for so many years, he does not have power or confidence to talk to them. Like other lower caste people, Goopy also accepts that caste system is the way to keep society from disintegrating to chaos.

In the film *Hirak Rajar Deshe*, Ray used religion in much bolder form; here he directly uses names which differentiate religion. The ethos of togetherness and peaceful living continue, but Ray now uses names to identify the groups of people.

Thus, the power amongst the people has been utilized over centuries to subjugate subjects through the socially and economically constructed boundaries of class, caste, and religion. Satyajit, raised in social reformist Brahmo ideology, was acutely aware of the malice of caste, class, and religion and has critiqued it in these two films. The understanding of power created due to class, caste, and religion segues us to another form of socially constructed power amongst people, that is, power that one gender can have on another.

Power of Gender: In Ray's films, *Goopy Gayen Bagha Bayen* and *Hirak Rajar Deshe*, women have been treated with indifference as puppets in the hands of the more powerful male members of the family. Particularly, in *Goopy Gayen Bagha Bayen* women are used as sexual objects for males that can be won as prizes or gifts. Ray specifically emphasizes in his indictment of Indian patriarchy, the authoritarian and powerful role of the father under whose hegemony the Indian women, in all their different roles are expected to function—as obedient slaves.

In his two films, *Goopy Gayen Bagha Bayen* and *Hirak Rajar Deshe*, Ray uses imagery to provide a lesson for society that women are still treated as an object. Ray skillfully demonstrates how the principle figures in these narratives walk a tightrope between masculinity and effeminacy.

In *Goopy Gayen Bagha Bayen* women are transformed into subjects. The only female members in the film *Goopy Gayen Bagha Bayen* are the two obedient, vulnerable princesses, who never speak or act, and are offered as prize to the two male protagonists for their efforts in stopping the war between Halla and Shundi. The women do not have the power to oppose or make their own decisions. The two brides in the film are speechless and what the dominating power or male power will articulate they will agree without any hesitation. The audience gets a glimpse of princesses of *Goopy Gayen Bagha Bayen* when they lift their veils, startled by the

magic change of costume Goopy and Bagha undertake. The women do not speak nor do they act. They appear obedient to the strict coding for women in Indian culture. They do not, in fact, look at anyone including the grooms with whom they will spend their future life. The princesses exhibit an exaggerated measure of modesty, shyness, humility which is common in a young maiden when she hears her own marriage discussed. Lowering head or look down obedient signifies the emotion of modesty, shame, humility.

Further, prejudice based on women's skin color is very evident in the film's dialogue. When Goopy and Bagha first catch a glimpse of a woman far above in the balcony of the fortress, Goopy remarks that it might be a maid. But Bagha has sharper eyes. From that very far distance he can see the color of the woman, and remarks, "no doubt she is a princess because her skin is fairer than the maid." Fairer skin color was conventionally associated with upper-class people (princesses) and those without fairer skin were thought to belong to the lower-class (maids, in this instance).

In the film *Hirak Rajar Deshe* there are no representations of women other than one shot of a female character when king's soldiers comes to the village schoolmaster, Udayan's house and burns his books. The woman inside the house, whom we assume is Udayan's mother, has an expression of suffering, holding Udayan's father in her arms. . She appears only for few seconds but is speechless like the princesses in *Goopy Gayen Bagha Bayen*. She has no clear individual identity. When leaving, Udayan addresses his father, not the woman, who is supposedly his mother. In conclusion, an analysis of power relations at the micro level is central to the feminist project of understanding the nature and causes of women's subordination.

II. Conclusion:

Thus we can conclude by saying that, Ray, through his masterpieces, has definitely portrayed the power relations. Media, as it is often quoted, is the mirror of society. Ray's films are truly a reflection of the social scenario. Ray demonstrate how kingship, class, caste, and gender, inform the roles and interpretations of power relationships between the powerful and powerless.

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