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## ASHANI SANKET (Distant Thunder) 1973

**Produced by**  
*Palaka Movies, Calcutta*  
**Story**  
*Based on a story by*  
*Bibhuti Bhushan*  
*Bandopadhyay*  
**Script, Direction & Music**  
*Satyajit Ray*  
**Photography**  
*Soumendu Roy*  
**Editing**  
*Dulal Dutta*  
**Lead players**  
*Soumitra Chatterjee*  
*(Gangacharan), Babita*  
*(His Wife Ananga),*  
*Sandhya Roy (Chhutki)*

The time: 1942-43. The place: a remote village in Bengal.

While the world is at war the villagers run out for the pretty sight — of planes flying overhead.

Young Ganga and his wife Ananga are the only two Brahmins, new arrivals, in this village, primarily inhabited by lower caste peasants.

For the villagers, Ganga is the priest, the doctor and the only teacher in the school he has started with the help of Biswas, a rich farmer, who also provides them with their board. Ananga spends her time with the jolly Chhutki, wife of another peasant. Everything seems right with the world.

Days later, Dinu, an old Brahmin tells Ganga of the sudden spurt in rice prices in the neighbouring village. "This is because of the war," says Dinu. "Our Government is fighting the Germans and the Japanese and the rice is being sent to our soldiers."

At first, Ganga does not take him seriously, but later it is apparent that in spite of a good harvest in the village, a famine is inevitable.

As prices rise further, the peace of the village is disturbed. Peasants sell their stock to starve later; rice shops are looted frequently; Biswas refuses to dole out any more food for Ganga and his wife. For a handful of rice Chhutki yields to the advances of a man. And Ganga, while hunting for edible roots in the forest, is molested by a stranger.

At the worst stage of the famine, Ananga's friend from

another village comes to beg for rice and dies at her doorstep.

In the darkest of hours Ananga tells her husband that she is pregnant — with their first child. A horde of starving humanity approaches.

### THE FEELING POURS OVER ALL THE CRACKS AND SEALS THEM UP

*Pauline Kael*  
*New Yorker/1973*

The colour imagery of Satyajit Ray's *Distant Thunder* is so expressive that I regretted the need to look down to the subtitles; it took precious time away from the faces and bodies, with their hint of something passive, self-absorbed — a narcissism of the flesh

Soumitra Chatterjee, Ray's one-man stock company, moves so differently in the different roles he plays that he's almost unrecognizable. He was the passionately romantic Apu in the last film of the trilogy, the husband in *Devi*, the suitor in tartan socks and English boots in *Two Daughters*, the guest in *Charulata*, the handsome, arrogant leader of the four young men in *Days and Nights in the Forest*. At first, his Gangacharan is almost physically dislikable — thin yet flabby, contemptuously pedantic; in the course of the film, as the feudal system that sustains this contempt is eroded, his body seems to change. The Second World War, which is so remote from the villagers that they don't know who is fighting, destroys the traditions that bind the community. The area is idyllically lush, but it isn't self-sufficient. When faraway supply ports for grain fall to the Japanese, and large shipments of food are needed for the Army, the price of rice soars. Speculators send it higher, and starvation and cholera will shortly follow. Famine approaches with the force of a natural disaster; the villagers are helpless.

During the early stages, the light is so soft, and the lily pads, the flying insects, the bathing women are so tranquil, that even when the women are hungry and picking snails out of the mud or digging for wild potatoes, the images are still harmonious. The film is delicately, ambiguously beautiful; the shadowing comes from our knowledge — and Gangacharan's knowledge — that the people we're looking at are endangered. It is a lyric chronicle of a way of life just before its extinction, and Ray gives the action the distilled, meditative expressiveness that he alone of all directors seems able to give. We're looking at something that we feel is already gone, and so the images throb. Or is it that we do? It comes to the same thing.

Whether intentionally or not, Ray has put something of himself into Gangacharan — of his own sense of guilt, of weakness, and of commitment. And something even more personal — his seeing the beauty in the Indian past almost completely in the women. The men in this village are ignorant and obsequious, and physically very unprepossessing; the rich ones hoard and profiteer, the poor panic, become violent, riot. But the women are conceived

of as in a dream of the past—they might be iridescent figures on a vase. These women are uneducated and superstitious, they know nothing of the world outside; yet they're tender and infinitely graceful. Moving in their thin clinging saris, they create sensuous waves of colour in the steamy air. Gangacharan's bride, Ananga, is innocently childlike, undulant, luscious, with a pouty, ripe-pink under lip; the brilliant orange-red spot in the middle of her forehead is like a cosmic beauty mark. Played by the actress Babita (that should mean Baby Doll), Ananga is the Indian version of a Hollywood darling. She seems to have been created for the pleasure of man; she has been bred to think of nothing but her husband, and she finds her pride and her fulfillment in pleasing him. She wants to be a tempting morsel so that her husband can take a juicy bite.

Ananga is just the ornament to his existence that this preening Brahmin would have found; everything in the society appears to be designed to assuage his ego. Yet he's intelligent, and he's not a bad fellow—merely infantile. When he realises that he can't fulfill his end of the bargain, and his wife must do demeaning work to get food for them, the whole basis of their relationship changes. Gangacharan begins to care about someone besides himself. He loves her now not because she takes care of him but because of how she feels about taking care of him. There are other actresses in the film with a fine-grained quality that goes beyond Babita's almost pornographic charm—the one who plays Moti, the Untouchable, and another who plays a woman who gives Gangacharan food to take home to his wife. They, too, are gentle and undemanding—ideal traditional women.

Ray is one of the most conscious artists who ever lived, and in this film he means to show us the subservient status of women; the children Gangacharan teaches (by rote, drumming information into them) are, of course, all boys. The women remain illiterate, and locked into the vestiges of the caste system—Ananga and Moti are friends, but if they touch each other Ananga bathes. However, I wonder if Ray realises the degree to which he shows a deep-seated distrust of Indian men and an equally deep trust in the selflessness of women. (Even Ananga's friend Chhutki, who trades her favours for food—giving herself to a hideously scarred kiln worker—wants to share the rice she gets.) Ray is not a vulgar chauvinist, exalting subservient women; quite the contrary. While the men in the films are weak and easily flattered—dupes, self-deceived by vanity and ambition—the women have conflicts that are larger, more dignified, involving a need for love, for independence, for self-expression. They are morally stronger than the men. This may, in part, reflect a belief that the women, having always been in a subservient position, were not corrupted by English rule in the way that the men were.

Still, in *Distant Thunder*, in a village far removed from that emasculating Anglicisation, Ray perceives the

women with such love that they become figures in a vision, and since he sees the men without that etherealising intensity, there's an imbalance — poetry and prose. In the Apu trilogy, the hero was the embodiment of poetry, but here it is only at the end, when Gangacharan accepts a group of famine victims as his family, that he becomes as compassionate (and as fully human) as the women were all along. For Ray, the source of their strength is humility. And although one wouldn't propose any other course of action for Gangacharan, the way Ray sees him — made whole by his passive, chivalrous acceptance of what's coming — suggests a rather attenuated attempt at universalising his situation. Satyajit Ray has rarely before dabbled in having his characters do what he so obviously believes is symbolically right; you expect a faint white light to begin whirring around Gangacharan's head. And when, with famine victims approaching their home, Ananga, with a shy, flirtatious smile of pride, speaks of the child she is carrying, this, too, seems to be symbolic of endurance in the midst of extreme adversity.

The music, which Ray composed, is also used portentously, signalling 'distant thunder'. And Ray has developed an alarming affection for melodramatic angles and zoom-fast closeups; when there's a violent action — the scarred man's overtures to Chhutki, or a rapist's assault on Ananga — he wants us to feel the dislocation. But it's intrusive, pushy; his style can't accommodate this visual abrasion. When a movie director suddenly loses his tact, he can shock viewers right out of the movie: cameras are cruel to the disfigured, and when Ray forces us to look close at the enlarged burned face of the kiln worker, we don't understand why. He's introduced like a Quasi-

*Rioting for rice*



modo, and though the more we see him, the easier it is to look at him, his becoming more sympathetic—so that we notice how attractive the good side of his face is—is too pedagogic, too symbolic. The rapist appears even more abruptly; we don't see his face—all we know about him is that he smokes cigarettes, like a Westerner. He remains a plot device, an illustration of the horrors these women experience, and hide, guiltily. Ray's use of emphatic techniques to heighten the impact of his material actually lowers it. When Ananga first mistakes planes flying overhead for insects, that's native and halfway acceptable, but when, later, the noise of the planes drowns out her screams as she's being raped, that's ladling it on. The ironies are too charged, as in the situations that American television writers come up with: this cleverness is the dramatist's form of yellow journalism. In Ray's work, what remains inarticulate is what we remember; what is articulated seems reduced, ordinary.

*Distant Thunder* is not one of his greatest films, yet it's still a Satyajit Ray film, and in how many directors' films does one anticipate greatness? With Ray, you puzzle if a picture is a little less than a masterpiece. If this one lacks the undertones of a *Days and Nights in the Forest*, it's probably because he's trying to do something that sounds straightforward but isn't quite clearly thought out. Ray wants to show us how war changes people (Bergman brought it off in *Shame*), but he also wants to make an indictment. And somehow he fails on both counts. Probably he fails on the first because he doesn't endow the villagers with enough complexity. And maybe he didn't think of them in complex enough terms because he had that second, social purpose in mind. When Gangacharan learns political lessons—when he discovers that what's wrong is that “the peasants do all the work and we live off them”—it's just plain fake. Gangacharan's sponging of the peasants—in the sense that he served them with bad grace, contemptuously, demanding a little more than was fair—is hardly a factor in the starvation. When we get the closing title, telling us that five million Bengalis died in the man-made famine of 1943, Ray uses the term ‘man-made’ because it implies that the famine was a crime. But it looks more like a horrible pileup of accidents, plus some criminal greed, and thousands of years of no planning. His statement seems forced; his whole structure is forced, and yet the film is astonishingly beautiful. The character of Gangacharan—a mixture of slothful peacefulness and a sense of dissatisfaction which he takes out on the peasants and an inquisitive, modern mind—is a fine creation, except for terminal loftiness. And there's also a character Ray can't quite get a grip on: a beggar Brahmin with a gap-toothed rabbit smile that Gangacharan calls sly. It's that, and worse. Throughout the movie, whenever he appears, he seems to suck life away. He creates the most disturbing images, maybe because Ray sees him as both the life force and as dirty Death itself. At the end, it's he who arrives with his tribe of dependents—eight in all—to join Ganga-

charan's household. With his rags hanging on him and his staff in his hand, he's all four horsemen rolled into one. In the final image, the silhouetted figures of this old man leading his family are extended into a procession of the starving advancing on us. It's a poster design, and yet we're also prey to unresolved feelings about that sly beggar. The film is more puzzling than it seems at first; Ray is such an imagist that even his poster art slips into ambiguities.

I don't know when I've been so moved by a picture that I knew was riddled with flaws. It must be that Ray's vision comes out of so much hurt and guilt and love that the feeling pours over all cracks in *Distant Thunder* and seals them up.

## DISTINCTIVE POLITICS

Jack Kroll  
*Newsweek/1975*

In her biography of the great Bengali filmmaker Satyajit Ray, Marie Seton points out that during the late 1960s many of his countrymen were criticising Ray for not reflecting the contemporary scene in India. Whether or not Ray took such criticism to heart, his films are apparently taking on more of a political tone. *Distant Thunder* can be called a film, but Ray's politics are as distinctive as everything else about this master director.

Ray is dealing, not only with the ultimate horror of mass starvation, but also with the iniquity of greedy men who withheld precious rice from the people for profit—certainly the most ultimate of evils. But Ray's genius is for the lyrical, for the contemplation of life as a blend of material and spiritual beauty. His 'politics' is thus absorbed into his very personal poetry, and the fact of starvation takes on a tragic inevitability that is both extremely powerful aesthetically and dangerously loaded with ideological ambiguity.

The film contains things as delicate, as powerful and moving as anything Ray has ever done. His sense of ordinary human life as an idyll of small but supernal pleasures has never been so subtly conveyed. Ray can make you sense the fragrance of human relationships—the love between Ananga and Gangacharan, the friendship between Ananga and the other young wives, the impulse, barely contained on the part of the young Brahmins to break through what their hearts tell them are the artificial bounds of caste.

The film, like Ray's sensibility, is so suffused with the sense of beauty that both film and sensibility can only melt before the dark onset of catastrophe.

The final apparition, of a starving family that suddenly becomes a horde of starving wanderers, is a shocking—and beautiful—image that perhaps must carry too much weight in the design of the film. In *Distant Thunder* Ray has found again his wonderful arabesque of feeling that can break your heart with the strength of its caress. What is missing is a menace of lyric ferocity, a spin in the arabesque that would reinforce the beauty with the energy of anger.