

Document Citation

Title	Distant thunder
Author(s)	Chidananda Dasgupta
Source	<i>Museum of Modern Art (New York, N.Y.)</i>
Date	1981 Jun 25
Type	program note
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	2
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Ashani sanket (Distant thunder), Ray, Satyajit, 1973

The Museum of Modern Art Department of Film

11 West 53 Street, New York, N. Y. 10019 Tel. 956-6100 Cable: Modernart

FILM INDIA: Part I

Satyajit Ray

June 25 - July 24, 1981

Saturday, July 18 at 2:30

Monday, July 20 at 2:30

DISTANT THUNDER (ASHANI SANKET). India. 1973. Script, music, direction: Satyajit Ray. Produced by Sarbani Bhattacharya. Based on a novel by: Bibhuti Bhushan Bandyopadhyay. Photography: Soumendu Roy. Editor: Dulal Dutta. Art Director: Ashok Bose. In Bengali; English subtitles. Courtesy of Cinema V. 102 mins.

With: Soumitra Chatterjee (Gangacharan), Babita (Ananga), Sandhya Roy (Chhutki), Chakravorty (Gobinda Kinabandhu), Romesh Mukerji (Biswas), Noni Ganguly (Jadu), Sheli Pal (Mokshada), Chitra Bannerji (Moti), Suchita Roy (Khenti), Anil Ganguly (Nibaran), Debatosh Ghosh (Adhar).

"Ray had for a long time wanted to film Bibhuti Bhushan Bandyopadhyay's novel "Ashani Sanket", dealing with the man-made famine of 1943. Perhaps the idea had come to him during the severe drought of 1967, which had claimed innumerable lives. In 1943, millions had died while the harvest was good and the food plentiful: a mystery few of those who died for the lack of it were able to fathom. All the food they had produced was taken away to feed the British army and they saw little of it. They never understood how it went or where. In hordes they trekked to Calcutta, begging from door to door; they died without raising a hand at the people who had everything. They stood before food shops and did not loot them. They just died on the streets, like flies. All this neither the novelist nor the film-maker dealt with. The thunder they heard was a distant one. Bibhuti Bhushan saw an age-old way of life crumbling before the cynicism that hunger brings. A Brahmin priest (very sensitively portrayed by Soumitra Chatterjee), typically ruled at once by his intellect and his greed, savoring every good thing in life—plenty of well-cooked food, a sexually appetizing wife—scrounges on his devout clients and lives happily enough on the outcome. Suddenly, portents of change begin to appear. Food goes scarce, the women begin to gather edible roots that they normally spurned, sleep with strangers for a kilo of rice; unknown to her husband the priest's wife is raped by one of the strangers who have appeared out of nowhere and are hovering around the village. Events are seen from the point of view of the village-folk who do not know who or what is causing this bizarre problem of shortages in the midst of plenty. Vaguely they hear of fighting in Singapore, without knowing where that city is or what connection the war being fought there has with the rising prices they encounter. The modus operandi of those who spirit away the grain is as unclear to the audience as it is to the villagers. In one last Brahmin-feeding ritual, at a time when food is already beginning to get scarce, Gangacharan (our priest) finds it hard to eat the delicacies thinking of his starving wife. Soon after this, hell breaks loose. The rice-dealer who has loads of it stashed away will not sell it to the villagers (obviously because he will sell it at a much higher price to the war authorities and one large-scale operation is more convenient to him). In the resulting riot, the Brahmin's soft skin gets bruised.

With a shock he realizes, suddenly, that the fact that he is a Brahmin and a priest has no value; his livelihood has vanished into the thin air, along with an age-old tradition of reverence for his kind in all circumstances. The Brahmin's person is no longer inviolable.

"In the mounting famine, it is an outcast who dies first, with a casualness matched by the indifference of passersby. Gangacharan's wife is pregnant; to compound the problem, another Brahmin whom they have occasionally fed--one who is denied the good cooks, the elegant mud hut and the beautiful wife of his fellow priest--lands up with a number of dependents. This too, Gangacharan accepts with good grace. But then grey hordes of humanity appear on the horizon, marching towards their death. Over this apocalyptic vision, a title tells us of the number of people who had died in 1943.

"In the years since CHARULATA, this is Ray's first period film. It is also Ray's return to the rural scene, and is marked by a certain self-consciousness. There was, somewhere deep down, a need to be different from PATHER PANCHALI which, apart from two stories in "Teen Kanya," had been his only rural film in the years from 1955 to 1973. In that context, it is possible to see POST-MASTER as an exquisite but all-too-brief exercise in which the village is never established, and the villagers are only a part of the local color that surrounds the main protagonists, the servant girl and the postmaster from the city. Along with SAMAPTI, it is concerned with showing the predicament of the city-bred in the village situation and is not a film of rural people, seen from the inside as PATHER PANCHALI was. So ASHANI SANKET, postponed many times before it was finally undertaken, was Ray's first substantive return to the Bengali village scene, burdened with the fearful problem of achieving the reality of PATHER PANCHALI without the benefit of the primitive passion of the 'first fine careless rapture.'

"Ray adroitly avoids the problem of comparison with the earlier work by opting for color and by a change of context. Unlike in PATHER PANCHALI, he goes in for vast shots of the landscape laden with dark shot with a wide-angle lens; it helps to create the canvas that would take in the traditional Bengali village and the invincible international forces that bring about the famine. In this, as in the use of lush color, Ray seeks a contrast between the bounty of nature and the terror of man-made famine. The 'distant thunder' of the title frees him from the need to confront the action required in depicting. But the combination of the palpability of color and the 'distant' thunder of the suggested famine tends to reduce the impact of the tragedy. Nature and the people are brought into the more living presence by the way in which heightened rather than muted color is used; in contrast with this, the famine, seen from a distance, does not impinge sufficiently on the consciousness, and the severity and mordent irony of the contrast that Ray seeks does not materialize. The moral burden placed on that last shot of the approaching people turning into grey hordes is a little excessive, too preciously conceived to have the impact that the title tries to reinforce. It is not sufficient, by itself, to convey the cruel irony of contrast with a lush nature. The problem arises precisely because Ray raises the expectation of an indictment, raising the threshold of the tragedy himself from the individual to the social-political plane, at which his ending becomes a little half-hearted, almost an afterthought. Had he stayed with an intense observation of the individual tragedy, leaving to the audience to infer the social statement, the film would be more characteristic of himself." --Chidananda Das Gupta in "The Cinema of Satyajit Ray," (Vikus Pub., 1980)

FILM INDIA is made possible by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, Washington, D.C. Additional support has been provided by Air India, the Smithsonian Institution Foreign Currency Program, and the Asian Cultural Council. The Museum's film program is made possible with public funds from the New York State Council on the Arts.