

Understanding Satyajit Ray's Filmic Approach to Ibsen: A Comparative Study of *Ganashatru* and *An Enemy of the People*

Sharif Atiquzzaman

Professor of English, Former Principal, Government Brajalal College, Khulna, Bangladesh

Abstract: Satyajit Ray's filmic adaptation of Henrik Ibsen's play *An Enemy of the People*, titled *Ganashatru*, offers a keen exploration of how Ibsen's theme resonates with Indian audiences. Ray's skilful handling of the complex socio-political landscapes inherent in both Ibsen's original narrative and his own adaptation ensures that the essence of the story is effectively transformed into the Indian context. This task requires a profound understanding of themes such as truth, morality, and societal responsibility, and Ray adeptly integrates them into his adaptation. While doing so, he encounters multifaceted challenges, particularly in the delicate task of translating dialogues, which demand linguistic precision and the original dramatic tension inherent in Ibsen's writing. He carefully maintains the theme's emotional weight and philosophical depth while resonating authentically within an Indian cultural context. This balance maintains the drama's tension and urgency, making the moral dilemmas relevant. Moreover, Ray artfully integrates elements of Indian culture, enriches the narrative and makes the themes more accessible to local viewers. His success in these adaptations is the outcome of his deep understanding of the source material, combined with his innovative technique of storytelling, which ultimately creates a bridge between Western literary traditions and Indian cinematic expression.

Keywords: Adaptation; Cinematic; Narrative; Dramatic; Balance; Indian

The paper aims to explore how Satyajit Ray, by adapting Ibsen's play, critiques the social and political landscape of India. He particularly focuses on the religious exploitation by the influential quarter of society and the suppression of scientific truth by the power dynamics. Ray's transformation illustrates the central conflict between a doctor's revelation and the opposition of socio-political pressure that prioritises self-interest over greater welfare. Adapting a stage drama for film presents numerous

technical challenges. Additionally, the paper also intends to examine how skillfully Ray handles the tasks.

An inquiry into the existing literature concerning the adaptation of *An Enemy of the People* to *Ganashatru* is exiguous. Despite the inadequacy, a few critics contribute valuable insights into their interpretations and responses through various texts in journals, books, and newspapers. It harnesses secondary sources and descriptive analysis, complemented by impactful references to both theatre and film acting.

In Henrik Ibsen's original play, Dr. Thomas Stockmann uncovers contamination in the tourist baths of a Norwegian town, leading to conflict with his brother, the mayor, and community figures who prioritise economic gain over public health. Initially supported by the local newspaper editor, publisher, and townspeople, Stockmann faces growing opposition and is branded an enemy of the people for trying to expose the truth. The play focuses on the conflict between individual morality and the tyranny of power dynamics.

Similarly, in Satyajit Ray's film set in an imaginary West Bengal city, Dr Ashok Gupta discovers contamination in holy water from a temple, posing an epidemic threat. His brother, Mayor Nishit Gupta, dismisses the warnings, prioritising tourism over safety. Attempts to alert the public through the press are blocked, and a public meeting ends with Dr. Gupta being labeled anti-religious. They successfully agitate the mob against him, although he says, 'I respect others' religious sentiments and cannot think of attacking their religious beliefs even in my dream' (*Ganashatru* 01:20:42). But they hurl abusive words at him, and finally, he is proclaimed as the enemy of the people.

When adapting Henrik Ibsen's stage drama to a film, significant modifications are necessary to address the shift in cultural context from 1882 Norway to 1989 India. While Ibsen's narrative, centered on Dr. Stockmann's discovery of contaminated baths in Norway, emphasizes the conflict between scientific truth and economic interests, Ray shifts the focus to religious bigotry and the contamination of a temple's holy water in West Bengal. 'The idea of the temple is Ray's masterstroke

because it brings a political-religious context and makes Ray's film truly Bengali in ethos and highly topical throughout India' (Robinson 342). He skillfully adapts the play's theme to the Indian context.

Notable changes include reversing the age of the doctor from Ibsen's younger character to an elder brother in Ray's version, which highlights progressive traits in Dr. Ashok's character. Certain characters from the original play are omitted, like the tannery owner Morten Kiil and two sons of Stockmann to broaden the narrative's focus on societal corruption rather than personal conflict. New characters, like Ranen, signify a youthful drive towards scientific understanding, anchoring the film's relevance to Indian audiences. Overall, Ray's adaptation retains core themes while adapting them to resonate with India's cultural and political landscape. These inclusions and exclusions have been made to reflect different connotations of the theme Ray intends to convey. Here, this authorship is important as 'authorship is always a way of looking at films, and obviously other ways exist as do other questions' (Gerstner 28).

In the original play, Morten Kiil is depicted as a tannery owner possessing a large share of the public baths. It is suspected that the contamination of the bathwater results from the tannery wastes. However, in Ray's adaptation, as the source of contamination is an underground pipeline, this character becomes irrelevant to this theme, and by removing Kiil, Ray emphasises the more extensive themes of corruption and abuse of institutional power. In the original play, Kiil lures Dr. Stockmann to purchase shares of the baths for his family's security, which he refuses to accept on ethical grounds. So, the exclusion of Kiil shifts the focus from a family conflict to a wider societal issue. In doing so, 'to all thinking Indians, he provided the opportunity, even when he starkly depicted the coarsening of India's moral fibre, to reach out to the essential humanity which lies within them' ('India's Satyajit Roy'). It's also a way to tailor the narrative to the specific cultural and political context of India, making it more relatable to the Indian audience. In such adaptations, 'a change of language is involved; almost always, there is a change of place or time period' (Hutcheon 145).

At the end of Ibsen's play, Dr. Stockmann is sacked from his job; Petra, his daughter, is also dismissed from her teaching profession, and his two sons are expelled from their school. In the face

of all these calamities, isolation, and alienation, Dr. Stockmann exhibits a kind of determination. He says, ‘...at present, the stupid people are in an absolutely overwhelming majority all the world over’ (Ibsen 111), and ‘The strongest man in the world is he who stands most alone’ (155). In Ray's adaptation, Dr. Ashok faces the same lot, but he finds some support and solidarity from a quarter of the people. Despite Dr. Gupta's defeat by the corrupt allies, Ray's 'Ganashatru' concludes on a note of optimism, ‘I may be an enemy of the people, but I have many friends. I am not alone’ (Ganashatru 01:34:00).

Transforming a stage drama into a film involves several technical challenges, such as converting stage-based performance styles to the movie screen format, adjusting to the limitations of settings and locations, and managing audience reactions of theatre and cinema. Additionally, filmmakers encounter issues with editing, dubbing, background music, and more. Theatre acting requires exaggerated gestures and a high-pitched vocal delivery to reach the last audience, while film acting requires a more subtle, nuanced approach. Film actors need to learn how to use the camera, adjusting their performance to its perspectives.

Theatrical performances often utilise a limited number of sets, while movies can be filmed anywhere. What made Ray produce a film like ‘Ganashastra’? It is a drama on the screen as it is mainly an indoor film. It was shot in three main indoor settings: Dr Ashok Gupta's home, the editor's office of 'Janabarta,' and the hall-room of 'Nutmandir.’ The two consecutive heart attacks of Satyajit Ray in 1983 and 1984 seriously impacted his health and prevented him from working for five years. Even after his recovery, he was not able to work on location, and the shooting of 'Ganashatru' was largely confined to these interior sets. Despite the limited indoor settings, it plays a significant role in the film's visual storytelling. The framing and character positioning successfully convey the narrative of the story. While relying only on indoor settings might be seen as a limitation, it can be an opportunity for better character interactions. It also allows Ray to explore the passage of time and the impact of events on characters in a unique way. As a master of visual storytelling, Ray, despite using recurring settings, removes the monotony by utilising different angles that create a sense of rhythm

within the film. As for the film's style, Ray says that although 'Ganashatru' is restricted to the studio, it will not be in any way theatrical. It is ultimately a chamber piece. 'We are dealing with words, words, words. But of course, we are using the camera as intelligently as possible' (Malcolm 2). But "there is a common belief among film enthusiasts, particularly among those who have watched Satyajit Ray's films quite keenly, that *Ganashatru* is, by far, his worst film... The film suffers from some extremely poor technical treatment..." (Chattopadhyay 169). And there are other groups of people who are tempted to agree with the statement that Ray has transformed Ibsen into Ray in *Ganashatru* (Robinson 343).

The decision to shoot the film indoors due to his health issues serves to adapt Ibsen's play's setting, focusing on a small town and its inhabitants. The Story's projection is well-suited to the confined space of an indoor set. Shooting 'Ganashatru' indoors allows Satyajit Ray to work within his physical limitations, although it does not limit the film's artistic and narrative essence, but rather enhances and explores its potential in a new dimension. Ray was conscious of removing the last trace of theatricality from his work. He told Andrew Robinson in an interview, "I found that for once one could play with human faces and human reactions, rather than landscape, Nature in its moods, which I have a lot in my films. Here I think it is the human face, the human character which is predominant" (Robinson 341).

Adapting a drama into a film encompasses several crucial components, such as core themes and characters, narrative structure, foundational elements, the processes of condensing and expanding, visual storytelling techniques, pacing and tone, a balancing act, honoring the source material, casting and performances, technical considerations, and more. Ray adeptly pinpoints the central message and emotional essence of the drama, meticulously selecting the elements that are vital for the film adaptation. He recognizes the emotional undercurrents despite changing some plot details. A piece of literature requires significant condensing and expanding to fit the film's length and match the visual narrative. Translating dialogue and actions into visual storytelling and using camera angles to convey emotion, Ray has successfully done the task. While some changes were inevitable,

Ray's adaptation remained true to the spirit of the original drama. Casting actors who can embody the characters convincingly is crucial for bringing a story to life, and Soumitra Chatterjee, Dipankar Dey, Ruma Guha Thakurata, Mamta Shankar, Dhritiman Chatterjee, Suwendu Chatterjee, and Manoj Mitra definitely performed as per the demands of the roles. Cinematography, editing, sound, background music, everything creates a cinematic experience. Overall, 'Ganashatru' is a significant cinematic work of art that effectively adapts Ibsen's play while offering a powerful commentary on Indian society.

Works Cited and Consulted

Chattopadhyay, Bhaskar. *The Cinema of Satyajit Ray*. Westland Publications Private Limited, 2021.

Gerstner, David A., and Janet Staiger, editors. "The Practice of Authorship." *Authorship and Film*, Routledge, 2003.

Hutcheon, Linda, and Siobhan Flynn. *A Theory of Adaptation*. 2nd ed., Routledge, 2013.

Ibsen, Henrik. *An Enemy of the People*. ICON Group International, Inc., 2005.

"India's Satyajit Ray." *The Times of India*, 25 Apr. 1992, p. 14.

Malcolm, Derek. "Satyajit Ray: The Language of Film." *Sight and Sound*, 28 Aug. 2022, [bfi.org.uk/press/2022-08-28-enemy-of-the-people.pdf](https://www.bfi.org.uk/press/2022-08-28-enemy-of-the-people.pdf).

Ray, Satyajit, director. *Ganashatru (An Enemy of the People)*. National Film Development Corporation of India, 1989.

Robinson, Andrew. *Satyajit Ray: The Inner Eye*. U of California P, 1989.