

Handout: The Music Room

Fall 2020

Instructions

The Music Room (1958) is a Bengali film by Indian director Satyajit Ray. It is based on a short story of the same name by Bengali writer Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay (1898-1971). It portrays a couple of episodes in the life of Bishwanath Roy, a *Zamindar* or feudal landlord (more on this term below) who has seen his estate reduced to almost nothing.

We will analyze this film at two levels, at the narrative and the documentary level. At the narrative level, we will pay attention to what the film is showing: what's the story, what are the events that take place, how do characters in the movie react to different situations. At the documentary level, we will treat this movie as another primary source, as a document. We will interrogate and discuss the conditions in which it was created, the cultural and historical context and tradition of which it was part. Here's a set of instructions for next week.

- There won't be class on Monday. In normal circumstances, we would have met to watch the movie together. Since we are socially distanced and watching a movie over Zoom is technically possible but not a good experience, I will let you watch the movie on your own and whenever you have the time. Please do watch the movie at least one day before class on Wednesday.
- Please read the texts I uploaded to the Modules section in Canvas. Most of the texts deal with the movie and its director.
- Dipesh Chakrabarty's piece is a bit difficult, since there are many names of authors and texts that you might not know. But it is an important discussion on how the literary past of Bengal was conceptualized and what it meant for the burgeoning nationalist consciousness of Bengalis under colonial government.
- There will be no discussion post on Canvas. Please bring comments and questions on the movie and the readings to class on Wednesday.

- The section “Things to keep in mind for discussion” of this handout will give you some ideas on what to look at or look for in the movie. We will revisit these ideas/scenes in class.

In order to understand the cultural and historical world and the anxieties and feelings portrayed in the movie, it is necessary we acquaint ourselves with a bit of Bengali history, especially regarding the situation of landlords in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Brief history of Bengal in the 18th century

From the 16th to the 18th centuries, most of India was under the rule of the Mughals, a dynasty of persianized Turkish Muslims that adopted over many years Indian customs, blending them together with their own. Before the arrival in India of Babur (r. 1526-1530), the first of the Mughal emperors, Islam had had a long presence in South Asia. India saw many military campaigns coming from Islamicate kingdoms in Central Asia starting from 7th century onwards. The most important military campaign took place during the 10th and 11th century, commanded by Mahmud of Ghazni, who was joined by Al-Biruni. This campaign signaled the beginning of a steady flow of Islamicate invasions and migrations into South Asia, and the beginning of an intense and deep cultural exchange between Muslim immigrants and the ‘native’ population of India which, though majoritarily Hindu, was composed of people of different faiths, languages, customs. Notably, and even though colonial and contemporary Hindu-right-leaning historiography argue the opposite, these Islamic incursions were not motivated by religious goals: there is no evidence of forced mass conversions at a large scale throughout India. The main goal was plundering, looting and appropriation of lands and territories; granted, not good intentions, but these processes were not fueled by religious animosity as the Hindu right would argue nowadays.

Unlike other Islamicate kingdoms and rulers in India previous to the 16th century, the Mughal empire successfully annexed new territories into a tight administration overseen by the central government but kept in place locally by two functionaries appointed by the Emperor to: a) collect taxes (power known as *Diwani*) and b) to maintain civil order (power known as *Nizamat*). Having these two offices separate and by appointment of the Emperor contributed substantially to keeping the distant regions of India under the Emperor’s control. Tax on agricultural yield was the main source of revenue for the empire. A complex system of tenancy-rights and proprietary rights kept almost all cultivable land as taxbase for the empire. Land was allotted to individuals or families through deeds or grants, with the explicit understanding that the holder of the deed had to pay taxes to the local authority, though there were also many tax-exempted deeds and grants given to temples and families that had provided a special service to some authority.

Land was not given to just any individual, and certainly not to peasants. Land was granted to local elites, irrespective of religious affiliation, so many Hindus were landlords. A Hindu could also become a royal dignitary, so many Hindus were in positions of power

inside the administration. A landowner, in charge of large swaths of land, was called a *Zamindar*. This is a Persian word: *zamin* means 'land' and *dar* means holder. Zamindars were part of the local nobility and were the persons in charge of collecting and paying taxes on those lands. Intermediary landlords existed, known as *taluqdars*. The word *Zamindar*, though of Persian origin and originally an administrative word, became part of the everyday vocabulary of Indians during the Middle Ages. Even now the word is perfectly recognizable to Indians. Throughout the movie, you can hear this word and the word 'land', *zamin*, though in Bengali pronunciation: *jomi*.

If *Zamindar* means a landlord, a *zamindari* is the extension of the land under the administration of a *Zamindar*. In Bengal, the region where the movie takes place, large *zamindaris* were under the control of Hindus, specifically, of Brahmins, though there were also many Muslim *Zamindars*. A *Zamindar* could theoretically manage his *zamindari* at will, he just needed to a) pay taxes to the central government and b) pledge alliance to the Emperor. Importantly, the rights to a *zamindari* were hereditary, so a *zamindari* could stay in the family for generations.

Because of the semi-independent and hereditary character of a *zamindari*, many Hindu *Zamindars* fashioned themselves as Kings, as *Rājās*, without disregarding or breaking the pledge they had made to the Mughal Emperor. This meant that many Hindu *zamindars* behaved in the way an independent Hindu king would, including maintaining a royal court in the *zamindari*. There, the *zamindar/king* would act as a veritable Hindu king, engaging in activities proper to a king according to Hindu kingship theory, which was vast and had theorized the important traits a king should have since the time of the *Mahābhārata*. The *Kāmasūtra*, a Sanskrit treatise on courtly manners and conducts which in the West became famous for its sordid and explicit depictions of sexual encounters, was one of many books detailing the activities in which kings and courtiers should engage in order to live a fulfilled life. Among them, horse riding, hunting, and the enjoyment of fine arts, including dancing and music, were proper activities for a king. In the colonial period, these activities, once deemed not only proper but desirable in a king, became proof of the decadent character of the Medieval period in India, and were denounced by English colonizers and Western-educated Indian reformists alike as one of the many corrupted traits that have plunged India into the dark waters of the Medieval period.

In Bengal during the 18th century, the offices of *Nizamat* (civil administration) and *Diwani* (the right to collect taxes) were vested upon a single person who could bequeath the combined offices. This meant that the first person holding both offices, known as the *Nawab*, became the *de facto* and basically independent ruler of Bengal, since the whole administrative apparatus was now in his hands. This is exactly what happened and, combined with a weak central government, it signaled the beginning of a brief moment in which the province of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa were not under Mughal control anymore.

In 1757, the English East India Company won the battle of Plassey in north Bengal against the *Nawab* Siraj-ud Daulah, and thus began the *de facto* rule of the East India Company. By 1765, the Company was acknowledged as holding the rights of *Diwani*, i.e. of tax-collection, in the provinces of Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa. In 1793, the Company signed an agreement with Bengali landlords to grant permanent rights of property to

Bengali zamindars. Before 1793 and during the Mughal rule as well, zamindars did not own the land, but were only in charge of collecting the taxes on the agricultural production of the land. After 1793, zamindars became the owners of their own *zamindaris*, with the condition of paying a fixed rate of taxes to the Company. While many Zamindars thrived under this new arrangement, many others saw their estates reduced in extension and many others were not able to pay the unforgiving tax rate that the Company had decided they should pay.

This is the world to which the protagonist of the movie belonged. He was a Zamindar, a landlord, but one who styled himself as a King, like many other Hindu Zamindars in Bengal. For many centuries, Zamindars/Rājās in Bengal were at the top of the social ladder, but our protagonist is facing a new reality.

Cultural/religious/historical images

The movie is rich with images of Bengali culture. While an exhaustive list of them would be too cumbersome to read and ultimately unnecessary for a proper understanding of the movie, a handful of them could provide a better insight into the inner world of the characters of the film. What follows is a list of words, images and ideas that appear in the movie. They are listed according to their order of appearance in the film. In brackets, you will find the approximate minute in which the item appears in the movie. I'm basing this estimate on the version found in the Criterion Channel.

month of Falgun [00:03:50] Corresponds to March/April.

muchkunda flowers a flower of the *Pterospermum acerifolium* tree. Its flowers are used to soothe many ailments, but also to provide a fragrant scent to beverages and ointments.

initiation ceremony [00:06:00] A rite of passage for Hindu (of high caste) boys that marks the beginning of their formal education. It is an important and elaborate ritual; we get a glimpse of it later in the movie (around 00:13:00) and we can hear some Sanskrit recitation.

sandbank exploitation right [00:09:49] In Bengal, rivers change their course constantly. When a river moves or its flow decreases, it leaves behind deposits of silt appear in the landscape where the bed of the river used to be. These silt deposits are rich in minerals and nutrients, and when they are exploited for agriculture they usually produce a high yield. As a Zamindar, Roy can lend the rights of exploitation of his land to other persons.

pranām [00:11:27] the reverence that Ganguly pays to Roy when they meet in the Music room. Roy, being a noble and an aristocrat, is much higher in the social scale than Ganguly, thus this one has to pay respects by doing a slight bow and touching (or signaling to touch) Roy's feet. This shows great respect and the acknowledgment of some kind of authority.

music recital [00:17:00] Classical Indian music owes much of its development to musical soirees that took place in royal courts during the medieval period. A gathering to listen to a musical performance was one of the many leisure activities in which a king would engage.

Indra's music room [00:23:00] Indra is the king of the Gods in Hinduism. As a king, he is supposed to have his own royal court, where the other gods are courtiers. Indra's court was the ideal/example of a royal court for Hindu kings during the medieval period. Rambhā, Urvaśī and Menakā, these are female demi-gods reputed for their beauty; Roy mentions their names since they appeared in his dream, as singers and dancers in Indra's court.

Elephant riding and horse riding [00:24:00] were kingly activities. Owning an elephant and taking care of it was an important activity for kings; the more elephants a king owned the more power and prestige he could project. Elephants were used for war mainly, so they were a powerful symbol of a king's might. In Roy's time, they had only symbolic and not military value anymore.

Tiger skin [01:04:00] A glimpse of Roy's past hunting habits? Tiger hunting was usually done on elephants. There's still a small population of tigers in Bengal, but mainly in the South, in the Sunderbans region.

Rose water [01:16:00] Ananta the servant sprinkles rose water over the guests, it is supposed to be refreshing. Ganguly is the only one who does not appreciate the gesture, even though he later complains there is no one to fan the guests.

Things to keep in mind for discussion

- Though we only get a glimpse of Ganguly's house, there are several scenes where we are offered a description of it. What are the differences with Roy's house? Does Ganguly own a music room as well?
- Throughout the movie, what are Ganguly's reactions to the music? what about his place at the gatherings?
- What is the state of Roy's land? Why is it in such state? What forces are at play in Roy's lands/life?
- How would you describe Roy's attachment to *Tufan* the horse and *Moti* the elephant? What's the nature of this attachment?