



MAHANAGAR The Big City 1963 India B/W Bengali 135 mins

Screenplay and direction: Satyajit Ray (based on a short story by Narendranath Mistra)

Cinematography : Subrata Mitra

Music : Satyajit Ray

Cast : Arati Mazumdar by Mahaba Mukherjee, Subrata Mazumdar by Anil Chatterjee, Priyogopal by Haran Chatterjee, Sarojini by Sefalika Devi, Pintu by Prasenjit Sarkar, Mukherjee by Haradhan Bannerjee, Edith Simmons by Vicky Redwood

This is a new restoration, undertaken in India, with the original negative being scanned at high resolution so that the film's epic scale and intimate detail can emerge in greater beauty and clarity. It has been rereleased by the BFI to mark the fiftieth anniversary of its first release and feels as fresh and relevant as in 1963. Although parts of Indian society have moved on from this depiction of urban life, others have not and neither has society in many other parts of the world.

Ray died in 1992, aged 72. He was the son of a prominent Bengali literary figure and an accomplished writer, composer, editor and artist as well as a film director. His passionate interest in the cinema developed early and shortly after WW2 he travelled with Jean Renoir as he looked for locations for *The River*.

Mahanagar is Ray's first film to be set in his native Calcutta and it can be said to reflect his admiration for Dickens. His Calcutta, like Dickens London is a bustling place of disappointment and hope. It has entrepreneurs seizing opportunities in a changing world, plus examples of exploitation and cruelty and a gulf between the rich and poor with a burgeoning middle class in post-independence India. The film was shot in 1963 but is set in the 1950's when the idea of women going out to work was not simply about emancipation but also a matter of financial necessity.

We meet the lower middle class Subrata as he travels home from work and are then taken into his home to appreciate how his lowly paid job has to support his extended family. Subrata uses his pride and position of superiority over his uneducated wife to sustain himself. Because of the crisis in the family fortunes and despite his belief that "a woman's place is in the home" he finds he has to obtain employment for his wife.

This acts as a turning point and we follow Arati's growing confidence as she moves further and further outwards from her original comfort zone and we see the effects this has on the patriarchal attitudes of her father-in-law and the social dynamics of the entire family. In so doing Ray can also give us rich vignettes of the middle class society emerging from India's independence. These are subtly portrayed – not a scene or a word is wasted and they contrast with the other world Arati inhabits back at home. There too though we watch a manipulative and exploitative process as the grandfather visits his former pupils to extract money for his new glasses.

Ray quoted Renoir as saying, "You don't have to show many things in a film, but you have to be very careful to show only the right things." Ray takes this to heart. He never looks down on or mocks his characters, neither does he indulge in sentimentality. He draws equally subtle performances from his actors. This was Madhabi Mukherjee's first film with Ray, (but not her first film.) She went on to become one of Bollywood's leading actresses.

The confined, gloomy but intimate atmosphere of the family home was created by the sets of the house having very small rooms with fixed walls. In his biography, Ray commented, "In those days, I don't think anyone built 4 walled rooms. It gave us very little room to move about and there were no long shots at all." These scenes contrast tellingly with the office scenes where we can see straight out of the window onto the wider world. The houses Subrata visits to try and make her sales are also light and spacious, but are also constrained by their walls and pretensions. The end of the film takes us back to the crowded city and tilts up to a single street lamp.

Awards : Certificate of Merit New Delhi 1964

Silver Bear for best Direction Berlin 1964

Submitted for Academy awards in Best Foreign Film Category but not nominated.

Judy Warner