



Lo Sadgati A Film by Satyajit Ray with Minimal Music

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Aim:-

The aim of my study is to show how the Brahmins exploited the untouchable class in an inhuman way in yesteryears. The Oscar-winning Director Satyajit Ray beautifully portrayed a short story, *Sadgati* of Munshi Premchand on this topic through his inner eye. The arrogance and hypocrisy of the upper class are very much evident. In this film, the use of music is minimal.

Abstract:-

Satyajit Ray in his tele-film based on the master-piece story, "*Sadgati*" of *Munshi Premchand* portrayed the reality of untouchability and hypocrisy of Hindu society for quite a long time in India. It is a matter of regret that it still exists in many parts of India even today. This Hindi film was made for *Doordarshan* in 1981. The film was very much criticized by a certain class of people because of the frequent use of the word "*Chamar*". All the actors performed very wonderfully in their respective roles. The message of the film is how the lower caste (the untouchable) man, *Dukhi*, who belong to *Chamar* community in this case, was exploited by the Brahmin priest in the rural area. The film's narrative revolves around just one particular day of *Dukhi's* life. *Dukhi* was tortured by the priest as he wanted a visit of the priest to his house to fix an auspicious date for his daughter's marriage. The pathetic end of *Dukhi*, the main character in the film, reveals the inhuman torture meted out to the lower caste people by the Brahmins. To be fair it is true that the particular Brahmin priest could not imagine that *Dukhi*, the labour will die while working. The end of the film is very cruel and pathetic. Ray made the end of the film in a very realistic way. He never used any melodramatic scene in this film and the use of music is very minimal. The sound of nature is added in a very natural way. The sound of rain, thunderstorm of a torrential rain is applied in a sad moment.

Keywords:- *Sadgati, Chamar, Brahmin, Untouchable, Satyajit Ray*

Introduction:-

The film "*Sadgati*" of *Satyajit Ray* was depicted from a short story of *Munshi Premchand*. *Sadgati* portrays a realistic picture of rural Indian society in pre-independence period. The miserable state of the low-caste untouchable Hindus in the society remained almost the same in some remote rural area of India. Barring a few cosmetic changes, the caste system in Indian rural areas is very much prevalent. Ray portrayed beautifully in this short film for *Doordarshan* the sordid reality of Indian caste system. This controversial subject invited a lot of criticism from different quarters.

Satyajit Ray's unique contribution to Indian film has been beautifully summed up in Andrew Robinson's work, "*Satyajit Ray: The Inner Eye*" '*Satyajit* has traveled a long way from the poetry of *Pather Panchalito* the terrifying prose of *Sadgati*.'ⁱ

The script of the film '*Sadgati*' was first written by *Satyajit Ray* in English and then *Amrit Rai*, son of *Munshi Premchand* translated the script in Hindi. But *Ray* commented that he never used any translated script in his Bengali films.ⁱⁱ

Narrative of *Sadgati*:-

Ray articulated natural sound track in the narrative of a distressed family of three members *Dukhi* (husband), *Jhuria* (wife) and *Dhaniala* (their little daughter) and a few villagers. He demonstrated different types of harassments meted out to a person who belonged to the community of "*Chamar*" (involved in the profession of tanning or shoe mending). "*Sadgati*" was made for *Doordarshan* at a time when *Satyajit Ray* was at the pinnacle of his artistic imagination. For this short film *Ray* had chosen an apparently simple story but in reality the inner sense is too complicated and to a large extent controversial. The dialogues and very little background music have its distinguished features. The film is very short but the creation is indeed an intense one.

Minimal Music & Sound effect

The simple and brief music of the film "*Sadgati*" needs special mention. The application of natural sound,



ringing of bell in morning ritual in a Brahmin's house, sound of torrential rain are commendable and appropriate for the linear form of narrative. The instrumental orchestration of simple folk tune in the beginning of the film is very wonderful and sets the exact mood and essence of the environment of rural area. Ray applied the surrounding sounds of nature in avillage.

Indian Film Critics' view on Ray's *Sadgati*

The critics of the film are divergent in their opinion. Therefore, it is very difficult to come to a definitive conclusion excepting the fact that certain sections of the low-caste were despicable in the eyes of the upper caste. Some viewers have written their experiences about the film which is available in some social networking sites. Scholar *Nishat Haider* has done a detailed study on "Dalits" where he highlighted *Satyajit Ray's* realistic touch in the film "*Sadgati*" and the beauty of the story of *Munshi Premchand*. *Haider's* article helps us to have a clear idea of the exact social status of the untouchable community.ⁱⁱⁱ

Bhaskar Chattopadhyay's wonderful observation "...even today, the evil shadow of untouchability and caste crime hover over us" is worth mentioning. He has also mentioned about the film and mesmerizing performances of the leading characters of the film *Sadgati*.^{iv}

The nuances of sound effects in the film were redesigned by *Amulya Das*.^v The music of the film was directed by *Satyajit Ray* and the film won the National award in the year 1982. But unfortunately, only a faded copy of the film is available in the National Film Archive and this copy has no subtitle. In this context I would like to mention that the version which is available in YouTube can't be downloaded. Critic *Mehal Yadav* has written an article on "*Sadgati: A Lost Chapter in the History of Hindi Cinema*" on 16th December, 2018 in a web review.^{vi}

Anjan Basu has written an article on the film "Looking Back At '*Sadgati*': An artistic Peak Satyajit Ray Himself Touched Only Rarely" which was published on 30/04/2020.^{vii}

Great Actors' view on Ray & *Sadgati*

The great actor and the thinker *Utpal Dutta* had mentioned about the film "*Sadgati*" in an exclusive interview "Ray A Renaissance Man". He called Ray as a Renaissance Man. The word "*Chamar*" has been used repetitively in the film. So the Government of India had some objections about the particular word '*Chamar*' (as it indicates glaringly the prevalence of caste system which was not in accordance with the Indian Constitution) as "*Sadgati*" was made for *Doordarshan* which was viewed by a large section of India. The Government challenged the dialogues of the film. They constitutionally attacked both *Satyajit Ray* and *Munshi Premchand* due to the use of word "*Chamar*" frequently. But the irony of the fact is that *Ray* got personal adulation from the Government of India and got a National Award. But Government officials thought that a positive image of India could be best projected by an uncontroversial subject matter. Actually India was not ready to accept the bitter truth.^{viii}

No artificial musical track is applied to underline any scene of the film. *Ray* had done wonderful shot designing in "*Sadgati*". According to *Mohan Agashe*, *Ray* never left any chance to use nature as additional actors. He tried to use the literature in a far more impacting way.^{ix}

Music & Sound Effect in the narrative *Sadgati*:-

Apart from some short musical application, the phenomenal sound is assimilated in an artistic way. The chirping sound of birds in rural atmosphere during the day time is applied throughout the film. This sound is typical of rural surroundings. The entire sound tracks and musical pieces suit perfectly with rural atmosphere of India and this may be considered as the aesthetic beauty of a realistic film. The film put a question to the civilized society - why the low-caste, less educated and less fortunate people are exploited by rich high-caste people almost like slaves of yesteryears. This unfortunate people are still deprived of their basic rights to live a life of self-respect. The film is a sad story of a family of three, who were more or less happy in their meagre needs of their life. All of a sudden, the family meets with an unheard-of ordeal. *Dukhi*, the husband arranged the marriage of their daughter, *Dhania* at a very tender age which was the order of the day. He decided to invite the Brahmin priest to his house to know an auspicious day for betrothal. He cuts some grass and ties it with rope (made of straw) to give the priest as fodder for his cattle to make him happy. *Dukhi* tells his wife to arrange a "*Thali*" for gift as and when the priest comes to their



house and specially instructs her to put a coin or “*Sikka*” (Coin) on the “*Thali*” (a gift to please the priest). He firmly told his wife, *Jhuria* not to touch the coin, as they belong to untouchable community according to the caste system.

After giving instructions about the gift to please the Brahmin, he told his wife to make a floor mat with a particular leaf which is considered sacred on such occasion. He met the priest in the morning with grass and requested him to come to his home for fixing an auspicious day for her daughter’s engagement. Realizing that, *Dukhi* was in dire need of a Brahmin, the priest made an attempt of getting some free labour from him without spending a penny. The Brahmin priest started treating him as a born slave and ordered him to do several heavy works. On that particular day *Dukhi* was very weak which we see in the first scene because of his prolonged infection and fever. After some strenuous job he began to feel dizzy. At that point of time, another man of lower-caste labourer noticed that *Dukhi* was physically very weak. In fact he was in empty stomach for a long period of time. The passerby advised *Dukhi* to ask for some food from the Brahmin’s house. But *Dukhi* refused to ask for food as he came to the priest’s home for some favour. After listening to *Dukhi*’s problem that man offered tobacco to boost up his energy for a while so that he could carry on his task of chopping wood.

Ray explored the ramification of Hindu-caste system in a very detailed way. The scenes portrayed the predominant untouchability of Hinduism where the low-caste people were not even allowed to touch the feet of a Brahmin. After the completion of the tedious job he proceeded towards the house of the priest and noticed that the priest, *Ghasiram* was reciting some Sanskrit “*Slokas*”¹ in a pleasant mood. Two persons were listening very patiently. The priest explained the meaning of the “*Slokas*” and also told them that he himself married thrice so far. It may be mentioned here that the two persons were father and son. Incidentally the son who lost his wife recently was very much relieved to hear from the priest, that a male should always marry after the demise of his wife because descendants are needed to run the tradition of a family. But even in that moment when he was discussing some bad practices prevalent in upper class he did not forget to get his work done by the poor fellow *Dukhi*. In this scene *Ray* designed the musical track behind the shots of *Dukhi*’s strenuous job with a tense sorrowful tune in Flute as theme-music.

After continuous chopping of a large log *Dukhi*’s axe appeared to be blunt. The beautiful expression with which he looked at the log may seem to the viewers as if it is a hard rock. In spite of his extreme exhaustion he went on to strike the log repeatedly with the blunt axe. He decided to sharpen the edge of the axe on a stone, but all his efforts were in vein. The sound behind the scene of sharpening the axe was very real and natural. The hard piece of wood was a symbol which may be compared to the deep-rooted superstition and self-imposed superiority of the upper caste Hindu community which is almost impossible to change.

Dukhi asked for some fire from the priest’s wife for smoking tobacco. This request made her very much angry. She questioned the audacity of the person and used some abusive language. *Dukhi* realized that the desperate situation he was in. It was glaringly clear that his class is deprived of basic rights and self-respect. After getting such inhuman behavior from priest’s wife, *Dukhi* blamed himself and very obediently told her to forgive him. With his extreme weakness, *Dukhi* failed to cut the hard piece of wood into small pieces. His tiredness compelled him to take rest for a while and ultimately he fell asleep by the side of the tree. At that time the Brahmin *Ghasiram* was taking a sumptuous lunch and talking to his wife. She advised her husband to cancel the visit to *Dukhi*’s home in scorching sunlight. At least for a while the lady showed some feminine softness when she thought of giving some food to *Dukhi*.

But her husband told her that five or six *chapati* (home-made bread) would not be enough for a person of his class. After taking a wholesome lunch, the priest *Ghasiram* was found enjoying a siesta peacefully.

After sometime when he woke up and noticed that the time was 2.20pm. He thought that he should check the progress of *Dukhi*’s work. He was enraged to notice that *Dukhi* was sleeping and started scolding *Dukhi* for his irresponsibility. The Brahmin showed his heartless behavior and forced *Dukhi* to cut the hard piece of log at any cost. *Dukhi* had already informed the Brahmin that he did not take any food since morning and

¹ A couplet of Sanskrit verse, especially one in which each line contains sixteen syllables.



feeling a little bit unwell. But the Brahmin did not pay any heed to his words. Visibly *Dukhi* was extremely angry and started to chop the log vigorously for sometime. Each time his strike to the log with the axe increased his anger. But he could not continue it for a long time due to his weak and unstable physical condition and he fell down on the spot and died. The viewers will easily understand his extreme anger and the body language indicated his humiliation and subjugation to the Brahmin *Ghasiram's* whims. The unexplainable torture by the Brahmin was the main reason behind the tragic death of *Dukhi* and almost in other words it was an indirect murder.

During all these sequences we see some other incidents in the film like

- 1) *Dukhi's* wife *Jhuria* is buying some materials for the Brahmin from the grocery shop of that area of the village.
- 2) *Dhania* is picking leaves to make mat and plate for the Brahmin.
- 3) The priest is giving advices and knowledge to less educated people.

The circumstances in which *Dukhi* had to die a premature death was incidentally witnessed by the Brahmin's son. This sad incident was also noticed by another person standing nearby. The Brahmin, *Ghasiram* realized the gravity of the situation and wasted no time to reach the spot to see what exactly happened. At first, he thought that *Dukhi* was asleep but within seconds his worst fear was confirmed. It would not be an exaggeration to say that *Dukhi* tumbled throughout his life and tumbled out of it. The appearance of the priest did not indicate any sign of remorse or guilt. The statue of *Ravana* is shown in the film quite a few times in different scenes. Perhaps in a very subtle way the director painted the Brahmin as *Ravana* (in Hindu mythology; a symbol of tyrant evil) to low caste people.

The terrible news of *Dukhi's* death was such a shock that *Dukhi's* wife *Jhuria* became almost mad and reached the place immediately where *Dukhi's* dead body was lying. The incessant rain after few hours of *Dukhi's* sudden demise added a misery to the scene. The entire sequence of rain was a gift to the director and his team as it was not planned at all. So the nature's gift added a beauty to the scene. An interesting piece of information may be given here. *Smita Patil* who played the role of *Jhuria* was to leave *Raipur* in the evening to attend India Film Festival in New York. As *Ray* was a great improviser he suddenly planned a scene. He immediately started to prepare for shooting with the help of trolley. The entire scene was taken in one shot and he took three takes of the shot. This scene is another testimony to why *Ray* is considered as a master that he was. The brilliant acting of *Smita Patil* touched sensitive soul in every corner of the world.

The natural sound of heavy shower added a realistic essence to the film. *Dukhi's* wife in disbelief thought that perhaps, he was still alive and she made fervent efforts to awaken him. But even after several attempts she realized that *Dukhi* was no more. She, out of her extreme helplessness and anger, knocked the door of the Brahmin and solely accused him for *Dukhi's* terrible death. The Brahmin did not answer as they were fully conscious about the misdeed they committed.

Terribly afraid of some untoward incident they did not have the guts to face *Dukhi's* wife. The Brahmin apprehended that something much worse was in store for him. After that a blame game started between the Brahmin and his wife. Both of them accused each other for this ghastly incident.

Views of Main actors in *Sadgati*:-

The role of the Brahmin was beautifully performed by *Mohan Agashe*, who mentioned in his interview that *Ray* treated the 'culture' as the villain. In my opinion by the word 'culture' *Agashe* wanted to mean the age-old practice of worshipping the Brahmin as God. According to *Agashe*, *Ray* never portrayed a character as a villain which is very appropriate for this film. He told that *Ray* always worked with minute details even for a fifty minutes television film. The role of *Ghasiram's* wife was performed wonderfully by *Gita Siddharth*.^x

The late actor *Om Puri* shared some of his experiences in an interview while working in "*Sadgati*" with *Ray*. According to him, *Ray* was a great improviser and he was always open to any kind of changes which would be beneficial for the film.^{xi}

Conclusion:-

The tragic and horrible end of hapless *Dukhi* is not permissible in any civilized society. It is glaringly evident that although slavery as an institution did not exist in India at that time, the upper-caste did not hesitate to exploit the lower caste people as they did before. The difference was that there was some fear of law and order. *Dukhi* lived a life of ignominy till his death. Even after death there was no respite. There was



nobody, even from his community to take the body for cremation. It was a mark of protest from the community against the Brahmin and the prevalent primitive customs of the society. His body was ultimately carried by the Brahmin with a rope tied in his leg to a place where animal carcass were dumped. Ironically it was the Brahmin who had to carry the corpse to avoid being caught by Police. *Ghasiram* considered the Brahmin caste as the paramount in the society. But with this incident his idea was dashed to the ground. This entire scene of dragging the body is a nemesis. The scene was so horrible that it was beyond description. It is indeed a blot in our civilized society. The sensible people would shudder to notice such an inhuman custom in Hindu society. At the same time certain customs like child-marriage, the Brahmin's sole authority to decide which is an auspicious day and many other superstitions are undoubtedly deplorable.

The terrifying story of *MunshiPremchand* and the beautiful portrayal of the story in *Ray's* film remain relevant even today. In the second decade of 21st century, when a *Dalit* college girl was forced into consuming a toilet cleaner we can easily understand that how the caste-system plays a dominant role in the conservative society of India. We often go through this type of news which make headline. But we are not ready to accept the harsh cruelties of our caste system, which is a reality even in the modern age. Ray very successfully represented the exploitation which the low-caste *Dalit* people face in their life. The issue of caste system is associated with superstitious practices of Hinduism. In *SourodipitoSanyal's* article – “Revisiting “*Sadgati*” by Satyajit Ray: Caste in Indian Cinema” we find how he defined the relevance of Ray's film “*Sadgati*” in the present time.^{xii}

Concluding Note on Music:-

About the music Luis Dias wrote in his article “Haunting and Soul-stirring”: The Music of *SatyajitRay*(1921-1992)-Serenade that “*Ray* understood the power of silence and of natural sounds in augmenting the potency of a background score in his films. The musical accompaniment quite often can be very sparse, but this only serves to highlight it. Less is more.”*Ray* stated “I use music as discreetly as possible.”^{xiii}

In the book “*BishayChalachchitra*”, written by *SatyajitRay*(Translated in 2006 as *Speaking of Films*),*Ray* wrote an essay on “Background music in Film” in the book where he mentioned “If background music is used without reason, it can only harm the film.” He followed the above mentioned statement in the film “*Sadgati*”.^{xiv}

In this film, music is used in a limited way. Its use is imaginative but never melodramatic. The music is very balanced and assembled with incidental sound.

I would like to conclude my article with a quotation from Openroadreview.com that “*Sadgati*”, or ‘The Deliverance’ is a film that in all its aspects doesn't fail to deliver”.

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