

# KACHENJUNGHA (MT. KACHENJUNGHA) 1962

Satyajit Ray

(Bengal language)

## OVERVIEW

*Kachenjungha*, Ray's eighth feature film, represented a departure from his previous work. It was the first that he shot in colour and the first for which he wrote the screenplay. The script itself was innovative inasmuch as it contained several strands, each focusing on a separate character, that ran parallel to each other (a technique borrowed from Jean Renoir, for whom Ray first worked in the early 1950s). The story itself concerns a group of wealthy Bengalis from Calcutta who vacation in Darjeeling, a hill station in the Himalayas, from where one can sometimes see Kachenjungha, the third highest mountain in the world. The main characters all belong to the Choudhuri family, including in-laws, and a few friends. The action, which takes place in a single day, unfolds in real time, during the course of one day, during which the characters take long walks and engage in long conversations. The central drama hovers around an expected proposal of marriage for the family's younger daughter, Monisha. As the day progresses, the camera moves from one main character to another, revealing slivers of their personality, just as the characters themselves are manoeuvring to get a glimpse of Kachenjungha, which slips in and out of the mist and clouds. By the end, this appreciation of natural beauty has changed some of the characters, but in ways that are ambiguous.

## CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

Ray's film was not a popular success in India when first released. Perhaps the social class of the characters was too elite, and definitely out of step with the socialism that was popular at the time. Over the decades, however, it has become more and more popular, probably because the problem it examines is still relevant to most Indians. At the time this film was made (early 1960s), arranged marriage was the norm, even among educated, westernised elites like the characters in the story. Not just the norm, it was overwhelmingly the common practice. Of course, there was (and still is) a spectrum. At one end, a 12-year old girl would be forced to marry a 40-year old uncle. At the other, a 20-year old college graduate would be asked to marry a 28-year old boy from a similar background. That end of the spectrum is what is shown in the film. The parents arrange a meeting between prospective grooms and their daughter; tea is served, banal talk occurs. If the daughter 'likes' the groom, further meetings take place, then an engagement and then a marriage. It is a two-step process: parents arrange, girl approves. Today, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, arranged marriages are still the norm and many take place as they did five decades earlier. But in many of them, especially among the class of people in the film, the steps are now reversed. First, the girl finds someone she likes and then gets parental approval. Although Ray's film is not polemical about arranged marriages, it is certainly critical of the custom. The film has also proved popular across the world precisely because it transcends the issue of arranged marriages. The 'holiday' is a near-universal cultural event providing people from many societies with a 'break' from everyday conventions, another perspective from which to view themselves and their world.

## STORY

*Introductions* The opening shots introduce us to all the main characters in quick-fire fashion. Indranath, the father, dressed in suit and tie, strolls outside a hotel in the morning, looking self-satisfied. He has brief words with Jagadish, his wife's brother, who is a bird-watcher and keen to get going on an early morning walk. Anil, the young son, rushes by on his way to the photography shops in town. Next, we see Anima (the older, married daughter) with her little daughter and husband, a seemingly happy family within the larger family. Then Anima receives a letter (or telegram), which she hides from her husband. Labanya, the wife, appears and is criticised by Indranath for being late and for forgetting his scarf. Monisha finally appears and is warned by Anima's husband: 'Don't marry unless you are really in love.' This is the first cloud to darken the otherwise promising day.

*Ashok* As the family slowly gathers to begin a walk, Indranath is approached by a man who pleads with him to hire his unemployed son, an engineer called Ashok. Ashok and Monisha speak briefly,

and appear to like each other.

*Monisha and Bannerjee* The first walk is taken by Monisha and Bannerjee, the man chosen to marry her. He is older than her, gentle but also controlling in the way he guides her toward a garden, where he has found a flower that she likes. He circles around her, like a tiger after its prey, talking softly but trying to break through her icy formality. He keeps bringing her to the edge of the real issue—will she marry him?—and she nimbly steps aside. It is a consummate dance of dialogue. Their walk and conversation is interrupted five different times to show other walks and conversations.

*Anima and Shankar* The next significant exchange is between Anima and her husband, Shankar. We have seen already that their marriage is under strain and now they acknowledge that it has been a failure. He also tells her that he knows she had been having an affair (which explains the mysterious letter she has hidden) and offers to give her a divorce. Their conversation, though amiable and without rancour, casts another shadow on the soon-to-be arranged marriage for Monisha. Their little daughter comes riding along on a pony and cries out to them, 'Hello Mummy! Hello Daddy!' Then the mist descends over the mountain peak above them.

*Ashok and Indranath* Ashok, the unemployed young engineer, meets Indranath and the two strike up another conversation. Indranath, who has already been told that the young man needs a job, offers him one. But Ashok, who clearly comes from a lower social status and is more spontaneous, is put off by the older man's patronising attitude and rejects the offer. When Indranath is surprised and tries to offer him advice, Ashok says that he can manage on his own, thank you.

*Monisha and Ashok* During these walks, Monisha accidentally meets Ashok again. He is awkward and gauche, but open and admits that he always wanted to meet girls of her 'class.' 'What class is that?' she asks and he proceeds to give her a sociological lecture. Despite the harsh words about her 'class', he smiles broadly and is clearly more suited to her than is Bannerjee. He gives a little speech about how the beauty of the mountains has changed him and given him 'courage...as if I was somebody... a hero.' When he asks her if the scenery doesn't also give her strength, we understand that he has inspired her to be courageous, too.

*Monisha and Bannerjee* Monisha walks away from Ashok and sees Bannerjee on the path, waiting for her. She approaches him in a pensive mood. 'I've been looking for you,' he says with a smile. 'I know. You've got something to say to me,' she says. 'Yes,' he says. 'But there's one problem.' We now expect her to reject his offer of marriage, but instead, he speaks first and says that he thinks it's better if they break off the engagement. If, later, she wants to contact him, then he would welcome that.

*Anima and Shankar* With that potential marriage issue resolved (or at least postponed), the action shifts to the other marital problem. One marriage has been cancelled before it starts, but the second has run into grief ten years after it began. Shankar asks if Anima can give up her lover, and she asks if he can give up his gambling habits. They stand in silence until their daughter runs up to them, and it is clear that they will remain together for the child.

*Finale* In the closing scene, Monisha invites Ashok to visit her in Calcutta, an invitation he accepts with some reluctance ('As long as I don't need an appointment to meet your father.'). As he walks away, Ashok passes Indranath and greets him as an equal. In the final shots, Indranath sees a poor local boy happily eating a sweet; he is lost in contemplation and then calls out for Monisha and Bannerjee (unaware that they have broken off the engagement) just as the camera pans to a magnificent sight of the sun shining on the high snowbound peak.

## THEMES

*Arranged marriage* As is evident from the summary of the plot above, the central theme of the film is the custom of arranged marriages. In fact, the core story comprises two such arrangements: one that ten years ago resulted in the marriage of Anima and Shankar, and a second that might produce a wedding between Monisha and Bannerjee. Both marriages (the actual one and the possible one) are the result of Indranath, the patriarchal father, who views such connections as a king might view alliances or a business man might view a 'deal.' They are political and economic transactions that, if done correctly, create advantages for him, and, of course, for the others involved. Early on, however, we are given signs that the first marriage is on the rocks. There is secrecy (the mysterious letter), rancour, accusations and distrust, but also a little daughter. The wife, we later learn, is carrying on an

affair (hence the letters), while the husband is squandering funds on gambling. They are about to agree to a divorce when the daughter rides by on a pony, crying out 'Hello, Mommy! Hello, Daddy!' They stay together, with what outcome we are uncertain. The second arrangement, a possible marriage for nineteen-year old Monisha, is the driving force of the plot. Again, early on we see that her intended husband, Bannerjee, is older than her and looks like a junior version of her father. He is direct, but not manipulative, and seems to play the role assigned to him in this game with aplomb. Crucially, he is sensitive enough to realise that Monisha is having second thoughts and, at the very end, releases her from any obligation. As with the first marriage, this sounds a note of hope, but again we are unsure about her future. Overall, the film is, at the very least, sceptical about the wisdom of arranged marriages.

*Nature and human nature* A second theme running through the film is the interaction between natural beauty and human behaviour. More than once a character makes a direct comparison between the unpredictable weather (high up in the mountains) and unpredictable people. Similarly, just as the characters are constantly trying to catch a glimpse of the magnificent peak that they know is hidden by the clouds, they are also forever attempting to see into another's mind and read intentions. There is also a clever visual demonstration of the overlap between nature and society when Jagdish uses his bird-watcher binoculars to observe the behaviour of Monisha and Bannerjee. Another example comes when Indranath and his wife are discussing Monisha's so far unannounced intentions. Indranath looks up at the shrouded mountain and says, 'If only we could see the mountain. Then everything would be perfect.' Later, Ashok makes an often-quoted comment that might sum up the entire film when he explains how the scenery has changed his self-image. The final shot of the film also suggests this inter-relationship when Indranath, the father, is shown pondering the notable day that has just past when, suddenly, he looks up and is afforded a crystal-clear view of the mountain peak. Has something also been revealed inside his own mind?

## MAIN CHARACTERS

Indranath Choudhuri	Indranath Choudhuri is the father, a wealthy businessman and Anglophile.
Labanya	Labanya is his wife.
Jagdish	Jagdish is Labanya's widowed brother.
Monisha	Monisha is Labanya's and Indranath's younger, unmarried daughter.
Anil	Anil is the couple's son.
Anima	Anima is the couple's older, married daughter.
Shankar	Shankar is Anima's husband.
Bannerjee	Bannerjee is an engineer, who has been selected to be Monisha's husband
Ashok	Ashok is a young man whom Monisha meets on the holiday.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

### *Indranath*

Character Indranath can appear as a stereotype of the older, successful man and father. He is not unkind to his wife, but he does gently order her around. This is how he engages with the world, by manipulating it, perhaps to a good end, but always to his advantage, as well. He is an Anglophile and a social conservative, especially on the role of women and the institution of marriage. Even the crustiest old codgers, like him, however, can be changed by the natural beauty of the Himalayas.

### Illustrative moments

*Practical* Indranath is a businessman, who has built up his empire by pragmatic decision-making. This aspect of his character is illustrated in the opening sequence, when we see him wandering around out the hotel. He is up early, ready for the planned walk. The others are dawdling. His brother-in-law, Jagdish, walks by reading a bird book. 'Why do you carry that thing?' Indranath asks with genuine curiosity. It turns out that Jagdish is hoping to spot a particular bird whose call he once heard. When he shows Indranath a picture of the bird, Indranath asks, 'Can you roast it?' 'Roast it?' 'Yes, can you roast this bird.' 'No, no, I'm trying to see it.' 'Then it doesn't interest me,' Indranath says dismissively. 'Close the book.'

*Conservative* 'Conservative' might be a polite description of Indranath's social outlook. Given his long and successful career in business, it is not surprising that he is controlling and authoritarian. These traits are displayed in a sequence during the walk he is taking with his wife. 'It would be nice if the marriage took place in December,' he declares, without really consulting her. 'What about her

studies?' his wife asks. 'She's studied enough,' he answers. 'Every educated woman deprives a man of a job.' 'And her exams?' his wife asks. 'Oh, she'll graduate into a "married woman" soon,' he says. Then he notices that his wife is upset and tries to convince her not to worry. 'She has a mind of her own,' his wife says, and he interjects, 'Don't start that. She's, what? Only 19. I'm 65. Don't you think I know what I'm doing?' This is an important scene, but it is only at the end of the film that Indranath appears to reconsider his confidence when he sees the clear view of Kachenjungha.

### *Bannerjee*

Character Bannerjee, the man intended for Monisha, is a congenial person. Smiling, mild-mannered and nice-looking, he is difficult to dislike. But one senses that he is looking to gain something, to convince someone of something. He is self-assured and directed. One should, he counsels Monisha, 'always look for a tangible result.' That is the gap that opens between them. She is more introspective, he more extroverted. He has an answer for that, too. Differences in a marriage are to be expected. He has an answer for everything.

### Illustrative moments

*Genial* Bannerjee's geniality is illustrated in the scene where he first appears. The family have gathered at a meeting place after breakfast in order to take a walk. He greets them in a suit and tie, hair slicked back, and approaches Monisha, who looks in another direction. He glides up to her, pulls out a cigarette case and lights up. 'Your ear-rings are nice,' he says with obvious pleasure. 'Yes, you gave them to me,' she says, hiding a little smile. He circles around her, still not finding her eyes, and says, 'Where to?' She leaves it to him and he leads her to a garden, where he has found a flower that she admires. It is a brief scene, less than five minutes, but it reveals Bannerjee's smooth-talking persona. Hard to dislike, and yet there is something that does not seem completely authentic.

*Perceptive* Throughout the film, the characters are constantly evaluating and re-evaluating themselves and others. And we as viewers do the same. If Bannerjee appears both kind and fake at times, by the end, we are convinced that he is sincere. Crucially, he has the sensitivity to read Monisha's unvoiced thoughts about the marriage proposal, which he has not actually put to her. This moving scene occurs at the end when he meets Monisha on the path. He sees her reflective mood and tells her that she needn't say anything, adding that if she ever comes to realise that 'security is better than love, or that love can grow out of security,' she should contact him. 'You're free,' he says and walks away. It is a brave speech, one we were not expecting from the over-confident Bannerjee. But, as we see in other examples in the film, Kachenjungha can change people.

### *Monisha*

Character Monisha is a young woman, barely nineteen years old, still a student and unsure of herself and what she wants to do. Polite and well-mannered, she is not shy or distant, only reserved. She is intelligent and articulate, as we learn when the drama unfolds about her possible marriage to Bannerjee. Withdrawn and protective around Bannerjee, she is less formal and more spontaneous when she is with the younger Ashok. She can also speak her mind, as her mother puts it, and she does that at the crucial moment in the film.

### Illustrative moments

*Uncertain* Monisha first appears in the film when she comes into her older, married sister's room. She looks very young, timid, and unsure of herself. Of course, this is the day when she is expecting a man to propose to her. 'Give me a pin, please,' she says to her sister as she touches her hair. Her sister asks if she is ready. 'Almost' is the answer, which might serve as Monisha's nickname. Then her sister notices that she's forgotten to put on ear-rings. When her brother-in-law asks if she likes Bannerjee (her intended), she confesses that she doesn't know. Her honest answer tilts the entire film toward a resolution of her uncertainty.

*Independent-minded* The crucial scene that convinces Monisha she should not accept Bannerjee's forthcoming proposal reveals her strength of mind. Although she has seemed passive and unconfident to this point, midway through the story, she does not hesitate to express herself and contradict Bannerjee. The two of them are strolling along the path when they begin to talk about Monisha's uncle, Jagdish, the somewhat bohemian bird-watcher. Bannerjee says he is 'nice,' but then goes on to comment that people need to be practical, to get things done, 'achieve a tangible result.' In the middle of his exposition, she says, 'The world needs people like my uncle.' Bannerjee

agrees, saying that differences between people are good, like between husband and wife, implying that he knows she is different to him. He says it's rare for a couple to have the same talents and interests. 'But what about the Brownings?' she asks. He does not reply, but it is unclear whether he does not understand the reference or simply agrees with Monisha. What is evident is that Monisha has opened up a gap between them and spoken her mind about valuing her 'impractical' uncle.

### *Ashok*

Character Ashok is a young, educated man without an income. He has lost his father, which is understood to mean that his mother is suffering without any other financial support. He is polite, if somewhat cold and at times critical. He is also very proud and shrinks from asking for help from others. He has intellectual interests similar to Monisha's, and he has the ability to open up and respond to the natural environment and to other people. He is drawn in sharp contrast to Bannerjee. Where Bannerjee is practical, Ashok is sensitive.

### Illustrative moments

*Proud* Ashok may be an unemployed graduate, a young man from a lower-middle class family, a veteran of many interviews and without prospects, but he retains his pride. This characteristic is displayed in the first scene in which he appears. We see him with his uncle, who spies Indranath, the wealthy businessman. When the uncle insists on introducing him to Indranath, in the hope of getting a job, Ashok says no. 'Why not?' asks the uncle. 'You need a job, don't you?' 'Yes, but this isn't the right place.' When the introduction is made and the uncle begins to sing his praises, Ashok retreats rather than appear to beg for a job. This early glimpse of his self-respect is confirmed as the film unfolds and he refuses the position that Indranath offers him.

*Sensitive* Ashok is young and somewhat lost, but he appears to respond to the world around him. In an early conversation with Monisha, she says that she can't study because of all the beauty, and he reminds her that Tagore never put his desk near a window for that reason. The best illustration of his sensitivity, however, occurs much later, toward the end. He runs into Monisha on a path and they chat, a little nervously, aware of their growing friendship. In that conversation, Ashok tries to explain that he didn't mean to be mean when he said things about her 'class' and adds that he has been excitable lately. Then he says, 'Maybe this place did it. . . I've never seen such scenery. The majestic Himalayas, these silent pine trees. This sudden sunlight, sudden clouds, sudden mist! It's so unreal, like a dream world. My head was in a whirl. Everything changed inside. As if I was somebody. . . A hero, a giant. I was full of courage. I was reckless, undaunted. Tell me, a place like this fills one with strength, doesn't it?' This could serve as a summary of the entire film.



(Anima and Shankar)



(Bannerjee talks to Monisha)



(Ashok and Indranath)



(Ashok and Monisha)



(Bannerjee about to pop the question)