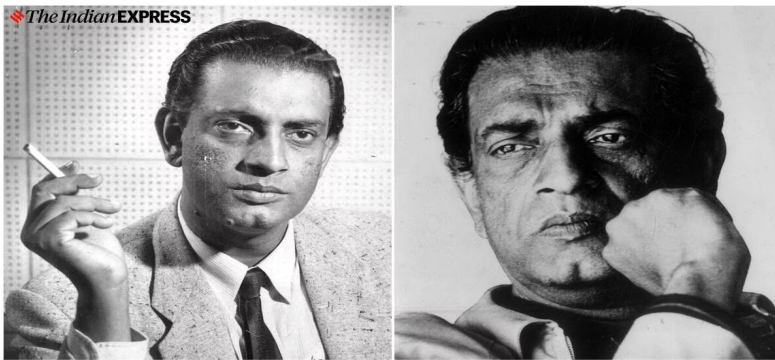


100 years of Satyajit Ray: Manikda and the little songs of his cherished road

The centenary celebrations of India's greatest filmmaker have begun in earnest. Born on this day in 1921, Satyajit Ray changed cinema with poetic realism and humanist concerns, turning the medium into an art form.

Written By Shaikh Ayaz | Mumbai |
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Satyajit Ray was born on this day in 1921 in Calcutta into a compulsively creative family. (Photo: Express archive)

Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Yasujirō Ozu, François Truffaut. Physically, these filmmakers cut a somewhat diminutive figure but rest assured, their stature in world cinema has remained taller than ever. Standing at a towering 6.4 ft, Satyajit Ray, on the other hand, was not just a giant tree of a man (to borrow an Akira Kurosawa description) but has also loomed over Indian and international screens for over six decades, his leafy shadow falling on wherever there's poetic realism and cinematic imagination.

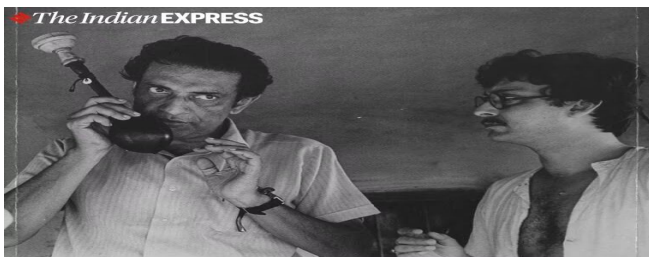
Lean and intense, Ray — who started his career in advertising — was born on this day in 1921 in Calcutta into a compulsively creative family. His grandfather and father were men of many talents. There was something of the Bengal Renaissance in their progeny too, whose range of interests extended well beyond cinema. A young Ray had grown up on Hollywood movies, so when his ad agency sent him to

London for higher training, he spent more and more of his time in the company of films and started “losing interest in advertising in the process,” he once said in an interview.

During this trip, he saw Vittorio De Sica’s *Bicycle Thieves* (1948), a neo-realist Italian masterpiece of post-War despair and was entranced by its beguiling simplicity and humanism. Back in Calcutta, he heard that Jean Renoir was in town and walked straight into the hotel where the great French filmmaker was staying to confide in his own dreams of making a movie someday. Renoir, who was location-scouting for *The River* in Calcutta at the time, encouraged the aspirant. And so began the journey of the song of the little road.

Ray’s landmark debut, *Pather Panchali* was made on a shoe-string budget in 1955 with a mostly non-professional cast. All the while, he clung on to his job for a safety net even as he shot what would become the first of the classic Apu Trilogy on weekends. The lyrical *Pather Panchali* introduced the movie-going world to the wide-eyed Apu, born into crushing poverty and desperation but who would over time grow into a bookish young man with a mind of his own and an autobiographical novel boiling in his breast.

The Apu Trilogy, comprising *Pather Panchali* (1955), *Aparajito* (1956) and *Apur Sansar* (1959), has been called a bildungsroman. And indeed, it’s a coming-of-age that traces Apu’s life, learnings and love, from his difficult but still magical childhood to itinerant adulthood. The film moves from village to city, tracking Apu’s personal predicaments, at all times lit by Ravi Shankar’s haunting sitar-and-flute score that seems so deeply embedded into the trilogy’s core as flavorful seeds in a soil.



Soumitra Chatterjee went on to collaborate with Ray on some of his greatest films. Here, Ray can be seen with Chatterjee on the set of *Ashani Sanket*. (Express photo by Nemai Ghosh)

In *Apur Sansar*, Apu is played by Soumitra Chatterjee who went on to collaborate with Ray on some of his greatest films becoming, in a sense, what Jean-Pierre Léaud aka Antoine Doinel was to François Truffaut. *Apur Sansar* has a scene in which Apu (Chatterjee) narrates a brief outline of his novel to his friend Pulu. “A village boy. Poor but sensitive. His father is a priest and he dies. The boy comes to the city. He studies. Through his education and struggles we watch as he sheds his old superstitions and fixed views. He questions everything. Yet he has imagination and sensitivity. Little things move him and bring him joy. He has greatness in him and the ability to create but he doesn’t make it. He does nothing great and remains poor. But he never turns away from life.” It perfectly sums up Apu’s arc. We can be sure that if he had written the novel of his dream, it would have been exactly like Ray’s *Apu Trilogy* — full of small, luminous joys, tremendous emotional pleasures and social power. (Ray, a typical *bhadralok*, once commented that he identified most with *Apur Sansar* out of all the three films, because Apu was by now pursuing intellectual aspirations).

Apu believes that his novel isn’t a tragedy. Yet, as *Apur Sansar* progresses, with the eponymous hero losing his wife (the ethereal Sharmila Tagore, whose initial Bollywood years had a Bengali hangover as she worked up an impressive tally with makers like Shakti Samanta, Asit Sen and Hrishikesh Mukherjee) and his failure at never writing the book, it’s hard not to think of his life as a tragedy. But the climax shows Apu reconciling with his son. Together, they set out to seek new adventures, on the little beaten down path with its rich mix of hope, wisdom, experiences, comedy and adversities. Luckily, the song of life will brighten up their journey.

The Man From Calcutta

The *Apu Trilogy* was an instant success. It marked a new era and cemented Ray’s status as an auteur. Here was a man who stuck to his roots in South Calcutta from where he crafted Bengali cinema that was truly world-class even though Hollywood would have rolled out a

red carpet for him. You might call Ray an apt ambassador for 'local can be global' ideology. A profound thinker, he imbued his films with a personal worldview. Almost all his memorable leading men were pensive poets of the soul while the ladies (Sharmila Tagore, Madhabi Mukherjee, Swatilekha Sengupta) were museums of curiosities. The Bengal of Ray's generation had a literary bent of mind. Gopal Krishna Gokhale famously said, "What Bengal thinks today, India thinks tomorrow."

Ray turned the Bengali readers into wilful viewers by inventing the cinema of tomorrow. With intellectually engaging stories that had literary value as well as aesthetic appeal he made the otherwise frivolous and frowned-upon activity of movie-going into an art form. No wonder he penned so few original screenplays and instead absorbed generously from literature, from Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay and Tagore to Munshi Premchand and Sankar. Even Henrik Ibsen. Erudite and open, Ray was not insecure about drawing inspiration from books. He once wrote that a filmmaker "may borrow his material, but he must colour it with his own experience of the medium. Then, and only then will the completed film be his own, as unmistakably as Kalidasa's Shakuntala is Kalidasa's and not Vyas's."

Women's World

A painter by training as well as temperament, Ray had a habit of sketching his mood boards which served as a script. He was known for conducting rigorous research and immersing himself in the world he was creating. And he created many disparate worlds, which suited his unquenchable curiosity and tastes. Ray always had a dedicated audience in his native West Bengal and in the intellectual circles elsewhere in India, although to many Indians it appears that he's essentially a Western phenomenon.



Pather Panchali was the first Ray movie I ever saw, and like many cinema-addicted Indians, I saw it not in India but in London,” affirms Salman Rushdie in *Imaginary Homelands*. (Photo: Express archive)

The legendary 1950s star Nargis, for instance, wasn’t exactly a fan. She berated him for selling India’s “poverty to the world.” The truth is that the Apu Trilogy had a rapturous reception in the West. One popular joke goes that many Indians encounter their first Ray either at film schools or abroad. “Pather Panchali was the first Ray movie I ever saw, and like many cinema-addicted Indians, I saw it not in India but in London,” affirms Salman Rushdie in *Imaginary Homelands*. Despite the success abroad, Apu Trilogy had a greater influence in India more than anywhere else.

In Bengal by the 1960s there was a flowering of similar naturalism and anxieties of the age, best reflected in the works of Ray’s rivals, Ritwik Ghatak, Tapan Sinha and Mrinal Sen. All were devoted to depictions of brutal social realities that held a mirror to society. Ray’s style was also replicated by Bollywood’s parallel cinema of the 1970s whose leading patron saint, Shyam Benegal, had this to say about his mentor: “If there is a single contribution of Satyajit Ray to the world of Indian cinema it would be the path he created for Indian cinema to break free from being self-referential and imitative of subjects largely lifted from Hollywood.”

The Apu Trilogy is today deemed the zenith of Indian cinema’s achievement but some of Ray’s best-loved classics came in the 1960s. More than ever, he was in total control of his vision. Based on Rabindranath Tagore’s novella *Nastanirh*, *Charulata* (1964) gave Madhabi Mukherjee the role of a lifetime as a lonely wife reinvigorated by the arrival of her husband’s charming cousin. An

unconventional take on female desire, Charulata breaks many barriers. In *Apur Sansar*, we see Apu teaching his wife Aparna (Sharmila Tagore). Incidentally, Ray's own mother had home schooled him before he was packed off to college.

In *Charulata*, Mukherjee's elegant title heroine takes tentative steps towards being a writer triggered by her very own courageous awakening, both metaphysical and sexual. Mukherjee's performance is sublime. She's able to balance emotional conflict and yearning with unflappable grace but the Indian public loves nothing more than an iconic pop culture moment. Charu's spying scenes with a gorgeous pair of opera glasses have imprinted themselves into the audience's memory. It's an iconic Ray moment — along with another image from *Mahanagar* (1963) in which Mukherjee is helped by a female colleague with a dab of lipstick. With these little gestures and motifs, Ray subtly smashes the glass ceiling. If you are planning to watch or rewatch *Charulata* try twinning it with *Ghare Baire*, from the 1980s, which again has the much-married Bimala (Swatilekha Sengupta) falling for the revolutionary allure of Soumitra Chatterjee's Sandip. Like *Mahanagar*, which puts its heroine firmly in the 'home and the world' dilemma of old-fashioned versus modern way of living, *Ghare Baire* is a classic clash of values. *Mahanagar*, *Charulata* and *Ghare Baire* are all powerfully committed to having the women ultimately find their voice. Add to that list 1960's *Devi*, which Sharmila Tagore considered her "best performance."

Varied Subjects of a Polymath

Starting his film career in 1955 until his death in 1992 at age 70, Manikda was remarkably prolific. Awarded an honorary Oscar just before he passed away, he humbly returned the favour to American cinema by singing the virtues of old Hollywood. Life had come a full circle. In fact, he was to make his ambitious sci-fi project titled *The Alien* for American market. It never took off though it was said to have inspired Steven Spielberg's *E.T: The Extra-Terrestrial*. Ray was also an author and critic who poured great felicity and insights into his writings on cinema. Averaging one film a year, he churned out

stories of all stripes — 1966's Nayak saw him team up with heartthrob Uttam Kumar opposite Sharmila Tagore in what was an engaging look at what happens when the movie world collides with ordinary life, 1969's adventurous Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne was as much for adults as children, 1970's Pratidwandi expressed middle-class angst and lastly, 1990's Ganashatru, about medical politics, stands chillingly relevant in today's pandemic times.

<https://youtu.be/xksRC4AcEzk>

Having seen the thriving feudal system in Bengal up close, he was just as interested in the debauched and fading vestiges of royalty. If 1958's Jalsaghar (starring veteran Chhabi Biswas) exposed the voluptuary hypocrisy then his only Hindi film, Shatranj Ke Khilari (1977), was the ultimate farce about the decline of Awadh. However, like a true master, Ray kept one of his best for the last. 1991's Agantuk is among his most intellectually stimulating films. In Utpal Dutt's uncle who returns to surprise his niece, we get a character so evolved and empathetic that cinema cannot handle him. The well-travelled stranger of the title is perhaps disillusioned with civilization, as author Sohini Chattopadhyay suggests in an outstanding essay from last year. But he plays along, even as he finds the great human circus amusing. At first, everyone is out to prove him as an imposter. In reality, he is nothing but a harmless, world-weary philosopher who has seen much suffering and is further heartbroken by the growing nuclear threat that can inflict apocalypse with the push of a button. Perhaps, it's just Ray talking at the very end of his life. The master polymath at last finding joy in tribal beauty and simplicity. Before departing for good, Dutt's character leaves behind a gift for his beloved niece. Satyajit Ray has bequeathed us something more precious than a mere gift — he has given us timeless objets d'art.

Reference:

<https://www.google.com/amp/s/indianexpress.com/article/entertainment/regional/100-years-of-satyajit-ray-manikda-and-the-little-songs-of-his-cherished-road-7298639/lite/>