

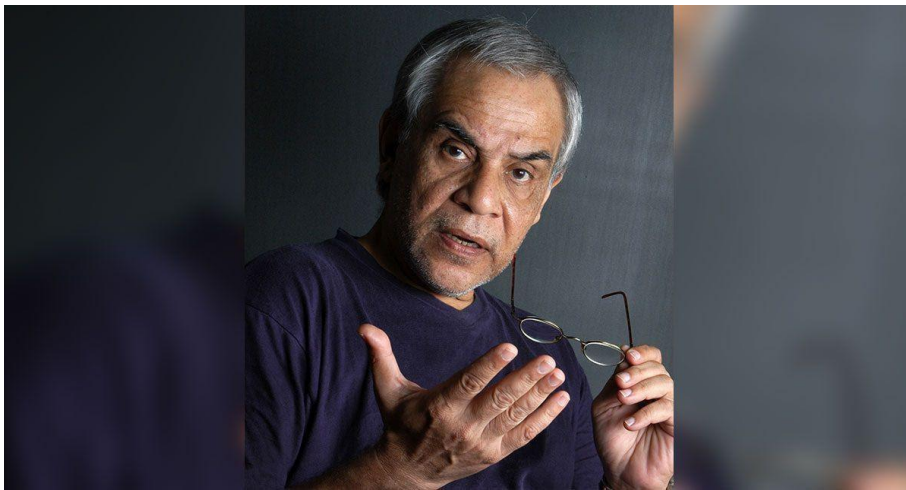
ON THE ACTOR'S TRAIL

Dhritiman Chaterji interview: ‘Too much analysing is like gravitating towards death’

The acclaimed actor headlines ‘Professor Shonku O El Dorado’, which is based on the literary character created by Satyajit Ray.

Chandrima Pal

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Dhritiman Chaterji

One of Bengali cinema’s most iconic actors leads a quiet life in Goa, surfacing in Kolkata or Mumbai when he sees fit. Dhritiman Chaterji made an impactful debut in 1970 with Satyajit Ray’s *Pratidwandi* and later starred in Ray’s *Ganashatru* and *Agantuk*. Chaterji’s latest movie also has a Ray connection: he plays Professor Shonku, the literary character created by Ray in 1965. In *Professor Shonku O El Dorado*, directed by Satyajit Ray’s son Sandip Ray, the brilliant and eccentric scientist travels to Brazil to look for the mythical city of gold. The movie will be released around Christmas.

Apart from Ray, Chaterji has worked with Mrinal Sen (*Padatik*, *Akaler Shandhaney*) and Aparna Sen (*36, Chowringhee Lane*, *15 Park Avenue*) as well as appeared in Hindi films (including *Black*, *Kahaani* and *Pink*). In a conversation with *Scroll.in*, the 74-year-old actor

spoke about his choice of scripts, his collaborations and his political views.

You have said that you never wanted a career in acting and worked with Satyajit Ray and Mrinal Sen only to understand their craft better. How did your journey pan out?

The main impetus in working with Satyajit Ray and then with Mrinal Sen was getting closer to people I revered. I was thrilled to be in the films that they did, but I didn't see it at that point of time as a diving board into an acting career. I was starting another career in advertising and happened to be moderately successful at that. I had that luxury of being able to pick and choose, which was important to me because at that time, I just could not see myself as part of what was the mainstream then.

Later, it sort of changed. Actors get labelled. So there was this 'angry, young rebel, anti-establishment' tag that I got labelled with. As I got more and more into acting, I found it interesting to try various sorts of characterisations.



Dhritiman Chatterji in Professor Shonku O El Dorado (2019). Courtesy SVF.

How do you choose your projects now?

My inclinations at one point were not only artistic, but also ideological. But then I discovered the excitement of doing something new and playing a different range, which took me to the Hindi mainstream with Black and so forth.

As far as picking and choosing is concerned, at one point it used to be the director and co-actors that mattered. I got this reputation for being very choosy, which was true. But with experience, I asked myself, am I going to be happy getting up every morning and going to work or am I going to feel I wish the shoot gets cancelled today?

Now I tend to trust that instinct more and more. I still apply the filters of my political and ideological beliefs, but I am not as choosy as earlier. What matters to me most is whether I am going to enjoy it, whether it is going to challenge me as an actor, is worth engaging with.

You have acted in political films. You continue to engage with political conversations on social media. Some of your peers, on the other hand, have made their peace with the establishment. How do you negotiate this environment?

It is not easy, but I persist. I will give you an example. I was offered a commercial. The script was very good and as an actor I would have enjoyed it, but I said sorry. Because the advertising agency represented a company that I thought was toxic. It was possible to say oh, I am just a professional. But there are things that I will not do.

As far as the political scenario is concerned, I see more politically engaged cinema in Marathi and Malayalam and a deeper engagement with grassroots issues. Unfortunately, Bengali cinema seems to be skirting contemporary realities.

The imminent dangers of direct engagement are sometimes overstated. There is going to be trolling, as we have seen in Naseeruddin Shah's case. Personally, I don't have that high a profile. When I go on social media, it is to express my political views or share links with those who are in my network and are more or less alike. That said, I know a number of people who are politically much more active than I am. After Kashmir, they may have withdrawn from social media, but I do not for a moment believe that they have

withdrawn from political activism. If anything, their work has intensified. But they find it strategic to use other media.

I do believe that politically, socially we are going through very dark times. This can lead to a lot of other discussions.

You can ask how relevant this is to cinema. I remember long, long ago Mrinal Sen told me, he was talking to Cesare Zavattini – one of the theorists of neo-realism and a member of the Italian communist party – and he told Sen that cinema has never changed anything. If you are at a film festival in Kolkata or Mumbai, you are in la-la land. It's all very international, very glamorous. But there is a disconnect. This is not to blame anybody, but I suppose people have to make their personal kind of rationalisation.

https://youtu.be/lf_lKOhnNzw

Dhritiman Chatterji on Padatik.

How would you compare the films of Satyajit Ray and Mrinal Sen?

Ideologically, we all know what Satyajit Ray was like. He was liberal, secular, and a socialist. He was a product of that time and one can say in a broad sense that he was a Nehruvian.

We also know that he was a practical man. He told me once, I feel a great responsibility towards my producers. He also said, my primary audience is the Bengali middle class, the literate audience. I am not making films for radicals. Which does not mean that I have to pander to that audience. I am conscious about the fact that the audience will see my cinema at a surface level. But there are people who will pick up signals and dig deeper. So my films have to keep both kinds of audiences in mind.

Mrinal Sen was a completely different kind of person. Much more radical, impulsive and much more dependent on improvisation. One of my favourite films with him, Akaler Shandhaney, started from a fragment of a story. Even when shooting, I remember at least a couple

of scenes between Smita Patil and myself where she was not comfortable in Bangla and we improvised after the camera started rolling. The first film I made with Sen, Padatik, was one where right till the end nobody, not even Sen himself, knew how the film would end.

So temperamentally, they were very different people and that shows in their cinema.

Satyajit Ray's 'Pratidwandi' is one of his most political works. You have said how as a fresh graduate with sharp political views, you did not really have to act in a film that deals with the struggles of a jobless graduate. Is that why Siddhartha continues to resonate?

I do feel that if Pratidwandi or any of Mrinal Sen's Calcutta films were exhibited today, they would attract huge audiences. Because they are so contemporary.

Long after I had started working with Ray, I realised how he would meet his actors, especially the new ones, after he had done the character sketches. He would then chat them up, talking about their family, their hobbies – nothing about films. It was only after this that he would give flesh and blood to the characters, write the final dialogue. Which is why they would seem so natural.

Siddhartha worked not only because I was a child of the times, but also because there was a certain method in Ray's casting.



Dhritiman Chatterji in Pratidwandi (1970). Courtesy Priya Films.

For your latest movie ‘Professor Shonku O El Dorado’, what are the things you had to do the first time?

I needed to roll back a bit. Normally for any film project, my primary responsibility is to be with the screenplay and the director’s vision. There have been instances where I have done films based on literary properties or characters. And quite deliberately, I choose not to go back to the original material so that there is no disconnect. But in this case, I had to change that approach.

The Shonku series is written in a diary form. While reading the stories, I wasn’t able to get a hold of Shonku as a person. The only clue I had were the sketches Satyajit Ray did for the magazine where it was serialised. I only had an inkling of his relationship with his father and the values he imbibed from him. It gave me an idea as to why such a brilliant scientist with an international reputation chose to remain reclusive.

This was the first time I did much more reading, thinking, talking to Sandip Ray than I normally do. I do not believe in things that are popular these days, like being in a workshop and analysing. Too much analysing is like gravitating towards death.

The movie aims to reach a wide audience.

The people who discovered the Shonku stories are now 50 plus. With no disrespect to anybody, they tend to be acutely proud and possessive of their culture. There is going to be another demographic that is younger, who do not really know the stories, and will see the film as a contemporary science fiction film with a lot of computer graphics. If negative criticism comes from an older demographic, don’t take it to heart.

https://youtu.be/DpVE8cvq_ik

Professor Shonku O El Dorado (2019).

You have had a considerable fan following, especially among women. How aware were you about your stardom?

Well, I knew about it. Fortunately or unfortunately, there was no direct contact between fans and their idols the way we see it now. So there were the occasional phone calls maybe, and the odd letters. But since I was never really into films because of the possible fame or adulation, it never mattered to me.

Thankfully, my life in Goa affords me that privacy. I am not a sociable person that way. I don't really like the idea of being accosted in public places and pose for selfies. I do it occasionally, but I like to keep away from the glare at all times.

Streaming has led to a more intimate relationship with cinema. Do digital platforms excite you as an actor?

The various possibilities that are emerging do excite me a great deal. But then again, there is an upside and a downside. The upside to digital platforms and watching a creative on a phone is liberation, democratisation, emancipation. The downside is the worry of the critical eye getting dimmed. We either grew up with the large screen or created for the large screen. We got to know things like image resolution, depth of field, the authenticity of colours. When you are creating something for the tiny little screen, these markers are no longer very important. So the way of perceiving and seeing is getting dimmed or is changing.

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Reference:

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