

## DETECTIVE FICTION

**Feluda is one of Satyajit Ray's greatest creations but is he too brilliant for the movies?**

Although Ray's version of 'Sonar Kella' is a fan favourite, 'Joi Baba Felunath' points to the perils of adaptation.

**Nandini Ramnath**

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Soumitra Chatterjee in *Joi Baba Felunath* (1979) | RD Bansal Productions

Satyajit Ray's novel *The Mystery of the Elephant God* begins with a peek into its creator's precise mind. The private detective Feluda berates the hyperbole-prone novelist Jatayu for describing the Durga puja celebrations in Varanasi as "spectacular".

The word is banal and doesn't explain why the event is important, Feluda tells Jatayu. When Jatayu elaborates, "I still remember my eyes and ears being dazzled by what I saw," Feluda finally approves. This description appeals to the senses, he says.

Ray adapted the book into a movie in 1979. *Joi Baba Felunath* was Ray's second Feluda adaptation after *Sonar Kella*. In both films, the same set of actors played the casually sexy sleuth, his loyal cousin and sidekick Topshe and their hilarious pulp fiction writer friend Jatayu. Giving Soumitra Chatterjee, Siddhartha Chatterjee and Santosh Dutta

company in *Joi Baba Felunath* was Utpal Dutt as the sinister Maganlal Meghraj.

The Bengali-language movie, which is being streamed on Mubi India, is entertaining enough. Yet, it underscores the conundrum of a brilliant director unable to keep up with his brilliant writing. Ray cut out the plot points that were possibly difficult to film and changed the ending, weakening the mystery in the process.

The Feluda stories have been turned into television shows, telefilms, radio plays and full-length features, many of them directed by Ray's son, Sandip Ray. Feluda nostalgia ensures that there will always be takers for adaptations, whatever their quality.

The growing distance between the period in which the fiction was written and the present means that any version is bound to spark off a debate. Another obstacle is Feluda himself – a timeless character who is also a creature of his times.

### **The Varanasi vanishing**

*The Mystery of the Elephant God* is one of the most riveting Feluda stories. The plot is set in Varanasi and revolves around a missing Ganesha idol, a precocious boy, a dubious guru and a Moriarty-like adversary.

The plot is complex without being needlessly complicated. The descriptions of Varanasi, from the smells of the street to the types of houses and lodges, are highly evocative. The characters are marvellously sketched, with the boy Ruku taking his place among Ray's most endearing child characters.



Joi Baba Felunath (1979). Courtesy RD Bansal Productions.

However, some of the novel's important moments – a knife-throwing act aimed at scaring Jatayu, the identity of the mysterious guru – don't quite carry over to the screen. Besides, Soumitra Chatterjee, who was 44 at the time, was already a bit too long in the tooth to be playing the perennially youthful and fleet Feluda.

Ray himself was 58 when he made *Joi Baba Felunath*. Some of his greatest achievements were already behind him – the Apu trilogy, Jalsaghar, Devi, Charulata, Nayak, the Calcutta triptych.

Alongside putting Indian cinema on the world map, Ray had been ridiculously prolific in other fields, notably Bengali literature. Between the 1960s and 1992 (the year of his demise), Ray churned out short stories and novels on a staggering range of subjects. These include yarns about ghosts, science fiction, the adventures of the genius inventor Professor Shonku, and 35 Feluda stories and novels. Apart from establishing Ray's talents beyond direction, the fiction provided a steady pipeline of income, unlike the movies.

### **The mystery of the prolific filmmaker**

The first Feluda story, *Danger in Darjeeling*, appeared in 1965, a decade after Ray's debut feature *Pather Panchali*. The Feluda

mysteries, like the rest of Ray's writing, marched in lock-step with his films.

The cinema and the fiction were aimed at different recipients, but there were stylistic similarities too. The Feluda adventures have the same crispness and humble beauty of Ray's movies. They are written like screenplays, with vivid scene-setting, detailed portraiture and unpredictable plots.

In Feluda's admonishment to Jatayu, one can hear Ray's famous baritone and echoes of his approach to his films: the whittling away of flab and needless adornment to reveal the soul of the subject matter, the ability to reveal truth and wonderment through striking images rather than expository dialogue, the preference for directness over vagueness.

The Feluda tales spoke to the average Bengali reader's love for adventure and travel, Sagnik Chatterjee pointed out in his 2017 documentary *Feluda: 50 Years of Ray's Detective*. The mysteries have "hidden speed" and achieve maximum effect with minimal language, a fan told Chatterjee.

[https://youtu.be/STObI\\_B63tA](https://youtu.be/STObI_B63tA)

Feluda: 50 Years of Ray's Detective (2017).

Ray churned out his fiction at an astonishing pace, alongside grappling with the unending headaches involved in filmmaking and in between punishing schedules interrupted by crippling power cuts. In Chatterjee's documentary, Sandip Ray recalls that his father would sometimes complete a Feluda story within a day or even half a day. Ray had to be pushed to eat or bathe when he was putting pen to paper, Sandip Ray told Chatterjee.

*Danger in Darjeeling* was published in the year Ray's *Kapurush Mahapurush* was released and *Nayak*, Ray's first collaboration with movie star Uttam Kumar, was being prepped.

Soon after *Nayak*, Ray began work on *Chiriyakhana*, a murder mystery also starring Uttam Kumar and featuring Saradindu Bandopadhyay's detective Byomkesh Bakshy.

“All though the shooting of *Chiriyakhana*, Babu [Sandip Ray] kept pestering his father to make a film for children,” Ray’s wife Bijoya Ray wrote in her memoir *Manik & I*. “His father couldn’t but give in to his son’s request.”

That film was the musical comedy *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne*, based on a story by Ray’s grandfather Upendrakishore Ray Chowdhury – a movie meant for children that achieved a cross-generation appeal.

### **The saga of the boy and the camels**

In 1974, Ray returned to the zone of the children’s film with *Sonar Kella*, based on his novel of the same name. *Sonar Kella* is a rollicking adventure revolving around a boy who can see his past life, hidden treasure in Jaisalmer, a parapsychologist, a pair of crooks and camels.

Sagnik Chatterjee revisited the shooting locations in *Sonar Kella* and *Joi Baba Felunath* for his documentary. *Sonar Kella*’s popularity led to scores of Bengali tourists in later years, Chatterjee noted. In Jaisalmer, he visited Mukul Stone Shop, named after the young boy who believes he has been reborn.

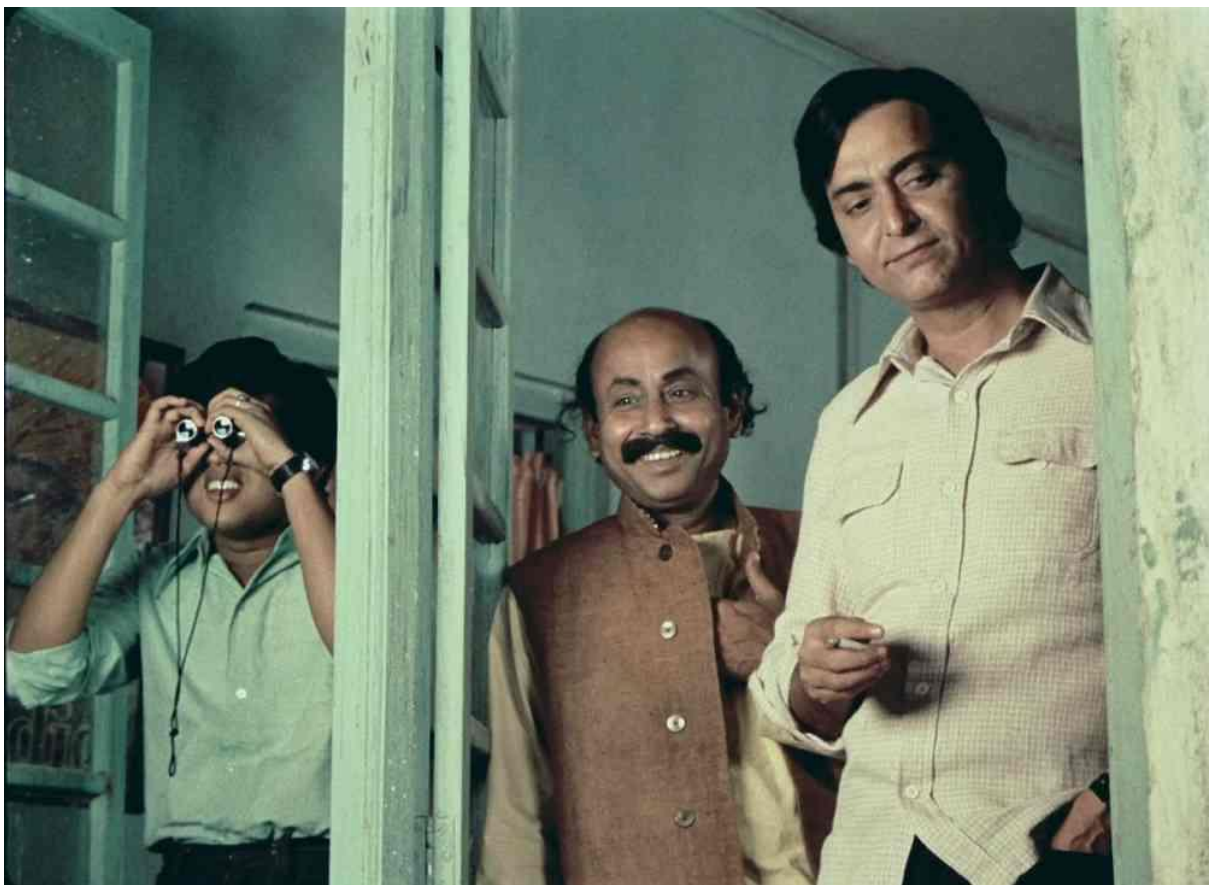


Soumitra Chatterjee in *Sonar Kella* (1974). Courtesy Government of West Bengal.

Sandwiched between the drought-themed *Ashani Sanket* (1973) and the dark and despairing *Jana Aranya* (1975), *Sonar Kella* was a box office draw, making a second Feluda adaptation inevitable.

However, *Joi Baba Felunath*'s drawbacks point to the challenges of adapting Feluda for the screen, even when their creator is in charge. Working at his usual pace – a film or a documentary a year, sometimes two – even Ray could not transport the expertly plotted and travel-heavy nature of his Feluda adventures onto the screen.

Ray decided against any more Feluda films after the death in 1988 of Santosh Dutta, who indelibly played Jatayu in *Sonar Kella* and *Joi Baba Felunath*. Sandip Ray took on the mantle of keeping the Feluda franchise alive. In 1986, Sandip Ray directed the Hindi-language *Kissa Kathmandu Ka* for Doordarshan. In a bizarre casting choice, Shashi Kapoor, who was pushing 50 at the time, played Feluda.



*Joi Baba Felunath* (1979). Courtesy RD Bansal Productions.

### **The case of the many Feludas**

Between 1995 and 1999, Sandip Ray adapted the Feluda stories into a series of serviceable television films. Sabyasachi Chakraborty, Saswata Chatterjee and Bibhu Bhattacharya played Feluda, Topshe and Jatayu respectively.

In 2003, Sandip Ray made his first Feluda movie, based on *Bandits in Bombay*. Five more film adaptations followed. A visibly aging

Sabyasachi Chakraborty continued in the lead role, while Parambrata Chatterjee and later Saheb Bhattacharya stepped in as Topshe.

The new set of movies remained staunchly loyal to Satyajit Ray's vision, plotting and dialogue. If modern conveniences were included at all, they played no role in advancing the investigation. For instance, although cellphones showed up in the later productions as a mode of communication between characters, Feluda continued to rely on his observation and problem-solving skills.

In 2014, in an attempt to reboot the franchise with more age-appropriate actors, Sandip Ray cast Bengali heartthrob Abir Chatterjee as Feluda in *Badshahi Angti (The Emperor's Ring)*. Satyajit Ray's first novel in the Feluda series revolves around a ring that originally belonged to Mughal emperor Aurangzeb and has gone missing in Lucknow.

*Badshahi Angti* felt like a movie, rather than a telefilm dumped on the big screen. Yet, this production turned out to be Abir Chatterjee's only appearance as Feluda. After Chatterjee signed up for a series of Byomkesh Bakshi adaptations, Sandip Ray correctly reasoned that the actor couldn't play two iconic and rival Bengali sleuths at the same time.

<https://youtu.be/ALJBz0WKWIQ>

Badshahi Angti (2014).

### **The boy who never grew up**

Reports of new Feluda films and possible reboots, both by Sandip Ray, and other directors, emerge every now and then. These include a proposed cross-over between Feluda and Shonku, directed by Sandip Ray.

A contemporary take on Feluda, in the vein of the British television series *Sherlock*, starring Benedict Cumberbatch, runs the risk of ruining the *raison d'être* of the source material. If Ray's drum-tight writing is to be dragged into the present, his sleuth will cease to be a reliable barometer of Bengali middle-class society between the mid-1960s and the early 1990s.

Part of the problem is the intended target audience. The penultimate Feluda case *The Mystery of Nayan* communicates Ray's thoughts on the matter through his detective.

Feluda reminds readers that the cases recorded by Topshe are meant for teenagers, which is why they don't have adult-friendly elements. "The real problem is that it is not just children who read his stories," Feluda grumbles. "What he writes is read by parents, uncles, aunts, grandparents, and dozens of other adults in a child's family. Each one of them has a particular taste and a particular requirement. How on earth can all of them be satisfied?"

The sleuth solves such young adolescent-friendly crimes as theft, murder, impersonation, fraud and the occasional drug-related offence. The investigations are intricate but the crimes are simple, innocent even.

Several stories have a geeky, boy-scout quality, with information on railway time tables and Indian history and art. As a belated concession to the Flower Power decades, hippies and hallucinogenic substances feature in stories set in exotic locations, such as *The Criminals of Kathmandu* (1980) and *Murder in the Mountains* (1986).

The absence of female characters and affairs of the heart further lend the stories their boyish, pre-pubescent purity. No woman infiltrates Feluda's world or distracts him from his investigations. Although frequently described by Topshe as dashing and handsome, the only female heartbeat that skips when Feluda enters a room belongs to the reader.

### **The chronicle of Kolkata**

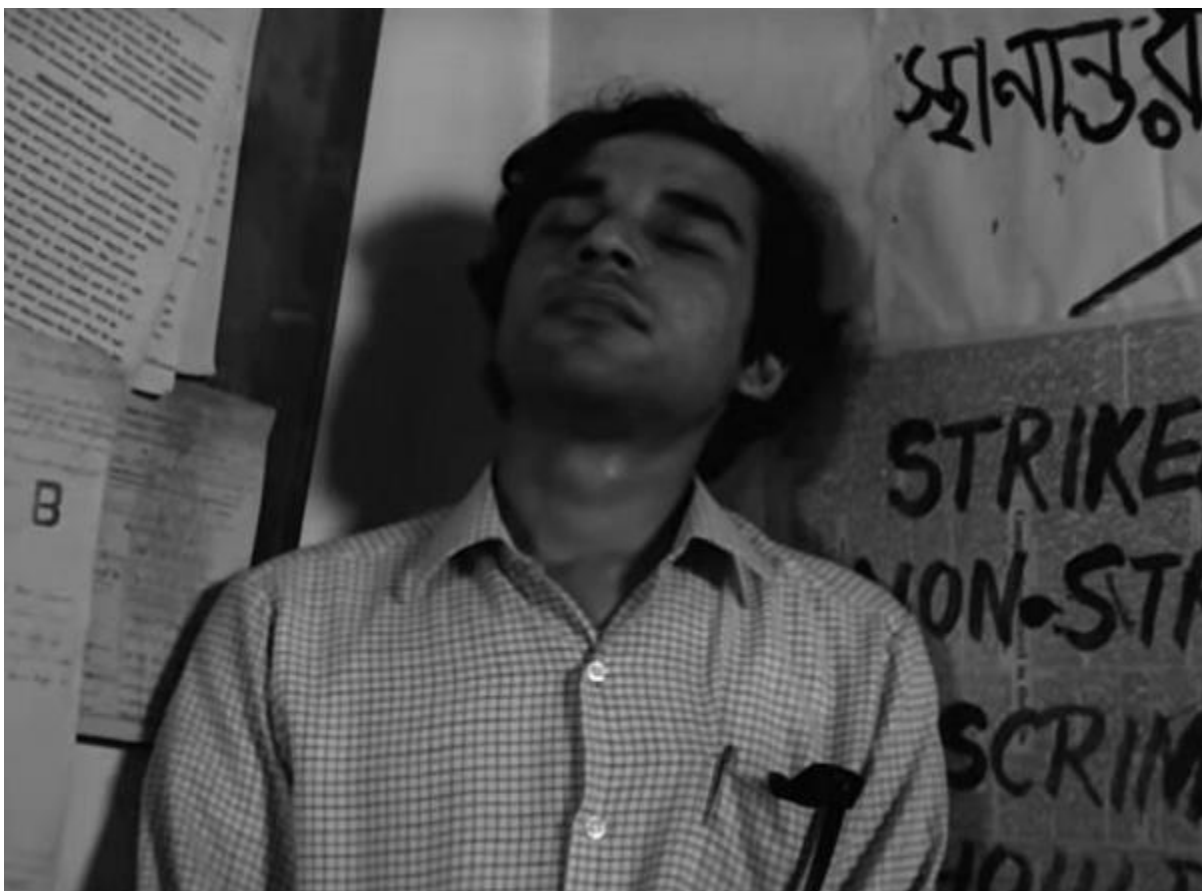
The Feluda stories were hand-written by Ray, in the analogue age before cellphones and the internet. They hark back to a pre-liberalised Kolkata and a similarly cocooned India, and bear witness to a time before the rupture wrought by the changes in the Indian economy after 1991. They speak of a middle-class existence characterised by an unhurried pace, relatively few consumer goods and largely domestic travel.



This was the period of fixed landline phones, a single national broadcaster and government-run radio stations. Feluda got his first television set in *Murder in the Mountains*, written in 1986.

On the page, at least, Kolkata was still a mostly joyful place, filled with simple pleasures (dalmuth and kachoris), easily navigable neighbourhoods and local crimes. Information about anything under the sun could be readily obtained from Feluda's associate Uncle Sidhu, a human Google before the search engine was invented.

The stories poured of Ray even as he shifted gears as a filmmaker, and even as the city he adored underwent upheaval.



Dhritiman Chatterji in *Pratidwandi* (1971). Courtesy Priya Films.

### **The shapeshifting director**

By the mid-1960s, Ray was both at the peak of his talent and at the crossroads. Some of his frequent collaborators had either moved away or were in the process of doing so. Cinematographer Subrata Mitra, who had shot all of Ray's films from *Pather Panchali* onwards, didn't work with Ray after *Nayak*. Production designer Bansi Chandragupta, whose ability to create verisimilitude made him one of Ray's most

important creative partners, moved to Mumbai and Hindi films in the early 1970s.

The themes of Ray's films had changed too. The movies that followed *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne – Aranyer Din Ratri*, *Pratidwandi*, *Seemabaddha*, *Jana Aranya* – indicated that Ray was responding to the political tumult in Kolkata and the rest of India. He had been criticised for retreating into a more manageable past with his period dramas, but the films made in the late 1960s and 1970s suggest otherwise.

The Feluda fiction appeared to provide its creator an escape from the headaches of filmmaking as well as the demise of calm and sureties in Kolkata. In the parallel Feluverse, neat endings were possible and order was always restored.

In 1983, Ray had his first heart attack. His health problems slowed him down tremendously. He made his subsequent movies against medical advice, often with an ambulance on standby.

Even as Ray's cinematic output wavered in later years, the Feluda stories kept coming. The master had slowed down but Feluda didn't stop living up to Jatayu's honorary title for him – ABCD, or Asia's Best Crime Detector.

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