

BOOK EXCERPT

Fun, camels and greed control: Soumitra Chatterjee recalls the shoot of Satyajit Ray's 'Sonar Kella'

Edited excerpts from the acting legend's memoir about his lengthy collaboration with the master director.

Soumitra Chatterjee

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

After *Ashani Sanket* all of us began work on the wonderfully joyous film *Sonar Kella*. Manik-da informed me that I would have to play Felu, a character in a series of detective stories that he had himself written.

As far as I can recollect, Felu-da was introduced to the world when the children's magazine *Sandesh* was relaunched in its new phase. Felu Mittir and his team made their appearance in Manik-da's imagination when he sat down to write for the magazine. Like everyone else, I too read the stories eagerly when they were published. I had liked *Badshahi Angti* (The Royal Ring), the first mystery novel featuring Felu-da, very much indeed. I particularly enjoyed the business of flinging chilli powder in the adversary's eyes and escaping towards the end of the

novel. There were many discussions over *Badshahi Angti*, but Manik-da had probably not yet thought of making a film with a Felu story.

However, since Manik-da didn't say anything specifically, I cannot be certain whether he had thought of filming Felu at this stage. But I had, and I kept thinking about it. The reason for this was the intrinsic appeal of the Felu stories. The story was so well laid out, the settings and twists and turns (all following the logic of the narrative), the different characters and their dialogue were all so perfect that it felt as though the writer had consciously set the process of writing the screenplay into motion — all that was left was to actually write it. Even the travels were presented so alluringly that the reader and his suitcase seemed to join Topshe, Lalmohanbabu and Felu Mittir on their journeys.



Sonar Kella (1974). Courtesy Satyajit Ray Archives and Ray Estate.

In addition to Felu's behaviour and gestures, what I tried to remember constantly was that Felu was a thinking man. I simply couldn't afford to forget his cerebral ways. A sharply intelligent person is trying to use incisive analysis to solve a mystery — I was conscious of the fact that my expression had to bring this out. I had attempted to maintain a continuity of this expression right through the film. I had specifically thought of using my eyes, eyebrows and a frown. An intelligent

person's glance grow sharper when needed. Perhaps there are clever people who can conceal this — I cannot say. I believe that in certain situations a pair of bright, lively (at times restless) and articulate eyes signal that deep thoughts are running through the mind. This was what I had tried to use in Felu's case, and Manik-da had not objected. Audiences and Manik-da would have judged how successful I was — I cannot comment on this.

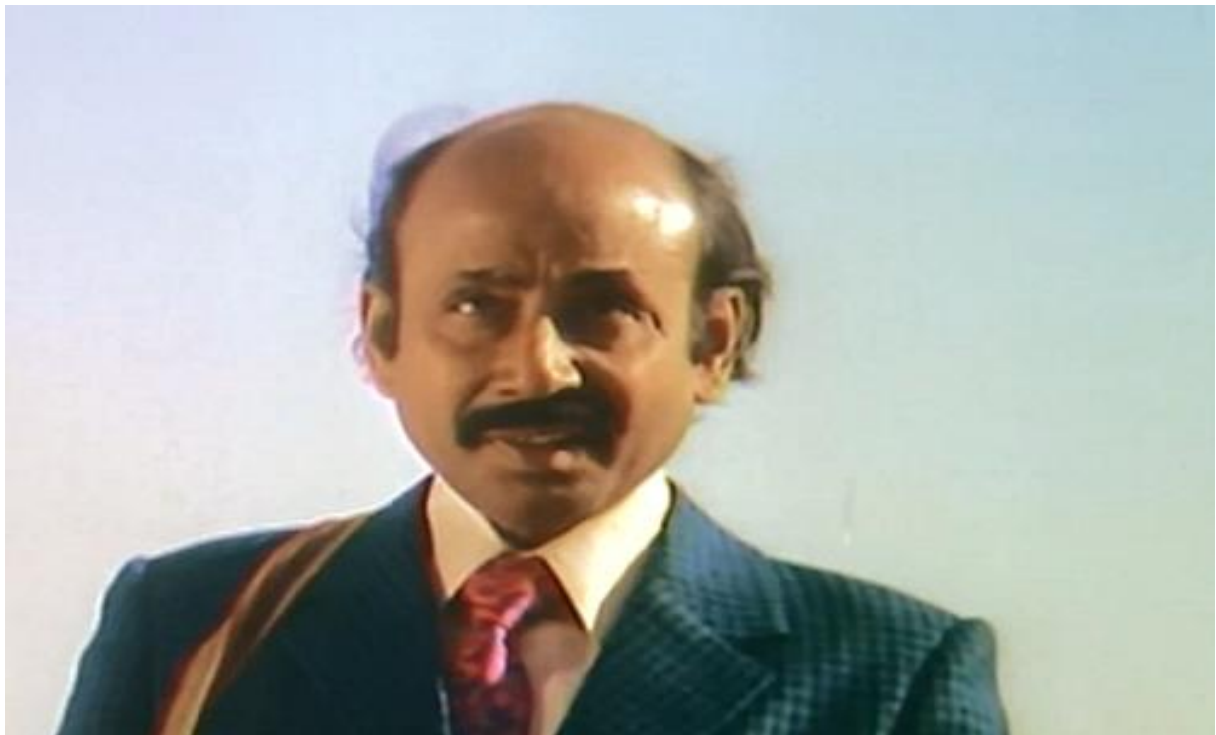
In this context I am reminded of a specific scene in *Sonar Kella*, where Felu accepts Dr Hazra's card, whereupon thoughts of whether the doctor spelt his name with a 'j' or a 'z' begin to crowd his mind. I am sitting in a low chair, the card lying on a table in front of me. I am thinking with my hand on my brow, the position of the hand signalling that I was analysing things. When you're working with an extraordinary director, even a tiny instruction at a critical juncture can transform the very dimension of the performance. Rehearsals were underway when Manik-da slipped in an instruction — 'At this point drum your fingers on your forehead, Soumitra, as though you're playing a musical instrument.' His instruction flashed like a bolt of lightning in my head and the Felu's expression acquired an extra dimension. There's also an instance of the use of the eyes in a scene that takes place soon after this one, with a worried Felu pacing up and down while the camera follows him.



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

Santosh-da's performance as Jatayu will remain an immortal asset of Bengali cinema. When Sandip Roy later made TV films in Hindi with the Felu stories, I discussed this with Manik-da. After we had watched the first episode, he said, 'No, without you and Santosh, Bengalis will not take this well. They won't accept this version.'

There are probably very few detective stories featuring a jovial real-life writer of detective stories. Jatayu's manner of speaking was a source of enjoyment to everyone, from young boys and girls to old men and women. Jatayu was constantly in search of the title of his next thriller. His anxious conversation always included Hindi and English words, pronounced in his unique way. When agitated, he used portmanteau words in his haste, such as 'hyanes', combining the Bangla 'hyan' with the English 'yes'. Only he could have asked a question like 'Kanta ki era bechhe khaaye?' when told that camels primarily eat 'kantagaachh' or thorny cactus plants. Felu, even Topshe, frequently correct the innumerable mistakes that Lalmohan-babu makes. But the ability to spring a surprise is not one-way — once in a while Lalmohan-babu can even startle Felu Mittir, such as when he says, 'Did you know Rammohan Roy's grandson owned a circus?' Jatayu had this kind of dialogue too.



Santosh Dutta in *Sonar Kella* (1974). Courtesy Government of West Bengal.

The unusual free-hand exercises that Manik-da depicted in *Sonar Kella* had to be shown in the interest of the film, but in real life

Santoshda was an extremely fit man, who exercised regularly — which was quite natural for a professional actor. Santosh-da was usually in very good health, with fitness levels matching those of athletes of his age. Let me inform those who can recollect the scene shot at Lathi station that the manner in which Santosh-da stretched his limbs was an indirect display of his physical fitness. Making such funny movements smoothly is impossible unless one exercises regularly. None of us had ever ridden on the back of a camel before we shot for *Sonar Kella*. The rhythmic gait of the camel was not familiar to us, and it was true that the undulating movements of its body were new as well. But whatever little apprehension we might have felt was far outweighed by the fun of it all. That Lalmohan-babu appeared close to tears was nothing but a reflection of Manikda's grip on reality and Santosh-da's acting prowess.

Besides the older characters, there were several young people in *Sonar Kella* too, with Mukul being one of the principal figures. The role of Mukul was played by master Kushal Chakraborty. A very clever and lively boy, whose company all of us enjoyed. Let's say we were returning to the hotel after a day's work, barely able to drag ourselves along in fatigue. But master Kushal was bursting with curiosity about everything — the variety of his questions was endless. We answered some of his queries, responding to the rest with, 'Later, OK?' and so on. But it was different with Manik-da, for he was a genuine friend of children.

Many people have been curious about the effectiveness with which Manik-da could extract wonderful performances from children and young actors. There was only one secret to this — he never thought of children as children, giving them as much importance as adults, and mingling with them as though he was one of them. As a result they were quick to make friends with him.



Kushal Chakraborty in *Sonar Kella* (1974). Courtesy Government of West Bengal.

Being in the company of the director Satyajit Ray, a man of extraordinary taste, offered constant opportunities for learning. Take the time we were driving through the extensive desert, in the scene where Mandar Bose has left shards of glass on the road to prevent Felu Mittir & Co. from progressing further. Manik-da shot a beautiful scene at the spot where the car tyre was punctured, but it was left out of the film eventually. He had shot it with great care, including the sand, cactus and sunlight on the desert — a conversation between Felu, Topshe and Jatayu while the punctured tyre is being repaired.

But later, when the scene seemed unnecessary to the demands of the screenplay, Manik-da cut it out ruthlessly on the editing table. I was extremely surprised at this. Manik-da used to regard his art with incredible attention and integrity. It didn't take him a moment to leave out such a wonderful scene simply because he felt it was unnecessary, like flab on the screenplay. This was a very valuable lesson – how to control your greed as a director.

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