

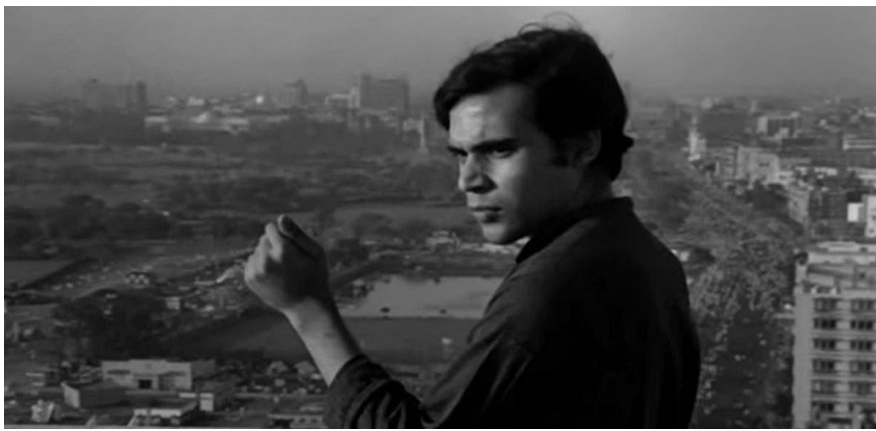
TALKING FILMS

In Satyajit Ray's 'Pratidwandi', a 'very contemporary' hunt for work and meaning

Acclaimed actor Dhritiman Chatterji tells 'Scroll.in' about playing the young and restless Siddhartha in the 1971 classic.

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Dhritiman Chatterji in Pratidwandi (1971) | Priya Films

A sense of finality marks Satyajit Ray's early Bengali films, the feeling of an impeccably arranged piece of music or a poem perfect down to the last syllable. But by the 1960s, Ray's cinema had started to reflect the social and political ferment that bubbled around the filmmaker in his native Kolkata. Mahanagar (1963), about a housewife who enters the workplace causing domestic turmoil, Nayak (1966), starring Uttam Kumar as a troubled movie star and Aranyer Din Ratri (1969), about a group of friends who head out for adventure and encounter misadventure instead, diverged from the previous productions. They explored doubt, ambiguity, disquiet and the disappearance of moral sureties.

The tensions spilled over in Pratidwandi, made in 1971 and adapted from a novel by Sunil Gangopadhyay. Ray vividly crystallised the dilemma between the political and the personal through the story of

Siddhartha, an unemployed graduate who finds himself a reluctant combatant in an undeclared war.

Unable to leap into the radical Left movement that surrounds him but equally unwilling to succumb to consumerist impulses, Siddhartha tries to balance his Brahminical morality with the new values of a city that is spinning in all directions. Siddhartha's restlessness and nervous energy find expression through the storytelling idiom, which includes jittery handheld camerawork, tense close-ups and several scenes of Siddhartha wandering from one place to the next. As he trudges through the city's streets, bars, coffee houses and brothels looking for work and meaning, Siddhartha mirrors some of the inchoate anger, chaos and rupture that Kolkata faced in the seething seventies.

In one of the movie's most well-regarded scenes, Siddhartha ruins a job interview by speaking his mind – the most significant event of the last decade wasn't the moon landing but the war in Vietnam, he tells a bunch of perturbed executives.

<https://youtu.be/yyBVBXTFWVs>

The interview scene in *Pratidwandi* (1971),

The narrative devices were also present in urban-centric filmmaking movements in Europe, including the French New Wave and British cinema. Siddhartha's experience with fear and loathing in Kolkata was brilliantly conveyed by Dhritiman Chatterji, who had never faced the camera before *Pratidwandi*. Chatterji's incredible performance set him on an acting career that includes films by Mrinal Sen, Aparna Sen and also Ray in his later phase. Chatterji continued his association with Ray in other ways after the director's death in 1992, appearing in films based on Ray's literary creations *Feluda* and *Professor Shonku*.

In an interview with *Scroll.in*, the 75-year-old actor revisited *Pratidwandi* and shared his views on Ray's legacy in the year of the director's birth centenary.

You were a little over 25 at the time, around the same age as Siddhartha in Pratidwandi. How did you get cast for the part?

When I was doing my postgraduate studies at the Delhi School of Economics in the mid-1960s, a group of us set up a film society called Celluloid. We wanted to talk to people like Satyajit Ray and Mrinal Sen for a journal.

Those were the days when you could knock on various doors and expect them to be opened. On one of my visits to Kolkata, I knocked on Ray's door for an interview. He was always open to requests, especially from young people.

After a while, I came back to Kolkata and was doing this and that. We were all active film society people. I heard that Ray was making this new film. A friend who was part of his extended family told me, why don't you go?

Ray had a long, long, long chat with me. I realised later why he used to chat with actors he was meeting for the first time. Everybody said that he was wonderful with newcomers and people he cast in small roles, they fit the roles perfectly.

Ray was a very keen observer. He observed the person keenly – what we call body language these days – and would incorporate all these things when he was giving the character final shape. This obviously helped new actors a lot, since they were doing things they were familiar and comfortable with.



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

Had you planned on an acting career at the time?

In those days, I was working with what was considered a blue-chip company, which manufactured metal containers. It was unheard of for a young executive in a company that still had Britishers at the top to work in cinema. It took a bit of persuasion. After the film, I moved to advertising.

My work with Ray and thereafter Mrinal Sen was because of my own interest in cinema. Seeing how these people worked was very much one of my objectives. I had no plans to take up acting as a full-time career. I knew I would be intensely uncomfortable in mainstream cinema as it was in those in days. Fortunately for me, the film became somewhat successful.

What did Ray tell you about the role itself?

He said nothing. His mode of working was that after finishing the script, he would call all the actors and crew members. He would virtually act out the script by reading the dialogue. Whatever discussions there were happened at that meeting. He wasn't given to workshops or over-analysis.

Had you read the book by Sunil Gangopadhyay on which the film is based?

I haven't read the book yet. Whenever I work in films derived from fiction or literature, I have made it a point not to read the original. My obligation is to the screenplay and the director's vision to the extent that I understand it. Going back to the book can create confusion. Besides, Ray adapted fiction to his own needs and vision.



Two vastly different urban journeys in Apur Sansar (1959) and Pratidwandi (1971).

Could you relate to Siddhartha and the milieu explored in the film?

To a large extent. I too came from an average literate middle-class Bengali family. Those were my times. I went to Presidency College in Calcutta, where I studied economics. Ray too had studied economics at Presidency.

I didn't actively participate in the politics of the time, but I was involved with college union activities. Some of my friends, who remain friends to this day, were part of the radical Left. That whole context was familiar to me.

There were differences too. I went to an English-medium school. In the interview scene, Ray wanted me to speak just the way I spoke in real life, without any attempt to use a Bengali accent.

The narrative idiom of Pratidwandi is different from Ray's previous films. What did you make of it?

A contemporary of Ray was Mrinal Sen. Mrinal da was very much into this new idiom, which had come through a bunch of French New Wave films that had been shown in Calcutta. Such techniques as jump cuts, freeze frames and directly speaking to the audience were a revelation to us.

Mrinal da dived into it straight away. I don't know if Ray wanted to be seen as more contemporary. He had started to face this kind of unspoken criticism that he was not addressing the problems of the day.

There was also a very obvious reason. Regardless of the aura in which he was wrapped, Ray was an intensely practical person when it came to his work. He once told me, I know I have an obligation to my producers. He had to make films on small budgets as quickly as he could. That's why he did a lot of the work himself.



Pratidwandi (1971): too many candidates and not enough jobs. Courtesy Priya Films.

The movie is shot mostly on real locations. There are scenes of you hanging on the footboard of a bus, walking up and down the city's streets. How closely does the film hew to actual events happening in Kolkata at the time?

That was a real bus. It wasn't hired for the shoot. It has to be said that these things were possible because it was Ray.

When we shot on Lindsay Street, Ray was following me with a handheld camera – that was the obvious thing to do. Nowadays, the street would be cordoned off, and there would vanity vans for the actors. The sequence would take two shifts, whereas he did in two hours or less.

Some people came face to face with it [political unrest] and some didn't. If you were on College Street or at the coffee house, you would keep hearing something going off in the distance. You would hear crowds running, a strike. Public transport would be stopped and you would trudge home – these things were par for the course.

Pratidwandi was made in the same year as Mrinal Sen's Interview, also a movie about an unemployed man seeking work. In 1973, you played a revolutionary in Sen's Padatik. How did these famous rivals and peers compare with one other?

I had met Mrinal Sen during the same time that I met Ray. Mrinal da was as approachable as Ray was. Ray was more reserved, whereas

Mrinal da was very outgoing and loved to chat – this Bengali thing we call adda. We faced it on the sets. The shot would be ready but Mrinal da would be busy chatting away with someone.

There was a stage when Mrinal da toyed with the idea of casting me for a film, but he said, you have just done Pratik. Also, your English is too polished for the character. We will work together later. That later was Padatik, which, in a very different way, was a very satisfying film to me, both because I was working with Mrinal da and for political reasons.

Ray, Mrinal Sen, Ritwik Ghatak, they were all part of the parallel cinema camp. Ideologically, all of them were progressive, Left and secular. Mrinal da had his own analysis of the movement, and when he spoke out about its shortcomings, he drew a lot of flak as well.

All of us were involved in one way or another. We were satisfied that we were not just engaging with cinema but also enriching the political discourse by doing whatever we were doing.

In those days, people took the trouble to use cinema for ideological reasons. Today, given the extremely silly we times we are living through, many of Mrinal da's films would be banned.

<https://vimeo.com/317750186>

Mrinal Sen's Padatik (1973).

Did you stay in touch with Ray after Pratik?

Oh yes. There was a simple device at work. The Rays had moved to a new residence with tall French windows. You had to look up and see whether the window to Ray's study was open or not. If it was open, it meant that he was there and you were welcome.

He loved talking about books, music, all sorts of things. He had friends from all walks of life. He was also given to listening, He was a very good listener.

You worked with Ray again in the 1990s in Ganashatru and his final film, Agantuk. He had been ailing for some time. Was he a changed man on the sets?

Yes, he had been very ill and had not been able to work for a quite a while before Ganashatru. A lot of his close family would have been happier if he had stopped working, but he was absolutely impatient to get back to work.

There was an ambulance on standby on the sets of Ganashatru. His cardiologist dropped in quite frequently. Since he had to do something within the four walls, as it were, he chose the Ibsen play An Enemy of the People. Also, the Rightwing Hindu revival had started just before this time in Calcutta, and this troubled him a great deal. Ray found the right vehicle with Ibsen's play.

I was, of course, delighted that I was going to work with him after a long time. I approached the role with some hesitation – it's what you would call a negative or unsympathetic character – but then I slipped right into it.

We knew he was ailing and had physically slowed down. He had to work for very limited hours. The cinematic quality of Ganashatru, its sets and camerawork, are not up to his exacting standards.

https://youtu.be/mgv68E_o6VM

The Apu trilogy.

How do you look back on Ray's legacy, especially in his centenary year?

I haven't seen a complete filmmaker like him – somebody who was in control of all aspects. It was very enriching to discuss anthropology,

literature, politics, all of that with him. If he hadn't been a filmmaker, if Pather Panchali had failed, he would have been eminent in his own right, perhaps as a writer or an illustrator.

Some of Ray's films have aged and not stood the test of time. It is also a failure of film criticism – having put him on a pedestal, critics are reluctant to dislodge him even a little bit. For instance, *Jana Aranya*, which is very dark and pessimistic, had technically aged with time. *Kanchenjunga* too, I find a little stilted now.

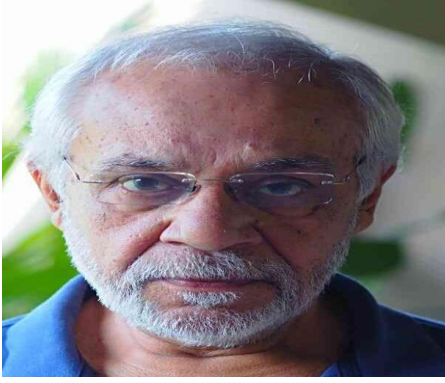
Apart from being stylistically different, Ray was always given to narratives that the average middle-class audience could grasp. I interviewed him soon before he passed away. I had broached the concept of the *rasika* in music and whether it applied to cinema. He said his primary audience was the literate middle-class Bengali. There is an upper layer of easy comprehensibility in his films. He said that just like in music, if a person wants, that person can dive deeper and find other meanings and symbols.

How has *Pratidwandi* held up for you?

I think it's very contemporary. What is wonderful is that when one goes to speak at film seminars, young people still come up and say how relevant they find the film to their own lives – the confusion, the lack of direction.

A classic film is one that you never tire of viewing. And every time you view it, you find something that surprises you or hadn't struck you earlier.

I always wondered whether, in the interview scene in *Pratidwandi*, I was guilty of being too glib or smart. Ray didn't think so.



Dhritiman Chaterji.

Reference:

<https://scroll.in/reel/990045/in-satyajit-rays-pratidwandi-a-very-contemporary-hunt-for-work-and-meaning>