

Ray, a hundred years on: This film auteur gave us a spectacular oeuvre which distilled contemporary times

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In a recent interview marking the 100th birth centenary of Satyajit Ray, three days from today, his son Sandip Ray stated that if his father was alive perhaps he would have remade the political satire HIRAK RAJAR DESHE, the sequel to his magical GOOPY GYNE BAGHA BYNE. HIRAK RAJAR DESHE was made shortly after the state of Emergency of the 1970s, and the implications of the Ray scion's statement are hard to miss. Yet, for long, Ray was critiqued by members of the leftist avant-garde for not being political enough, for not using his cinema more directly to address the raging political issues of the day.

Ray made his Calcutta trilogy, starting with PRATIDWANDI, where he viewed the world around him through the eyes of the disoriented youth of 1970s Bengal. Unemployment, lack of opportunity, the spectre of political violence and the breakdown of society and dissipation of old values were the subjects of his subsequent films. Yet, Ray continued to think of himself as a humanist and an artist par excellence in the traditions of the Bengal renaissance, a movement for liberal values and literary and artistic advancement that incorporated his own grandfather

Upendrakishore and father Sukumar Ray, the latter producing a brilliant oeuvre of limericks and satire in his short lifespan.

In keeping with the traditions of dissent and debate of the 19th century Bengal renaissance, Bengal stayed a bastion of intellectual ferment and liberal mindsets in the 20th century and way into the 21st. And the ability to question what was established, and what was sought to be established by the powers that be, has been a hallmark of the Bengali youth and older generations alike.

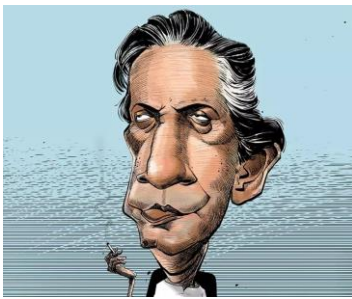


Illustration: Uday Deb

And now in 2021, when awaiting the outcome of an acrimonious election battle marred by multiple counts of violence, Bengal stands polarised and divided like never before. Divisions that have been engineered by the hand of politics, augmented and given more power by the rhetoric that politicians have parleyed and the political constituencies that they have sought to build around exclusivist identities and sectarian constituencies.

And while politicians have thrown countless barbs at one another, that Bengali hallmark of dissent, intellectual ferment and liberal politics that we might have celebrated on Ray's 100th year, has taken a beating.

Ray and dissent, somebody could ask? But wasn't he the very opposite, on the face of it at least? The perfect gentleman, well-bred and of distinguished lineage, feted by the establishment over and over again, winner of many awards and honours, national and international. Yes, Ray was the perfect bhadralok, with his gentility, erudition and art. But

Ray also dissented in a manner that was his very own. And that dissent marked his entire persona and oeuvre as the country's most noted filmmaker.

Ray gave up a flourishing career as an advertising professional to pursue his dream of making films. He funded his first film out of his own resources, used unknown faces and children. He stepped out of the established studio milieu of 1950s Calcutta and shot *Pather Panchali* in a village close to the city. He dissented when he refused to change the film's ending to make it more a part of the developmental narrative of the post-Independence nation, as suggested by the then Bengal chief minister.

Ray lived and worked in Calcutta, refusing offers that could have given him an entry into the Bombay film industry's charmed circle. The reason he gave was his lack of comfort in Hindi or any of the other regional languages. In essence it was his staunch reluctance to compromise by venturing where he would be on weaker footing, no matter how handsome the returns may have been. And dissent, true as anything, when it involved a refusal to capitulate, no matter what the gains could be.

Circa 2021, capitulation in the face of the political establishment, irrespective of this or that party, has been a hallmark of the film and culture fraternity of West Bengal. Film personalities with marginal stakes at the ground level have overnight burgeoned into political spokespersons. Had Satyajit Ray lived in these times, he would surely have dissented, debunked the trend in his own inimitable style, giving voice to his convictions through his art.

A recently released Bengali song stands forth as an act of collective dissent in the tradition of Ray. A coming together of non-party affiliated Bengali artists, mostly younger voices, calling to shun the ongoing war of hatred and polarisation, and to act independently of political machinations. Ray's *Feluda* does not make evidently political

statements, yet he is political. He is political in the way that he is liberal, just and fair, and in the way he constantly questions and stands up against greed, injustice and bullying. The most famous case in point could be his avenging of Lal Mohan Babu's humiliation at the hands of Maganlal Meghraj, where both Lal Mohan Babu and Meghraj are metaphors for deeper configurations.

Ray's 100th birthday coincides with counting day in Bengal. When, no matter which party comes to power, we will have lost a part of Ray and Feluda this election season. A loss of civility, reasoned rhetoric, a tradition of religious and cultural amity and overall, a part of what makes our Bengaliness. A Bengaliness that also includes the voice of creative and rightful dissent and difference, each in his own way, each as he thought fit.

Reference:

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/toi-edit-page/ray-a-hundred-years-on-this-film-auteur-gave-us-a-spectacular-oeuvre-which-distilled-contemporary-times/>