

Satyajit Ray: India Marks Centenary of Cinema Giant, but Legacy Has Multiple Interpretations

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Ratanshree Nirman/Roadshowfilms/Everett Collection/Gaurang Films/Bhandarkar Entertainment/Overdose Films

India is celebrating the birth centenary of one of her greatest sons, Satyajit Ray, in a variety of ways.

Sunday (May 2, 2021), marks the centenary of Ray, the Indian master who won an honorary Oscar in 1992, shortly before his death, and remains the country's best known filmmaker internationally.

Ray debuted with "Pather Panchali" (1955) the first part of the magisterial Apu Trilogy, which won best human document at Cannes. The Trilogy includes "Aparajito" (1956) and "Apur Sansar" (1959). Berlin was a particularly happy venue for him and he won top awards at the festival numerous times, for "Pather Panchali," "Aparajito," "Mahanagar" (1963), "Charulata" (1964), "Nayak" (1966) and "Ashani Sanket" (1973)

At Venice he won for "Aparajito" and "Seemabaddha" (1971), culminating in a career Golden Lion in 1982. He also won a British

Institute Fellowship in 1983 to go with the London Film Festival's Sutherland Trophy for "Apur Sansar." In 1987, the government of France made Ray a Commander of the Legion of Honor.

In India, Ray's films won 36 times at India's National Film Awards and he was also accorded the Dadasaheb Phalke Award and the Bharat Ratna, the country's highest film and civilian awards respectively.

The Indian government has newly instituted a Satyajit Ray Lifetime Achievement Award for Excellence in Cinema, and the country's various film bodies are organizing year-long centenary celebrations, necessarily virtual-physical hybrids because of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic.

Filmmakers are paying homage, both directly and indirectly, to Ray. Gaurang Films, Bhandarkar Entertainment and NCKS Explorations have produced Subhrajit Mitra's "The Wanderlust of Apu" (Avijatrik), which concludes the Apu Trilogy. The film, currently on the festival circuit, is based on the last part of Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's novel "Aparajito," picking up from where the film "Apur Sansar" ends and continuing the journey of Apu and his son Kajal.

"When I read the book, I was intrigued by the fact that the last one third part of the story was not filmed, where the journey of Apu continues further and the curve completes as the wanderlust is passed on to the next generation," Mitra tells Variety. "I was fascinated, inspired, intrigued by the work of the masters, but never been intimidated by it, or had fear about being judged. I interpreted the remaining part of the novel with my signature and visual style."

Producer Gaurang Jalan obtained the necessary permissions from Bandyopadhyay's estate. "The film has been shot at 68 locations to retain the rich aesthetic flavor that compliments its backdrop of 1940s India," Jalan tells Variety. "This film is our humble tribute to the master filmmaker himself on his centennial birthday besides the

evergreen actor, Soumitra Chatterjee, who resides in our hearts as the quintessential Apu.”

The late actor Soumitra Chatterjee, who collaborated with Ray in 14 films, beginning with his debut “Apu Sansar,” is the subject of actor and filmmaker Parambrata Chatterjee’s biopic “Abhijaan.” The film, produced by Ratanshree Nirman and Roadshow Films, is currently in post-production. Soumitra Chatterjee plays himself. It was one of his last projects before he succumbed to coronavirus in 2020.

Ray was a towering figure in Soumitra Chatterjee’s life and career, and Parambrata highlights that aspect, without the filmmaker overpowering the narrative. “It is a Toshiro Mifune-Akira Kurosawa like relationship, so one can’t deny that, but the film is about Soumitra Chatterjee, not just about his career as an actor, and also his worldview in general, that had to be kept in mind,” Parambrata Chatterjee tells Variety.

To portray Ray, Chatterjee cast iconoclastic filmmaker Q (“Garbage”). “Q has been cast mainly because of the incredible amount of physical resemblance that he has that he shares with the master,” says Chatterjee. “I wouldn’t have probably dared to cast somebody just for the sake of a physical resemblance, but Q is a very acclaimed filmmaker, and he’s somebody who knows films, so that is the reason why he has been cast.”

In 2017, Q had been cast as Ray in a film about the making of “Pather Panchali.” He had researched the part extensively and been in character for months, but the film never took off. “I had always been ready to play Ray,” Q tells Variety. “As is fairly well known, I am not his biggest admirer. However, that really helps to get perspective as an actor. My major concern was the body language and I worked a lot on that.”

Ray also introduced actor Dhritiman Chatterjee in “Pratidwandi” (1970) and they worked together again on “Ganashatru” (1989) and “Agantuk” (1991). Chatterjee is the subject of Overdose Films’

documentary “Talking Head,” directed by Spandan Banerjee, and bound for the festival circuit.

“What must be noted that Dhritiman is not a ‘Satyajit Ray actor’, not like Soumitra Chatterjee was,” Banerjee tells Variety. “The narrative of his work with Ray is a kind of a subtext that runs through my film ‘Talking Head,’ but it is about the actor’s journey.”

“It is of course about resisting the only identity often posited to actors who work with famous directors,” Banerjee adds. “In a way the actors try to evolve from that identity and yet it is not easy to unlearn the experience of working with certain directors.”

Ray was a true renaissance man, equally felicitous as a writer, composer and a graphic designer, as he was as a filmmaker. His son Sandip Ray, a filmmaker of note himself, has been assiduously bringing his father’s literary works to the screen, particularly the investigative stories featuring the detective Feluda and science fiction tales with the Professor Shonku character. Now, he is prepping an anthology film that combines the Feluda and Shonku franchises in separate stories, produced by leading studio SVF Entertainment, which will commence in July and release by Christmas.

“Due to the pandemic, the Feluda franchise got delayed and it would be further pushed if we would have done only Professor Shonku this year. So when Sandip Ray suggested he can combine both in a film we found that exciting and immediately agreed to produce ‘2 in 1’ Ray stories,” SVF director Mahendra Soni tells Variety.

Sandip Ray describes his father’s stories as “magnificent” and reveals that there are plans for a retrospective, a memorial lecture and physical exhibitions focusing on each facet of the master’s craft. “We have to wait now and if the situation improves we will definitely go ahead,” Ray told Variety.”

Meanwhile, filmmaker Ananth Narayan Mahadevan’s pandemic-paused “The Storyteller,” based on Ray’s story “Galpoboliye Tarini

Khuro,” and starring Naseeruddin Shah, Paresh Rawal, Revathi and Tannishtha Chatterjee, will start in the second half of 2021.

As an artist, Ray left behind a vast body of work across media and cast a long shadow. “I think Ray’s legacy is the semblance of simplicity he gives his narratives, be it cinema, stories or design,” says Banerjee. “He makes the craft of cinema simple, which, in reality, is the result of his tremendous hard work and talent.”

Describing Ray’s films as “textbooks,” Mitra says the “Indian market and mindset towards good arthouse cinema is still primitive, nothing has changed since the days of Ray, still Bollywood-centric. He’s still the lighthouse to us, who dare to dream differently.”

Q differs. “The lasting legacy as far as I am concerned is one of being a heavyweight,” says Q. “Weighing down generations of filmmakers from Bengal – instead of being that amazing light that shows you something wonderful and sets you free.”

“When you have such a colossal figure in a culture, you tend to stop deconstructing him and you tend to only view him as a perennial bank of nostalgia, which you can keep borrowing from for time immemorial, but I personally do not subscribe to that point of view,” says Parambrata Chatterjee. While Chatterjee cherishes and celebrates Ray’s oeuvre, he says it is also important to learn how to deconstruct his work. “That is also an approach we could do with a little more,” he says.

“He was successful in so many fields,” says Sandip Ray. “As a filmmaker, as a writer, as a musician and as a graphic artist, I think that will live on forever.”

SVF’s streamer Hoichoi, Amazon Prime Video, the Criterion Channel, MUBI, ZEE5, Eros Now and Disney Plus Hotstar are some of the platforms where Ray films are available to watch currently.

Reference:

<https://variety.com/2021/film/news/satyajit-ray-centenary-legacy-india-pather-panchali-1234964406/amp/>