

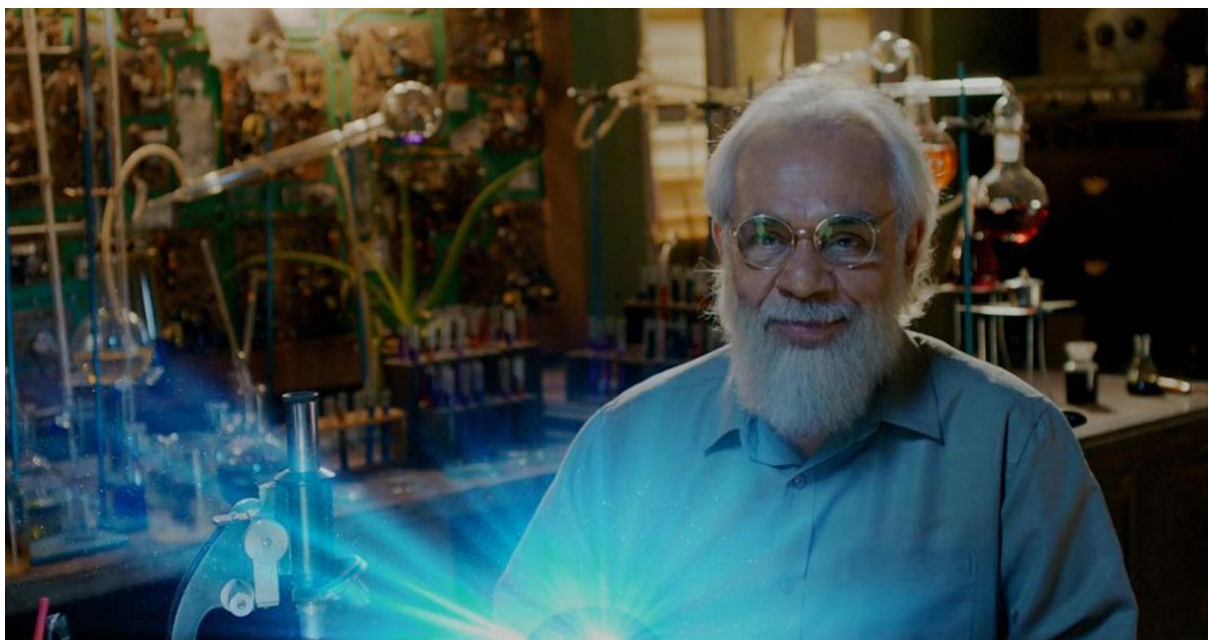
CLASSIC BOOKS

Satyajit Ray centenary: Professor Shonku's world no longer exists. Can he still cast a spell?

Satyajit Ray's eccentric super-scientist charmed generations of Bengali children, once upon a time. Today's children may be less impressed.

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Dhritiman Chatterji in Professor Shonku O El Dorado (2019) | SVF

My school days in the early 1980s were enriched by Satyajit Ray's movies and children's stories. Ray's Trilokeshwar Shonku, an ex-professor of Scottish Church College and an eccentric super-scientist, is perhaps one of the writer's greatest creations.

Indrani Majumdar, who translated some of the 38 Shonku stories in *The Mystery of Munroe Island and Other Stories* (2015) and *The Final Adventures of Professor Shonku* (2020), wondered whether the filmmaker and the writer were "perhaps two distinct personas". Blending tales of travel and glimpses of world history, Shonku made a clean sweep with his scientific masterstrokes. However, Ray didn't direct any screen adaptation of the Shonku stories. The director's son, Sandip Ray, finally did so in 2019 with *Professor Shonku O El Dorado*, based on *Nakur Babu O El Dorado* (1980).

The stories are a perfect blend of fictional inventions and great adventures. For readers in their forties and older, who didn't have the internet or satellite television while growing up, the sci-fi stories of Isaac Asimov, Jules Verne, HG Wells, Robert Louis Stevenson, Arthur Conan Doyle and Arthur C Clarke stimulated the imagination. A Bengali superhero like Professor Shonku was a welcome figure.

https://youtu.be/DpVE8cvq_ik

Professor Shonku O El Dorado (2019).

As a boy, I was fascinated by the finely-knitted stories of Ghanada, created by renowned Bengali poet and writer Premendra Mitra. Ghanada was essentially an explorer. By contrast, Ray created Shonku primarily as a scientist.

Shonku was inspired by the stories of Jules Verne, HG Wells and Conan Doyle's Professor Challenger from *The Lost World* and other stories. In a *New York Times* review from 1987, John Gross wrote about Ray's *The Unicorn Expedition and Other Fantastic Tales of India*, "Shonku seems to me not only less assertive but also less amusing and less fully realised a character than his bulky Edwardian predecessor. Still, he infuses the stories in which he appears with the agreeable flavor of an old-fashioned pseudo-scientific yarn."

Ray himself described Shonku as a "mild- mannered Professor Challenger".

John Gross, however, didn't miss the touch of the supernatural and a bit of pseudo-scientific texture in the Shonku stories. There's a substantial influence of Erich Von Daniken, as well as another interesting character from Bengali literature, Hesoram Hushiar, who was similarly inspired by Conan Doyle and created by Sukumar Ray, Satyajit Ray's father.

Another trail leads back to Nidhiram Patkel, a character from Sukumar Ray's short story *Satyi*. Among the differences between Nidhiram and Shonku is that Shonku is devoid of Nidhiram's fine humorous touch.

Shonku evolved over time. As translator Indrani Majumdar wrote, "Though the portrait of Shonku began on a note of whimsy and

quirkiness, over the years he turned into a no-nonsense scientist... eventually the character became more grounded in the real world.”

Ever since the first story, *Byomyatrir Diary*, was published in 1961, Bengali readers fell in love with Shonku, and they stuck around until the last story, *Saptaparnee*, was published in 1992. There was a sense of pride about Shonku’s gadgets, which were invented with very little money and elementary materials in a makeshift laboratory at Shonku’s Giridih residence. The professor was almost omniscient – he knew 69 languages and was well-versed in medicine, physics, chemistry, space science, robotics, computer hardware and artificial intelligence.

Shonku invented the “Annihilin pistol”, which can annihilate all living things. His “Miracurall drug” cures every ailment except the common cold, while his “Botica Indica” pill wards off food and water for 24 hours. Shonku also built “Bidhusekhar”, an artificial intelligence-enabled robot programmed to answer all manner of questions.

Cracks in the formula

Still, I wonder whether the Bengali children of today, who have grown up with the internet, will be impressed by Shonku’s imagination and knowledge. In his film adaptation, Sandip Ray shows a hologram-based video call and a sophisticated mobile phone. The young generation is accustomed to far more advanced technology and visual effects in Hollywood movies.

Despite being an inventor, Shonku maintains his belief in ghosts and the occult – baggage from stories written years ago that get carried into the present.

The gripping, analytical, suspenseful and amusing stories are written in the format of diaries – no doubt inherited from Hensoram Hushyar. This device helps to move the story forward, but creates uneasiness in terms of the structure.

A significantly uncomfortable feature of Shonku’s stories for me is the absence of the feminine touch. There are no women in Shonku’s house or anywhere around. This is also true of Nakur Babu, one of Shonku’s acquaintances. Likewise, Satyajit Ray’s stories starring Feluda, the popular Bengali sleuth, are almost devoid of women. Ray was miserly in bring woman characters into the universe of children’s stories.

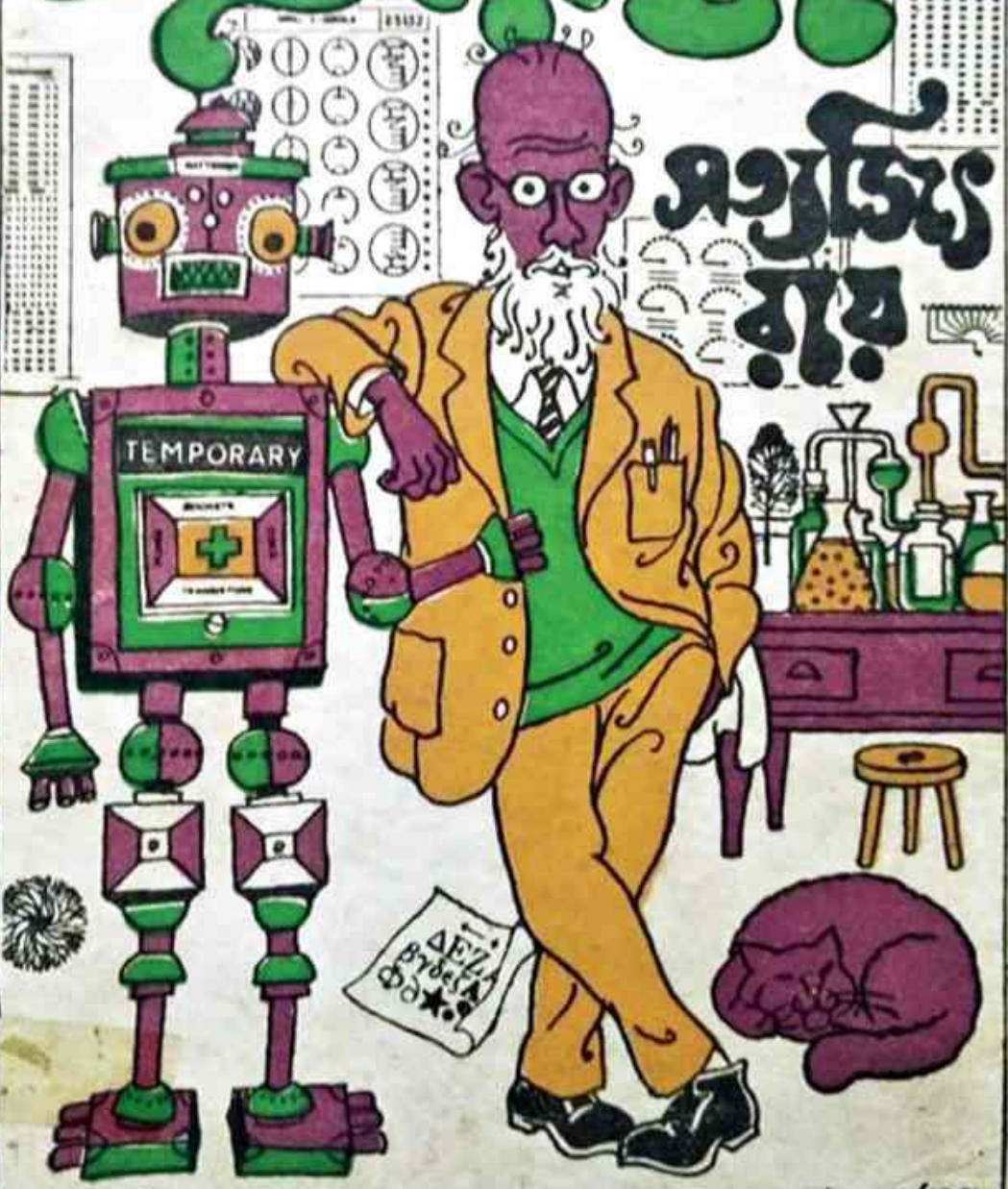
A few years ago, my school-going daughter felt that Shonku lacks the human touch and remains a mythical superhero. In the last story *Saptaparnee*, after learning that his friend Jeremy Saunders has liver cancer and two months left to live, Shonku sends the *Miracurall* drug to Jeremy. So far so good.

Shonku gets worried when he doesn't hear from Jeremy: "Doesn't *Miracurall* work in cancer then? Then the name of the medicine has to be changed!"

For Shonku, the effectiveness of his medicine and its name are more important than his friend's cure. My daughter was clearly hurt by the scientist's impersonal attitude. For today's generation, Shonku's Bengaliness is not enough. They will dissect Ray's super-scientist character with a razor-sharp moral knife.

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Science fiction should be a perfect blend of science and fiction. Ray's Shonku is more of the creation of an artist. Shonku provides outward descriptions of his discoveries, but the lack of detail is striking. While I was amazed at Shonku's stories as a child, my daughter feels discomfited by many of Shonku's splendid discoveries. Of course, today's teenagers are much more knowledgeable and possibly more sensitive too. My daughter is quite uncomfortable with the Annihilin pistol. She feels that no human should possess such a destructive weapon.

Professor Shonku might be a magical genius, but he's not quite the adorable hero. His inventions remain insignificant due to their non-reproducibility, even within the domain of science fiction. And yet, the wildly imaginative world of this weird and wonderful professor is still magical. As the renowned Bengali actor Victor Banerjee has commented, "Shonku's worlds are an enthralling escape, a consummation, in a sea of troubles, devoutly to be wished."

Is this magic generation-specific? Will the next generation inherit our passion for Satyajit Ray's superhero Bengali scientist? We do have an inclination towards weirdness and eeriness. I am still looking for the answer.

The writer is Professor of Statistics, Indian Statistical Institute, Kolkata.

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