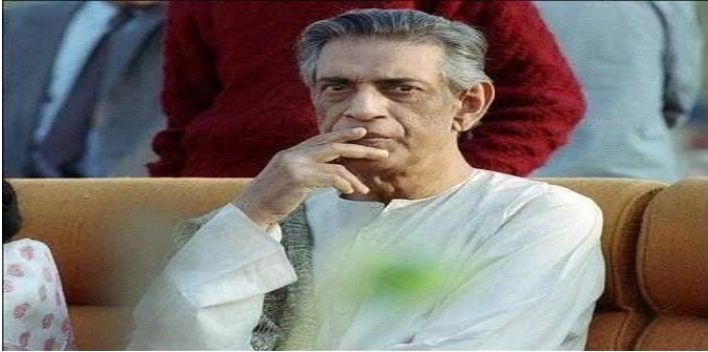


Satyajit Ray — the creative genius

Opinion

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Satyajit Ray

On his birth centenary, a tribute to the maestro who was much more than a renowned film-maker

In addition to being recognised as one of the all-time great film directors, Satyajit Ray was arguably one of the most versatile creative geniuses of Bengal, if not India, in modern times.

He received many coveted awards like the Bharat Ratna, Honorary Oscar (for lifetime achievement), Legion d' Honor (the highest civilian award in France) and the Kurosawa Award (for lifetime achievement as a film director), apart from numerous others at international film festivals. Kurosawa, one of the greatest film makers, made the remark that a person who has not watched a Ray movie is like one not knowing the sun and the moon.

Like Rabindranath Tagore, Ray was much more appreciated abroad than in India (excepting Bengal), the main reason being that all (except one or two in Hindi and English) of his films were in Bengali. This restricted its commercial showing in other parts of India, except in select film society circles.

Within India, he basically remained a 'Director's director', inspiring several generations of Indian 'art' or 'parallel' film-makers like Shyam Benegal and Adoor Gopalakrishnan. However, film buffs of the West, used to watching foreign films with English sub-titles, did watch and greatly appreciate many (though not all) of his films.

Apu Trilogy

In 'non-Bengal India' he remained known as the maker of Pather Panchali, like Tagore's fame mostly rested as the composer of the national anthem and the first Indian winner of the Nobel Prize.

Born in an illustrious literary family in Bengal, Satyajit was educated in Presidency College (Kolkata) and then in Tagore's Santiniketan (in arts) but had no formal training in film-making.

He learnt the technical aspects of film-making by watching films and reading articles by distinguished film-makers and critics from all over the world, while working in an ad agency in Kolkata.

Though Ray is internationally best known for his Apu Trilogy (three films on the life experiences of Apu, depicting the joys and the agony of a village boy stepping into the outer world), he consciously made films of many different genres throughout his life. He never stopped experimenting.

His films covered a wide spectrum with themes like village life, urban life, corporate life, the Naxalite years, famine, musical fantasy, detective stories, conflicts within a family, life of a taxi driver, the insecurities of a matinee idol, superstitions in religion and society, the Swadeshi movement in freedom struggle, princely life in colonial India, pitfalls of modern civilisation, satire, adventures, documentary films and entertaining films for children.

He also tried various technical experiments in all aspects of film-making like lighting, colour, music, editing, use of camera angles and tricks, even advertising with imaginative cinema posters.

Apart from being a film director, Ray performed many different roles in film-making. He wrote all his screen-plays with detailed sketches of shot sequences — a veritable lesson for budding film-makers.

He composed music in all his films fusing Indian (both North Indian and South Indian) classical, western classical and folk music from many parts of India, culminating in some distinctive Ray signature tunes; in a few early films he used renowned classical musicians like Ravi Shankar, Ali Akbar and Vilayat Khan as music directors.

Several of Ray's films were based on his own stories. He wrote the lyrics with rhymes (in Bengali) in a few highly popular musical films with two loveable characters in Gupi (a singer) and Bagha (a drummer).

He 'acted' behind the camera (particularly to instruct new actors, whom he used often in his films), besides lending a hand with editing, art direction and camera management, along with a dedicated team which he built up and who remained with him all along.

'Selling' poverty

Ray faced criticisms (particularly from some Bollywood film personalities) for 'selling' Indian poverty to the Western audience. This criticism is totally unfair and stems from a failure to appreciate his films.

Most of his films (except for the Apu Trilogy) have nothing to do with poverty. Even in the Apu Trilogy, the dominant theme is not portrayal of poverty but to depict the beauty of human existence and the indomitable spirit of man even amidst poverty.

In his film on the Great Bengal Famine (Ashani Sanket), his camera focussed on a beautiful butterfly along with the image of a dying emaciated girl. Some criticised this as Ray's timidity (even insensitivity) in not showing the true dimensions of the great human

suffering from the famine. Again, he was misunderstood. His subtle point was that Mother Nature remains totally oblivious to human suffering and does not lose her beauty amidst so many deaths.

Successful writer, too

Ray was a multi-faceted creative person. He was a highly successful writer of short stories, detective stories and science fictions in Bengali, his target audience being non-adult young. Many of his writings have been translated in English and became fairly popular even outside Bengal.

He was also an accomplished artist (particularly adept in sketching), photographer, calligrapher, an editor of children's magazine and a film critic. Incidentally, one of his short stories was used (without acknowledgement) as the basic material by Stephen Spielberg in making the highly successful Hollywood blockbuster film ET.

Ray's creative uniqueness can perhaps be best summarised by a short poem which the great poet Rabindranath Tagore wrote in the autograph book of young Satyajit whom he met in Santiniketan.

The poem, translated in English, is: 'Too long I've wandered from place to place/Seen mountains and seas at vast expense/Why haven't I stepped two yards from my house,/Opened my eyes and gazed very close/At a drop of dew on a stalk of rice?'

Ray captured this beauty, which is just two steps away from our homes but which we fail to appreciate on our own, and then made us see it through his films and other creative endeavours.

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Reference:

<https://www.google.com/amp/s/www.thehindubusinessline.com/opinion/satyajit-ray-the-creative-genius/article34442400.ece/amp/>