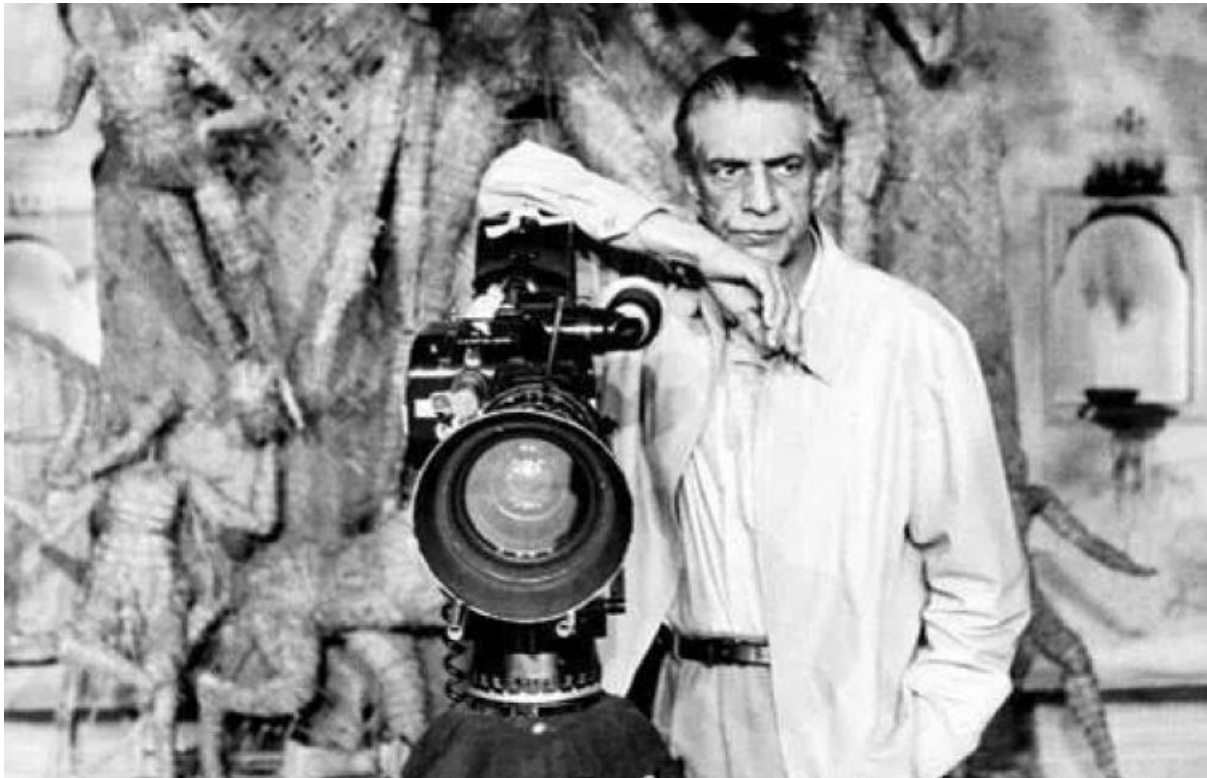


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Satyajit Ray Birth Centenary: A look at his involvement with children's literature and films

By ROBIN ROY

Though it is impossible to fully fathom the works of the maestro, on Satyajit Ray's 100th birth anniversary, here's a look at his involvement with children's literature and films, which opens up another facet of this genius.



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The celebrated Satyajit Ray who won the Oscar's lifetime achievement award on his death bed, always believed that writing and making films for children was an extremely serious business.

Child's act

So even when the great filmmakers of his time were involved in making films for adults and complex relationships, Ray was scripting the world's finest films involving children, their sensibilities and emotions. Understanding a child's mind

and the ability to look at their world especially through their eyes was in his template, and in his DNA — his grandfather, Upendrakishore Roychoudhury, and father, Sukumar Roy, were both great craftsmen in this regard. Ray directed 36 films — including feature films, documentaries and shorts — and authored several short stories and novels, primarily for young children and teenagers. Feluda, the detective and Professor Shonku, the scientist in his science fiction stories, Tarini Khuro, the storyteller and Lalmohan Ganguly, aka Jatayu, the novelist were lifetime characters created by him. He also revived children's magazine Sandesh, which his grandfather launched in 1913. Ray edited the same till he passed away in 1992.

Films and children

Sample his crèche — and like what TS Eliot had said — the stream of consciousness will become vivid before your eyes... the eternal 'screen' shot of Apu and Durga running through the kaash fields in Pather Panchali to see the steam engine belching out smoke, little Kajol asking his father about his status in Apur Sansar; Ratan refusing the one-rupee tip, Mrinmoyee whose favourite squirrel's demise takes a backseat as she realises that she is a grown woman... were indeed masterpieces depicting children and will always vividly be stamped in the mind. This is indeed the true picture of Ray's cradle and how he nurtured "his children" (literally) through his thoughts and sensitivities. They grew bigger than the fabric of the film and created a niche in our hearts forever.

Brush with Hollywood

Ray's first film Pather Panchali in 1955 won 11 international awards, including the inaugural Best Human Document award at the 1956 Cannes Film Festival. This, along with Aparajito (1956) and Apur Sansar (The World of Apu) (1959), form The Apu Trilogy. There's an interesting tale about his foray into Hollywood. In 1967, Ray wrote a script for a film to be called The Alien, based on his short story Bankubabur Bandhu (Banku Babu's Friend), which he wrote in 1962 for his children's magazine Sandesh. It was planned to be an US-India co-production with Columbia Pictures, with Marlon Brando and Peter Sellers in the lead.



However, Ray found that his script had been copyrighted and the fee appropriated by Michael Wilson, who had initially approached Ray through their mutual friend

Arthur C. Clarke, to represent him in Hollywood. Wilson copyrighted the script credited to Mike Wilson and Satyajit Ray, although he contributed only one word to it! Ray, later, confirmed that he never received any compensation for the script. After Brando dropped out of the project, the makers tried to replace him with James Coburn, but Ray became disillusioned and returned to Calcutta (now Kolkata). Columbia attempted to revive the project, without success, for two decades.

For his son...

It is said that after his son, Sandip, at the age of 13 complained that his dad only made films for adults, the ace filmmaker in 1969 directed one of his most commercially successful films — a musical fantasy based on a children’s story, *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne*, written by his grandfather. One of his most expensive projects — the film was difficult to finance — Ray further dropped his plans to shoot it in colour as he turned down an offer that would have forced him to cast a certain Bollywood actor as the lead. In 1980, Ray did a sequel to *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne*, a political *Hirak Rajar Deshe*.

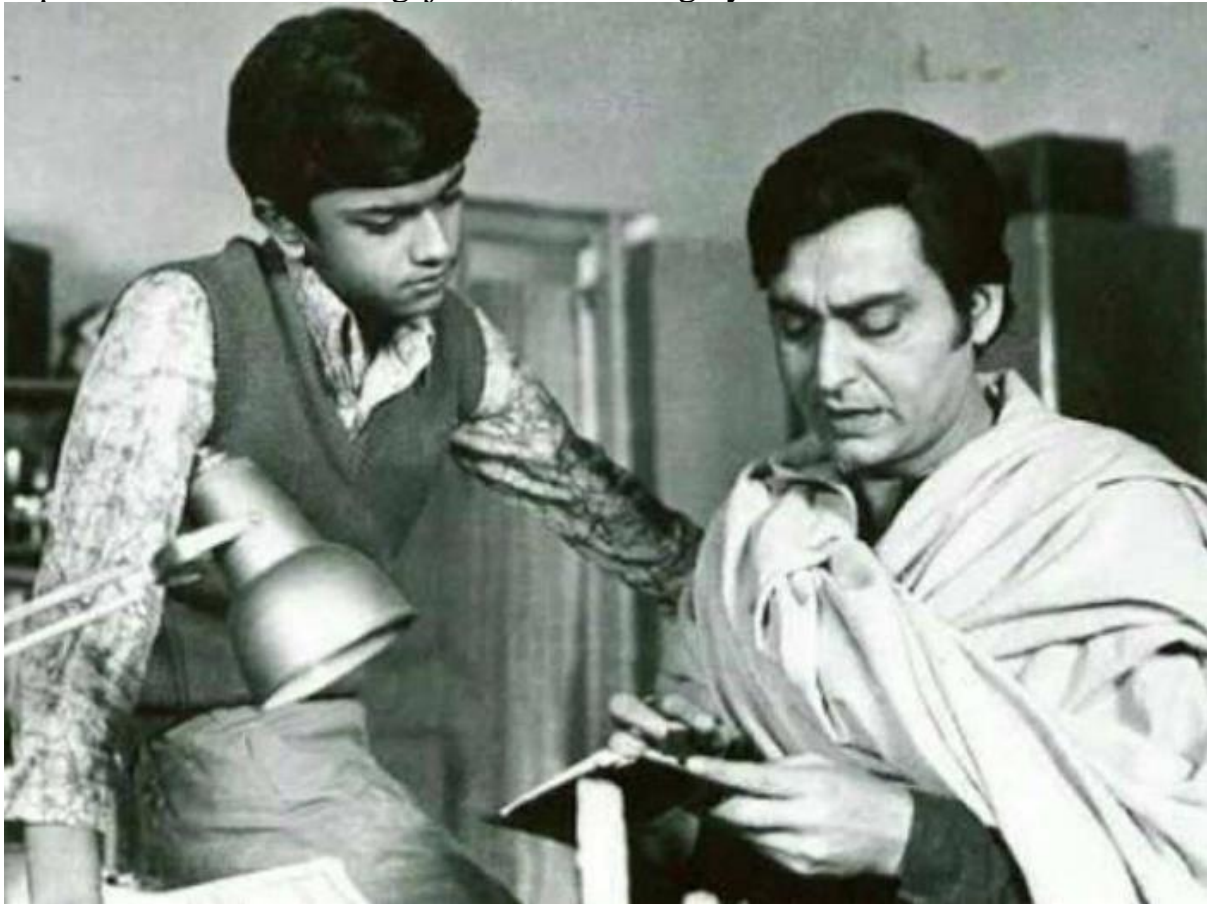


Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne

There were, however, some setbacks even for a person like Ray. When the film *ET* released in 1982, Clarke and Ray saw similarities in the film to Ray’s *The Alien* script. Ray claimed that *ET* had plagiarised his script. In fact, Ray said Steven Spielberg’s flick “would not have been possible without my script of *The Alien* being available throughout America in mimeographed copies”. Spielberg, however, denied any plagiarism by saying, “I was a kid in High School when this script was circulating in Hollywood.” (Spielberg had actually graduated High School in 1965 and released his first film in 1968).

‘Crime’ connect

Satyajit Ray also had deep interests in crime fiction which led him to read all the Sherlock Holmes fictions. And when Ray himself started writing (on crime fiction), not surprisingly, Holmes inspired him! Feluda’s character resembled Sherlock Holmes. But as Ray was Ray... he produced an Indian version of the sleuth, who instead of relying on martial arts and his .32 Colt revolver, he depended more on his Magajastra, that is his grey matter!



Feluda

Future of children’s fare

With Ray’s “pack up”, it is unfortunate that the children's segment both in literature and film making has taken a back seat — and today in the absence of a great storyteller like Ray, distributors aren’t enchanted by kids’ plot and hence this segment has almost been shelved. However, notwithstanding the depth of Ray’s works, which will last forever, the best part is that every time you read his novels, stories or see his films, Ray comes alive in his works, which will forever evolve with the times.



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