

## BOOK REVIEW

# Where Satyajit Ray brings alive the genius of three generations of the Ray family in one book

In '3 Rays', Satyajit Ray translates the works of his grandfather Upendrakishore and his father Sukumar, alongside his own.

Saikat Majumdar

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3 Rays (from left): Sukumar, Satyajit, Upendrakishore. | Public domain

Over the past couple of months, I've been re-reading Sunil Gangopadhyay's two-volume novel, *Pratham Alo*. This Bangla work of historical fiction, also available in Aruna Chakravarti's English translation (*First Light*), offers one of the most intricately researched narratives of the 19th century Bengal Renaissance that I know – one which mingles the lives of well-known public figures with those of delicately imagined fictional characters.

There are many things that I enjoy in this novel – one of them is its intimate representation of the early artistic development of a youthful Rabindranath Tagore. It was reinvigorating to be reminded that in Rabindranath's genius, performance preceded writing – long before his published work drew attention, the young Robi was a much-coveted singer-songwriter in every kind of family, social and community circle in colonial Calcutta.

I said “reminded” because no one who has grown up within Bengali culture is unaware of the primal performative power of Rabindranath’s oeuvre – the music of his songs, the rhythm of his widely recited poetry, and the staged delight of his innovative plays, all of which pervade our personal and social lives. But sometimes this needs reminding when one’s relationship with Rabindranath happens primarily through the printed word, perhaps wholly so for those who dwell outside Bengali culture and engage in this relation through translation.

In such instances, the literary is likely to replace the visual and the performative; such is, indeed, the shape and texture of his national and global reputation. The abstraction of print, which moves more easily through cultures, overcomes the sensoriness of sight and performance, except on the rare event when it takes on popular life, such as through film – or through the symbolic nationalism of a national anthem that a nation sings on their feet. It is a matter of historic convenience that this passage of performance to print is also the most readily available narrative of literary modernity.

### **Upendrakishore**

But if Rabindranath, a key figure of the Bengal Renaissance himself, complicates this easy transition of modernity through his own artistic sensibility, the three generation of Rays – Upendrakishore, Sukumar, and Satyajit – showcase an equally fascinating promiscuity of artistic expression across different media and sensory form. Like Rabindranath, their uniqueness lies not in the mere articulation in different art forms (not an unremarkable achievement in itself), but the very fusion of different historic sensibility in their individual acts of creativity, be it the pre-modern, the modern, or the postmodern, just to use Western classifications that describe them only half-satisfactorily.

3 Rays, the first book in the new Penguin Ray Library Series, is therefore a unique book – not only in its documentation of how the three generations of artists break down artistic boundaries of all kinds,

but how they each embody aesthetic and historic revolutions within their own sensibilities, and chart the trajectory of a greater one across nearly a hundred and fifty years. The signatures of the three Rays remain writ large on almost every aspect of cultural life in Bengal.

Upendrakishore, who introduced modern blockmaking in South Asia, was a pioneering force in the history of printing in the subcontinent. But all aspects of innovation were mutually interrelated in this striking family. Upendrakishore's interest in printing and blockmaking had much to do with the illustrations that went with his children's stories and retellings of folk and mythological tales, which the author did himself.

3 Rays reproduces many of these valuable drawings along with unique stories, like that of the sweet tuntuni bird and his rivalry with an arrogant king, leading to the puncturing of the royal arrogance, or that of the crafty cat Matanjali Sarkar who deceives animals far more powerful than him. There are also illustrations done by Satyajit Ray based on originals created by Upendrakishore's niece, the writer Leela Majumdar.

One of the most valuable things in the section on Upendrakishore is Satyajit's film treatment of his grandfather's classic children's novella, *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne*, along with illustrations taken from Satyajit's script notebook. The much-loved children's story of Goopy the singer and Bagha the drummer is a fascinating microcosm of inter-generational creativity across a wide range of representational media and technology.

It was first serialised in a 1915 issue of *Sandesh*, the magazine started by Upendrakishore and continued by the Ray family – along with Upendrakishore's own illustration, which Satyajit recreated when the story was reprinted in the magazine in 1961. But for anyone who knows the immensely popular film that Satyajit made out of it, the filmmaker's draft illustrations of the characters and the set are the most fascinating – they contain the embryos of the entire visual texture of the film itself.

All of these illustrations are reproduced in 3 Rays. Together, they give a glimpse of an unprecedented trajectory of creativity that runs from early printing in 19th century Bengal to the peak of its cinematic experimentation in the 20th century, entwined around a vibrant and time-tested tradition of popular art, storytelling, and editorial innovation.

## **Sukumar**

In between grandfather Upendrakishore and grandson Satyajit is the unforgettable figure of Sukumar, one of Bengal's greatest humorists and without doubt the most celebrated creator of nonsense poetry. Though people outside the Bangla-reading world might know Sukumar's nonsense verse through other widely circulated translations, most famously *The Select Nonsense of Sukumar Ray* by Sukanta Chaudhuri, here the translations are all by Satyajit.

In fact, in a sense, 3 Rays is all Satyajit's work, as all the translations, those of the writings of his grandfather, father, and that of his own, are all done by the third Ray. Like all great nonsense poetry, Sukumar's unforgettable verse masks sharp satire – whether that of outlandish variations of colonial hybridity in his creation of fused animals such as the Porcoduck (porcupine + duck) or the Whalepant (Whale + Elephant), of monarchical and administrative whims in “The King of Bombardia” or “Odour in the Court,” or a mockery of the Indian obsession of caste and lineage in “Groomy Tidings”:

“Gangaram himself despairs to fight his  
Ailments of the spleen and hepatitis.  
But mark you, sir, his noble ancestry –  
Ganga branches from a princely tree.”

But we already know that this is a family that is incapable of letting their imagination flow in just one medium. Sukumar's nonsense poems and stories, first published in the family magazine *Sandesh* and then printed as a book by the family publisher U Ray and Sons, were

all accompanied by the inimitable etchings by the writer. The images of these fantastic creatures, be it of the old tickler who insists on making you laugh by hook or by crook, or the fantastic creatures supposedly met by the questionable Professor Heshoram Hushiar – such as the gloomy Glumotherium or the submissive giant Docilosaurus – these were all images that multiple generations of children (including this writer) grew up on, almost in the same breath with religious myths and legends.

The pictorial and the literary are so beautifully fused in this imagination that none of us who can now imagine our childhoods through them can actually point to the real origin of these memories – the snappy, musical rhythm of the verse, or the endearing absurdity of the images. Names like those of the shrieking Chillanasaurus or the poor cowed bechara, the Becharatherium might make sense to speakers of other Indian languages too.

## **Satyajit**

After Satyajit's translations of Upendrakishore and Sukumar comes the largest section of the book: "Satyajit translates Satyajit", followed by a couple of stories Satyajit originally wrote in English. Satyajit's stories, as multiple generations of Bangla readers already know, are impossible to classify. They are truly, weirdly enthralling, evoking perhaps, the play of the real and the fantastic, the funny and the horrifying in the fiction of Roald Dahl, Saki (HH Munro), or James Thurber.

Satyajit's world is almost all-male; women characters rarely appear, and almost never play a significant role, in stark contrast to his films, where his depiction of female characters, from the fiction of Rabindranath Tagore to that of Sunil Gangopadhyay and beyond, has attained canonical status in film history. The stories are populated by middle-aged men from the lower end of the middle class, usually single and living alone, often stuck in low-end clerical or other bureaucratic work to which they are at best, indifferent.

They are, in other words, unremarkable and unnoticed people who lead invisible lives in the big city of Calcutta, from which they seek occasional respite through travel to nearby places as they can afford. The innocent drudgery of their daily lives creates the ground for the explosive encounter of the banal and the extraordinary that is the unforgettable signature of Satyajit Ray's stories.

Sometimes this extraordinary visitation happens in the form of a supernatural intervention, as with the serpentine mystery of Khagam (a story, whose retelling by a classmate had left me frozen in fear in Class III) or the loving company of a laughing dog – but sometimes it's just an unexpected, an unusually rewarding departure from the quotidian rhythm of one's life.

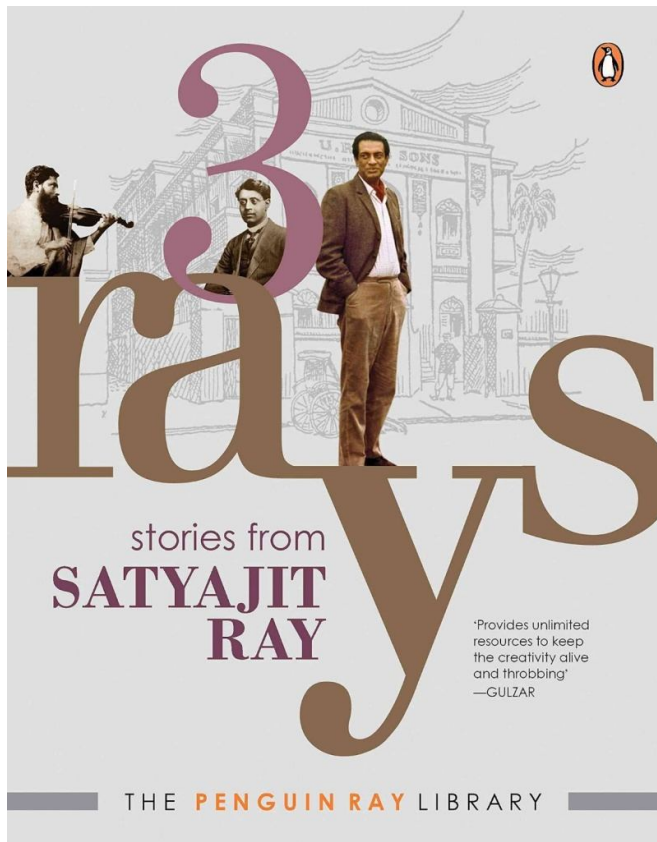
“Patalbabu Filmstar” is one of the most memorable stories of the latter kind, where an ordinary middle-aged man, an amateur theatre actor in his youth, is offered a moment's appearance in a film-shoot, where he is supposed to bump into the hero of the film in a moment of distraction on the street. That's all Patalbabu has, and a single “Oh” is all he has to say, but the thought and the care he puts in the planning, and the beauty with which he executes the fragment of that role gives him such great joy, such a momentous departure from his dull, uneventful life, that he leaves the shooting venue without claiming his honorarium.

One reason why Satyajit's films resonated so deeply with his audiences was that he captured with such great affection, insight, and pathos the true heart of middle-class life, its joys, delights and its banalities. The same quality lights up his fiction and pushes it closer to popular genres of literature with its light and spontaneous introduction of defamiliarising – sometimes mysterious and supernatural – elements.

Edited by Satyajit's son, the filmmaker Sandip Ray, co-edited by Riddhi Goswami, with an imaginative layout and design by the artist Pinaki De, 3 Rays is a rare treasure-house of talent that breaks all barrier between different genres of art, media and technology,

delineating a truly striking legacy of the Bengal Renaissance that is as global as it is local.

Saikat Majumdar's novels include *The Firebird* (2015), *The Scent of God* (2019), and the forthcoming *The Middle Finger*. He can be found here on Twitter.



**3 Rays: Stories from Satyajit Ray, edited by Sandip Ray, co-edited by Riddhi Goswami, layout and design by Pinaki De, Penguin Ray Library, Penguin Books India.**

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Reference:

<https://scroll.in/article/997262/where-satyajit-ray-brings-alive-the-genius-of-three-generations-of-the-ray-family-in-one-book>