

Go Now: A Ray Of One's Own

A new exhibition shines a light on celebrated filmmaker Satyajit Ray's human side through a series of letters that detail his struggles, complaints and travel plans.



A visitor looks at posters of Satyajit Ray's films at the exhibition. Photo courtesy: Kolkata Centre for Creativity

BY Malini Banerjee | POSTED ON May 16, 2022

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"Never having seen a Satyajit Ray film is like never having seen the sun or the moon." - Akira Kurosawa
For Bengal and its film industry, Satyajit Ray has been its "sun, moon and stars". The past couple of years alone have seen a spate of films trying to bask a little in his reflected glory. Be it Anjan (2021), which was made as a conclusion to the Apu Trilogy or Anik Dutta's Aparajito, a film about the making of Pather Panchajali or Netflix's Ray that featured Srijit Mukherjee's takes on his short stories—it seems as if the Ray-themed film has become a genre in itself.
Why he occupies half the sky of Bengali and maybe Indian films was explored in The Satyajit Ray Centenary Show (Volume I) organized by Kolkata Centre for Creativity in collaboration with Gallery Rasa early this year in February-March.
It looked at his lobby cards, synopses, posters and book cover designs, while revealing the creative process behind his meticulous design, costumes and props used in the films, and rare photographs by Nemi Ghosh, the noted image-maker who was known to be a close associate of the filmmaker. It dwelled on Ray the icon, and magnified his genius.
Volume II of the exhibition series, titled Iti, Satyajit Da conversely uses a microscope and shows a more human side of him. It shows the Ray that was beleaguered by everyday human struggles like power cuts (which he called load-shedding as it was commonly called then) and the weather. It shows the side of him that went to watch Bobby (1973), is appalled at the "shameless" commercialisation of the film, mentions it in an offhand manner, and even goes on to acknowledge Dimple Kapadia "as talented as she is attractive". It shows through an almost epistolary tale of this man, who as a conscientious correspondent, made time to reply to his fans and acquaintances alike.

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Clockwise from top: Ray with actor Utpal Kumar the protagonist of his 1966 film Nayak; Photographs detailing moments from the celebrated filmmaker's life; A letter Ray wrote to Nilanjana Chakrabarty Sen, complaining about the "shameless commercialisation" in the Bollywood film Bobby (1973). Photos courtesy: Kolkata Centre for Creativity

This series of 52 letters, too, was addressed to a family friend, who began as a fan. Nilanjana Sen (born Chakrabarty) was a college student at Kala Bhavan, Santiniketan, when she heard that Satyajit Ray was going to be at her university to film The Inner Eye the 1972 documentary on artist Benode Behari Mukherjee. Ray was already Ray then, but to Jana (as he later addressed her) what struck her most was that he was a son of an "extraordinarily talented family". Sen writes in the introduction to Chithi Panchajali (Ballad of Letters) that when she met him she was more in awe of the fact that Ray's father was Sukumar Ray whose "illustrations still stir us in exactly the same way and the segments of his poems are so naturally part of our daily usage and conversation" and that his grandfather Upendrakishore Ray Chowdhury was an "incomparably brilliant, sage-like genius".

The series of letters, translated by poet and translator Sampurna Chatterji and edited by Juhi Saklani, has been brought out as a book. Saklani observes in the Editor's Note that "letters were consistently and significantly present in Satyajit Ray's films. They were much more than convenient plot devices: they expressed and hid thoughts, they created a world of emotion between the two interlocutors, they were something alive and awaited, they made statements, and even when they didn't, they told us volumes about the people involved." She cites many scenes immortalised in his films as examples—Madhabi's (Mukherjee) Charulata sobbing while clutching her brother-in-law's letter, little Apu calling out "chithi chithi" in Pather Panchajali while running down the village, Sharmila Tagore's Dayamayee writing to her husband innocently and unaware what awaits her; in Devi (1966).

And thus it is, for these personal letters shining a light on Ray's life and his business of living. Curated by sculptor K. S. Radhakrishnan, whose sister-in-law Nilanjana happens to be the luckiest fan girl in the world—the exhibition of personal letters rises above the personal, and tells us more not just about the man but the times he lived in: how even though he was Ray, whose films went to Cannes, he was still a director who was often let down by the money men when his films did not have songs or romantic duos. Even as it shows us the warm, caring, almost elder brother-like figure writing to her, it also shows his genius through his "opposite" choice of words through brief letters that were "crisp but never brusque", and through his detailed travel plans—when he was filled with creative energy or when he was depressed and stuck in creative doldrums.

A generation of children and adults have been brought up on a diet of his books, his writing and his films, and may feel him as if he was their own. This exhibition makes Satyajit Ray aka Manik Da feel that much closer.

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Hi, Satyajit Da the exhibition
When: On till June 8, 2022; open to the public Tuesday to Sunday, 11 am to 6 pm
Where: Kolkata Centre for Creativity, 1st floor, Eastern Metropolitan Bypass, Anandapur, Kolkata

Malini Banerjee is a reluctant road-tripper who got seasoned through trips with an almost ancient mariner. She lives to eat, bake, travel and read, but thankfully does not attempt it all at the same time. Her work has been published in The Telegraph, MD-Day and India Today.

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