



Soumitra Chatterjee as Feluda in *Sonar Kella* (*The Golden Fortress*). Directed by Satyajit Ray, 1974. ALL PHOTOGRAPHS BY SUKUMAR ROY.

## Critical Acts

Soumitra Chatterjee is to Satyajit Ray's cinema what Toshiro Mifune is to Akira Kurosawa's or Marcello Mastroianni to Federico Fellini's. Starting with *Apur Sansar* in 1959, Chatterjee has acted in 14 films by Ray. He has also starred in films by directors like Mrinal Sen and Tapan Sinha. Chatterjee received 'The Officier des Arts et Metiers', the highest award for arts in France and a Lifetime Achievement award from Italy. He refused the Padma Shri in the 1970s. He received the Padma Bhushan in 2004. In 1998 the French director Catherine Berge made a full-length documentary on his life titled, *Gaach* (Tree). Chatterjee received the National Film Award for Best Actor in 2007, an irony since it came after giving stellar performances for five decades. Here, he speaks to **Shiladitya Sarkar** about his lifelong obsession with Tagore, poetry and theatre.



Soumitra Chatterjee in *Jhinder Bandi* (based on *The Prisoner of Zenda*). Directed by Tapan Sinha, 1961.

**SHILADITYA SARKAR:** YOU WERE ASSOCIATED with *Ekshan*, the influential literary journal from Bengal. How did it start? What was your experience as one of its editors?

**Soumitra Chatterjee:** One day, while I was returning from the Calcutta Coffee House, my friend Nirmalya Acharya informed me of his decision to launch a literary journal and insisted that I be the co-editor. I promised to help on the condition that he be the sole editor. We argued over this for the next two hours standing by the roadside. Finally, my wife urged me to team up with Nirmalya since it had been my dream to have a magazine of my own. I approached Satyajit Ray to design the cover. Since I had become famous by then, I was entrusted to get

advertisements from corporate houses. I also edited the poetry page since Nirmalya wasn't too keen about poetry. The rest of the decisions used to be consensual and we worked as a team. The magazine garnered critical attention and became the space for many great talents like Kamal Kumar Majumdar. We also published film scripts. Ray continued to design the covers till his death for a total of thirty years. I left the magazine after twenty years, in 1981, after being sure that Nirmalya didn't have to be dependent on me.

**S. S.:** You never directed a film. Instead, you were keenly involved in directing and writing plays. Any reason?

**S. C.:** I was a successful actor and that entailed a particular lifestyle. Directing a film would have meant being away from acting which wasn't possible. Moreover, after having worked with Ray and Tapan Sinha, I was keen to attain their standards. But the offers for direction that came my way were all for commercial films. In such a situation, I felt I would have more control in theatre. It was not for any authoritarian ego satisfaction. Since I either wrote the plays or adapted them from European literature, I was confident I could shepherd the content to my liking. Also most aspects including the set design and acting would be under my control. Unlike films, in theatre I could orchestrate the production without any constraints.

S. S.: What accounted for your consistent refusal to act in Hindi films?

S. C.: Creatively, I was satisfied working in Bengali films, particularly those of Ray's. So the need for acting in Hindi films wasn't strong. But there is another reason. It is my conviction that an actor's sensibility is shaped through language and the literature of his mother tongue. Surely, many European actors have done well in Hollywood, but here, in India, I also had the example of Danny Denzongpa. He is an immensely talented actor and he impressed me when I took classes where he was a participant. Unfortunately, he was typecast in Hindi films. Imagine what he could have delivered if his state had a throbbing film industry as in Chennai and Mumbai.

S. S.: During *Apur Sansar* you claimed you could smile in eight different ways. Later, you affirmed you could smile in 80 diverse ways. Have you evolved a template that facilitates role-playing? What are your thoughts on the creative process involved in acting?

S. C.: Difficult to explain. It is linked to spontaneity which itself is linked to one's inner passion. For me that inner passion involves an unremitting observation of life rather than merely being in love with life. I am attentive to the ways in which life produces ripples and how impressions shape one's inner being and pose new questions. Acting is not imitative behaviour. A swindler is a successful performer because through his act he can fool people, but his performance is not regarded art because it is not serving anything of value. It is not premised on truth. Imitation ends, so to say, where art begins. I have seen a lot and yet, life continues to surprise me. Actually, what can an actor claim in terms of creativity in the way a sculptor or a writer can? Acting is an interpretative art. But a performer can attain the heights of other artists if the performance could reveal the deeper shades of life. I believe great performance happens from those who have lived life, tried to understand it, and have paid the price for it. As a student of acting, I have no escape from this process. Man remains the object of my curiosity.

S. S.: Weren't you snobbish about pre-Satyajit Bengali films?

S. C.: My snobbery was so entrenched that I refused to watch any Bengali film of that era. Actually, a part of it I owed to Sisir Kumar Bhaduri, my mentor. Bhaduri, the doyen of the Bengali stage, influenced me into thinking that film was not a medium for a serious performer. He accorded value only to Charlie Chaplin. If I argued in favour of the great Soviet directors like Pudovkin and Eisenstein, Bhaduri wouldn't listen. Although I did watch Hollywood films, they didn't instil the urge for acting in films. *Pather Panchali* (1955) was a jolt. Even Sisir Kumar Bhaduri remarked that Bengali cinema, eventually, might have a future.

S. S.: Any special memories while shooting for *Apur Sansar*?

S. C.: I had the habit of making notes about what Apu would have been doing when he wasn't in the frame. I used to show Ray what I was writing. In one instance I had written that Apu was spending time at the coffee house. Ray wondered why Apu shouldn't be seeing a film. It was Ray's way of provoking me. Actually, Ray allowed me much latitude. Much before the shooting began, he and I would often watch



Soumitra Chatterjee co-edited (with Nirmalya Acharya) the famous Bengali literary journal *Ekshan* for twenty years.

Hollywood films together. Instead of discoursing on the particular film we were seeing, he would subtly point out the nuances of an actor. He would also enquire about the books I was reading. For instance he would ask, 'Have you read this particular book by Stanislavski?' If I said, 'yes', he would urge me to read other books by Stanislavski and give me a copy from his own collection.

S. S.: What accounts for Satyajit Ray's abiding interest in you? Even the illustrations he did for the iconic private detective Feluda bore a striking resemblance to you. Were you Ray's alter ego?

S. C.: Ray was a conscientious artist who didn't go by his whims. He accorded roles to people based on artistic considerations. I wanted to play Goopy in *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne* (1968). But Ray didn't consider me. When I saw the film I knew how apt the casting was. Tapen Chatterjee's performance was great. In many ways Feluda epitomised Ray's qualities. Professor Shonku, his other literary creation, also resembled Ray in terms of intelligence and curiosity. It would be a mistake to think I was Ray's alter ego. I didn't match his vision. But we shared, perhaps, a common attitude to many things.



Soumitra Chatterjee and Tanuja in *Tin Bhubaner Parey* (*The Outer Reaches of the Three Worlds*). Directed by Ashutosh Bandyopadhyay. 1969.

S. S.: The American film critic Pauline Kael once said, "Soumitra Chatterjee, Ray's one-man stock company, moves so differently in the different roles he plays, he is almost unrecognisable." You have essayed different roles for other directors as well, including that of an ageing and blind poet in *Dekhu* (2001), a swimming coach in *Koni* (1986), a thief in *Sansar Srimante* (1975), a divorced husband in *Saat Pake Bandha* (1963), an invalid doctor in *Wheelchair* (1994), among many others. What accounts for this wide range?

S. C.: The fear of being stereotyped – this fed the desire for versatility. Moreover, I have tried to remain flexible. It has helped in transiting from one role to the other like clockwork. It is important to alter and break oneself. There was a joke about Lon Chaney – 'The Man of a Thousand Faces' – a favourite actor of mine. Apparently, no one would kill an ant on his sets. Who knew, it could be Lon Chaney in disguise! Such was his range. Incidentally, Ray never repeated himself. Tapan Sinha, a director I respect, also valued diversity.

S. S.: Uttam Kumar and Soumitra were a much talked about pair of rivals. How was your relationship with the superstar? Isn't it true that your fan base, unlike Uttam Kumar's, was among young intellectuals

and students of elite colleges, a fact that Ray once spoke about? Did you yearn for Uttam Kumar's phenomenal popularity?

S. C.: People loved to think we were bitter rivals. In life, I shared a great bond with Uttamda. Surely, we were competitive, but the friendship survived, despite the occasional ruptures. Uttam Kumar's popularity is unmatched. Of course, I too had my share of stardom. We were different kinds of artistes, but we accorded value to each other's work.

S. S.: Which Indian actors are your favourites?

S. C.: Balraj Sahani is my all time favourite. Despite being a hero, he could pack in good acting, which is rare in Hindi cinema. Dilip Kumar and Raj Kapoor were also good, but in terms of cinematic acting, Balraj Sahani was the best. I am immensely fond of Naseeruddin Shah. He is a great talent. And his talent was well served because he arrived at a favourable moment in Indian cinema, during the heyday of the parallel cinema movement. Kamal Hassan is a quality actor, but due to the demands of the South Indian film industry, his acting seems too 'performative'. Naseeruddin was able to overcome this compulsion. Kamal Hassan isn't as consistent as Naseeruddin.

S. S.: Is reading Tagore a compulsion for you, as it is for many Bengalis?

S. C.: Tagore is not a fashion for me; he is a necessity in my everyday life. Unlike Ray, whom I knew for thirty years, I have never seen Tagore. Yet, Tagore is more alive than many of the living corpses around me. He can make me mull over a single line for days. For instance, he was once asked, among other things, by a London newspaper to select whom he considered the greatest from a list of international stalwarts. Tagore responded: "Nature hates superlatives. We can be sure of the great, but not the greatest." A single remark like this reveals his genius.

S. S.: Is a classical bent of mind important for a creative actor?

S. C.: Tradition is the starting point. But if I remain stuck to it, then I become a hopeless creature. I have to move forward. The path of that trajectory can be mapped in some measures by understanding one's roots. If I didn't know the acting styles of Sisir Kumar Bhaduri or Jogesh Chowdhury, I wouldn't have known what new aspects to bring to my acting. Moreover, certain values in art and life are static. For instance, the humanist tradition. Nothing can alter its basic premise. Therefore, a classical attitude isn't anachronistic; rather, it can enrich one's sense of the modern. My favourite filmmaker Akira Kurosawa was deeply rooted in Japanese culture. The same holds true for Ray and Tagore.

S. S.: During your long career you remained accessible to people, despite your stardom. Recently, during the political unrest in Bengal you didn't join the opposition as many artists did. Is your affiliation with the Left so strong?

S. C.: I criticized the Left in Bengal for their policies on Nandigram in



Babita, Soumitra Chatterjee and Satyajit Ray on location of the film *Ashani Sanket* (*Distant Thunder*). 1973.

their own paper. I don't favour many of their ideas. But it is true, I am wary of the Right, especially when the Right projects Leftist positions, as seen in the recent election in Bengal. My experiences of the Right have indeed been very bitter. An individual is a social being. I need connection with people. This belief took me to the streets. I must add, though, that at my age it is no longer possible to be involved in activism as before.

**S. S.:** The critic or the common man – whose evaluation do you value more?

**S. C.:** It feels great when a critic analyses your craft. However, I am keen to have people's responses. The common man consumes everything I do – films, plays, poetry, and recitations. Their opinions are valuable to me. Sometimes, they offer insights and express dissatisfaction about a performance that hasn't matched their expectations. I honour their opinions.

**S. S.:** Did you opt for the Jatra form to have a greater interface with people?

**S. C.:** I did it more out of nostalgia. I have seen the vitality of the folk form in my childhood and thought of testing it myself. But the experience was uninspiring. It was cacophonous. It didn't match up to the memories of the Jatras I had seen in childhood.

**S. S.:** Film stars are known to be superstitious? Are you religious?

**S. C.:** I have kept my distance from institutionalised religion. I love Durga idols, but that is my aesthetic sensibility. To me the idea of God is philosophical rather than spiritual. Recently, for the first time in seventy-seven years, I have written two poems with God as their

theme. I owe this transition to Tagore.

**S. S.:** Do you feel that the art of poetry and the art of recitation complement each other?

**S. C.:** I was into recitation much before I began to write poetry. My father was a well-known elocutionist and listening to him I became attuned to the rhythm of words and the nuances of meter. I began writing poetry in my adolescence, overcome as I was by romantic feelings. I had to contend with the looming shadow of Tagore. I wrote bad poetry. But I kept slogging, and eventually my first book was published in 1975. The responses from readers were heartening. I still write poetry and enjoy the process. Since I am also a professional elocutionist, I have remained attentive to contemporary writing and that has kept me responsive to the new styles in poetry. In a way, both the involvements nurture each other.

**S. S.:** Would you write an autobiography?

**S. C.:** To write one's life means telling everything. Most of us don't have a palate for the truth, irrespective of how much we cry hoarse about being truthful.

**S. S.:** You are a known bibliophile. Name five books that you would now want by your beside.

**S. C.:** *Gitabitan* (collection of Tagore's lyrics), the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, *Hamlet*, and the works of Jim Corbett.

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