

The Rays' cinematic reunion: A glimpse into Sukumar Ray's world

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In the year 1961, a significant tribute was paid by the renowned filmmaker and author Satyajit Ray. He chose to resurrect "Sandesh", the beloved children's magazine originally established by his grandfather, Upendrakishore Ray Chowdhury. This heartfelt endeavour was not only an homage to his grandfather's legacy but also a poignant acknowledgment of the immense contribution made by his father, Sukumar Ray. Under Sukumar Ray's remarkable editorial guidance, "Sandesh" had achieved iconic status, becoming a household name throughout Bengal.

In the eight years that Sukumar got to take over the editorship of Sandesh, he wrote and illustrated innumerable pieces that are revolutionary in any sub-adult literature in the world. So Sandesh, the magazine again relaunched under the editorship of Satyajit Ray and Subhash Mukhopadhyay in 1961, was actually a giant step to rediscover the world of Sukumar Ray, who died in 1923 just at the age of 35.

Ray again offered his literary tribute to his illustrated father in 1966 when he translated many poems from "Abol Tabol" (The Ridiculous) and the collection Nonsense Rhymes of Sukumar. Ray opened the door for non-Bengali readers to read Sukumar. With his extraordinary command of both Bengali and English, Ray did almost equal justice to the English translation. His father's extra-ordinary power of imagination and peerless selection of words were converted into English with no loss of magic in most of the translation.

Ray got the best chance to offer the richest tribute to his father in his birth centenary year of 1987 when the Government of West Bengal offered him to make a documentary on Sukumar Ray.

Cinema, the most adorable form of art to Satyajit Ray, was perhaps the best way to pay homage to his father, but this time luck was not on Satyajit Ray's side. It was a time when he was slowly recovering after a prolonged period of suffering from heart disease. He has been partly bedridden and homebound since 1984. He was not doing any films or even travelling unless it was very essential.

Thus, when the offer landed on his lap, he accepted it, knowing his limitations as a director.

The biggest challenge of making a documentary on Sukumar Ray was that there was no film footage of the man. For any biographical documentary film, footage of the man in the subject adds huge visual delight. Ray, while making a documentary on Rabindranath Tagore in 1961, was blessed with several film clips and newsreels of Tagore taken both in India and abroad. This time, deprived of such elements, he was forced to depend on old photographs, illustrations, newspaper clips, old family letters, diaries, etc. With this, Ray had to recreate the magic of his script-writ-



ing perfection for documentaries that the world had seen in Rabindranath Tagore, Sikkim, Bala and Inner Eye.

The first thing that made it difficult for Ray to make a documentary on his father was his misfortune of not knowing him personally as a son. Ray lost his father in 1923, when he was just two and a half years old. So many times Ray has said clearly that he is not introduced to his father as any son does, but rather that he knows him through his world of creativity.

This disadvantage of "not knowing a father but only knowing an iconic literary genius" named Sukumar Ray actually converted into an advantage to the director because it prevented him from going overly emotional at any point in the entire film. Ray, unlike recreating childhood scenes from the Rabindranath Tagore documentary, just used many black-and-white photographs of Sukumar and his family members at the beginning of the film. In the first 12 minutes or so, Ray navigates into the world of the Ray Chowdhury family with a lot of known and unknown facts through the background commentary rendered by Soumitra Chatterjee. The best part of that part is telling the rich cricket legacy of his family, a fact not known to many people before the era of Google.

Sukumar's role and efforts to make Sandesh a leading children's magazine of that time are very visible in the film. Ray salvaged and showed many rare cover designs, headpieces, and illustrations done by his father for Sandesh. In a nutshell, he exploited the unseen archive of the magazine to a great extent, which no doubt enriched the film. It is a visual delight to see the colour paintings of Sukumar and his modern printing output on the pages of his edited magazine.

Ray spent a considerable amount of time connecting Sukumar's close relationship with Rabindranath Tagore. He mentions Sukumar's association and Tagore's affection for this talented servant of Bengali literature. In the documentary, we get to see a group photo taken in London in 1912 where a young Sukumar Ray, then doing higher studies in printing and

photography in England, is seated next to Tagore, who was travelling to England with his English translation of Gitanjali. The film shows Sukumar's article on Tagore's literary work, which was published in London's famous



Quest magazine. It talks about the movement launched by Sukumar and his young friends of Bramha Samaj to include Tagore in its committee, and a small booklet with the title "Keno Rabindratha ke Chai" (Why Rabindranath is required), then published by the young gang, was also shown.

As an editor, Sukumar Ray convinced Tagore to contribute to Sandesh. A clip comes on the screen where the spectator sees Tagore's signature on the page of Sandesh. Tagore's soulful lecture read in Shantiniketan after Sukumar's untimely demise and Tagore's visit to him on his deathbed were also mentioned in the commentary rendered.

Surprisingly, Satyajit Ray omitted two vital facts that relate to Tagore and his father.

One is an iconic photograph of Tagore taken by Sukumar Ray; it was not mentioned in the film, and another fact that went unmentioned is Tagore's special preface written for Sukumar's first story book, "Pagla Dashu," published in 1940, 17 years after his demise.

Ray tried to include every single creative merit that Sukumar Ray showed in his short life as an editor, illustrator, club secretary, organiser, photographer and even as an activist in Brahmo Samaj.

His proficiency in technology, whether it is modern printing or photography, was vividly mentioned in the film; however, Ray missed to mention that Sukumar was a very good organ player and music composer, as well as a merit Satyajit himself



magazine from a child magazine to a new age teen magazine when no one in India ever thought of such an idea.

It is unfortunate that this amazing side of Sukumar Ray was not boldly mentioned in the script of Satyajit Ray's documentary. He had the chance to throw light on this side of Sukumar Ray rather than give too much importance to the enactment of his plays.

While trying his best to project Sukumar Ray as a mature, talented literary figure not confined to the small world of children's literature, Satyajit Ray simply



overlooked a wider spectrum of his father's work.

The documentary is a good example of self-control exercises.

Satyajit had every easy scope to overload the script with many short interviews and bytes of elderly people, including himself, talking about Sukumar Ray, but he did not include any. His own name comes only once when commentary runs to describe that in 1921, Sukumar's wife Suprabha gave birth to a son, and the newborn was named Satyajit.

It was the point where emotional turmoil could have overtaken Satyajit Ray. He could have added information, like that his name was initially decided to be Prasad, which was later changed to Satyajit. He even did not mention the only recollected memory of him with his father seeing a steamer going on the Ganga in Sodepur. All these small titbits, which have huge personal value but are not that important for common people, were smartly and ruthlessly avoided. In this regard, Ray has shown his global standard as a filmmaker.

To make the audience understand Sukumar Ray's ability as a playwright, Ray screened three of his plays in small fragments. Noted actors like Utpal

Dutta, Soumitra Chatterjee, Chiranjit Chakraborty, Santosh Dutta, Tapen Chatterjee and young students of Patha Bhavan School were cast. While The character of Santosh Dutta in the play "Ha Ja Ba Ra La" was shown in shadows and made a profound impact in the film. The play "Lakshman Shaktishel" is covered for a longer span, and Tapen as Hanuman and Soumitra as Ram enacted the play like any normal play. A song by Anup Ghoshal was also included in it.

The best thing about this documentary is that Ray did not try to show Sukumar Ray as a writer only meant for children's literature. The entire effort given by Ray in this film is to show Sukumar as an exceptionally talented man who is equally comfortable in the worlds of science, the arts, and commerce as well.

The documentary ends with the last stage of Sukumar's life and finally his premature death when he was at the apex of his creativity. In his many poems, Sukumar was slowly expressing his impending death in a pensive tune, and Ray made Soumitra read one of his last poems, which talks about ending his song "Ganer Pala Sango Mor".

Ray showed clips of many newspapers reporting the untimely death of Sukumar Ray, and in that, The Statesman was shown with the wrong masthead. As an avid reader of The Statesman from his early teens, this should not have been overlooked by Ray.

Satyajit Ray scholar Debasis Mukhopadhyay thinks that it will be unfair to compare Ray's other classical documentaries with this Sukumar Ray, which he did inside the studio and even some work at his home.

Debasis, who is one of the best collectors of anything related to Satyajit Ray, thinks the flashing of various characters in Sukumar Ray's writing shown in the beginning of the film itself is a little amateurish, and Ray's inability to take a camera outdoors is a big drawback of the film. Debasis reminded me that this is the only documentary Satyajit Ray made in which he himself did not do voiceover commentary in his signature baritone, and this is his only documentary made in Bengali. The rest of the four are all in English, and he himself is the voice behind the screen.

No master has all his work equally great. So is Satyajit Ray. Considering his physical limitations at the time of making this documentary, the tight budget provided by the Government of West Bengal, and the additional mental pressure of not falling into any trap of being overly emotional, Satyajit Ray tried his best in his last documentary that he made after many years.

The Sukumar Ray documentary, directed by Satyajit Ray, was to be released on 30 October 1987, on his 100th birthday at Nandan. As the hall was not available, it was released a day later, on 31 October 1987, in the presence of Jyoti Basu and the director himself.

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