

'MOST OF RAY'S LETTERS ARE STILL UNPUBLISHED'

In a candid chat, Debasis Mukhopadhyay talks about his experiences while archiving the forgotten works of Satyajit Ray, his cordial relationship with the legendary director and more

SOMEN SENGUPTA

Driven solely by passion, a young man from a small town of Bengal once left a secure job in the Railways to intensively research on Satyajit Ray. In the next few years, his passionate curiosity to archive the creative works of Ray resulted in the re-emergence of so many lost gems that the master director himself started calling Debasis Mukhopadhyay "my compendium".

Through vivid and systematic research, Mukhopadhyay unearthed short stories, articles, film synopses, illustrations, book covers, stage designs and many more forgotten works of Ray. Film enthusiasts will remain indebted to him for introducing them to the vast spectrum of Ray's world.

Excerpts from an interview with Mukhopadhyay:

Q How and when did the idea of archiving the works of Ray come to you?

I got introduced to Ray's world in 1971, when I watched his film *Pratidwandi*. Soon, I read his book *Badshahi Angti*. Both the experiences reshaped my idea of contemporary Bengali culture.

As a student of library science for a few years, I took on an academic project of making a bibliography of the books written by and on Ray. Then onwards, I continued with the job out of passion.

Q When did you start realising that your work is important?

From 1978, for collecting more information on Ray, I was meeting people like Chidananda Dasgupta, Leela Majumdar, Nalini Das and Radha Prasad Gupta among others.

Once, Nalini Das told me that when Manik (Ray) was a student of Kala Bhavan, Santiniketan, he used to write short stories in English, some of which were published in newspapers. I rushed to Kala Bhavan to check the date of his admission, and based on that, started searching old newspaper

files.

Those days, there were no facilities of mobile camera, copy machine or even a decent place to surf through old papers except at the National Library. I started checking the archives of *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, and to my surprise, indeed found a full-page short story published on 18 May 1941, named "Abstraction" by one S Roy. By scanning more of its issues, I found another story published on 22 March 1942 by the name "Shades of Grey", written by S Ray. I was almost confident that both were written by Ray.

Q Did you inform him that you have found a lost gem?

In 1981, I read Ray's interview in a Bengali magazine, where he had mentioned an article in *The Statesman* as his first published work.

I wrote him a letter, asking for his comment. He replied and confirmed that both the stories were indeed written by him. After that, Ray would always mention those stories as his first works and acknowledge me for finding them.

Q Did you meet him frequently?

I became close to Sandip Ray (Ray's son), or Babu *da*. Every time I made a new discovery about Ray, I would show it to Babu *da*, who would enthusiastically take me to him. Soon, he himself started entertaining me in person and over telephone.

The relationship turned so cordial that he personally started inviting me to his sets and also gifted his books, every time a new one was published. It motivated me to study his life and work more vividly.

Q Did he offer any help in your research?

Yes. Such was his kindness that when he came to know that many were not cooperating with me in unearthing documents and information, he issued me a handwritten letter of introduction in Bengali, under his letterhead.

It clearly stated that I am working on him and any help rendered to me will help him as well. It became a gold-



Debasis Mukhopadhyay

en passport for me to access many famous people and rare documents.

Q What other rare works of Ray have you come upon?

One was an important article published in *The Statesman*, titled "National Style in Film" in 1949. I found several others from *Desh*, *Betar Jagat* and *Chalachitra*.

Many of his outstanding illustrations for advertisements were untraceable. I followed his style of sketch and brush strokes and started matching those with old newspapers. The illustrations were done by him as an employee of D J Kemar & Company.

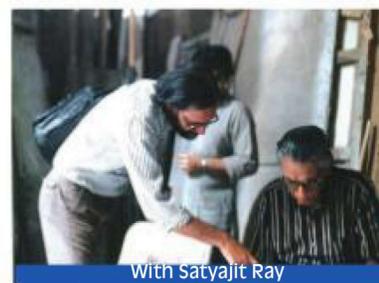
Ray, as one of the founder-members of Calcutta Cine Club, used to write short synopses for many foreign movies. No one ever thought that those are priceless for the world of cinema. I spent several hours going through the club's old records and files, and finally found some of the finest write-ups of Ray.

Q Has your work been used by others?

About that, I have mixed experiences. In 1987, when Shyam Benegal was making a documentary on him, Ray called me and asked for some of the illustrations he had done for commercials. I had all the dates of such publications. Collecting them from me, Ray rushed to the National Library and got them photocopied, which Benegal used.

So it was with Goutam Ghose, with whom I worked for hours while he was doing a documentary on Ray.

In 1992, just before and immediately after his demise, *Desh* magazine came up with two matchless issues, covering an extensive documentation



With Satyajit Ray

of Ray, including his cinema, music, books, reviews of his films in foreign journals, international awards, etc.

It was prepared by me and my name was mentioned, though I was an employee of a rival newspaper then. The same list later came out multiple times in many periodicals and books, but none gave me credit.

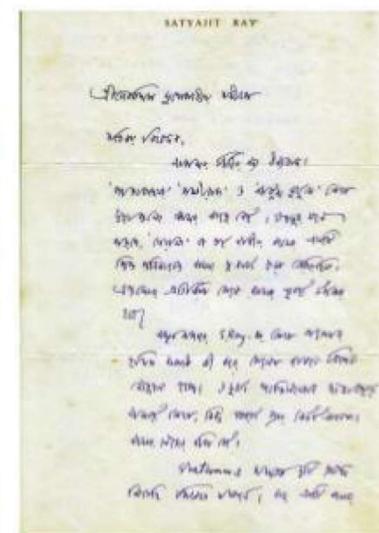
At one point, Ray started calling me his compendium and used to refer my name to anyone who wished to work on him.

Q How would he react when you revealed his past works to him?

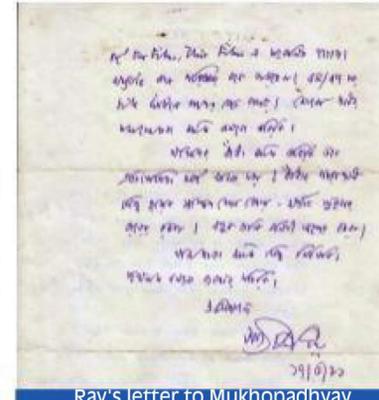
He used to approve of them with the joy of a child. In 1990, I found a book that was published in 1941 from College Street. Its cover and illustrations had a clear touch of Ray's style and opening it, I found his name as the cover designer. The book was *Chatu Babur Chata* by Kamakshi Prasad Chatterjee.

I ran to the studio where Ray was busy shooting his last film *Agantuk*. As soon as I handed over the book to him, he was delighted. Thanking me several times, he said with an impish grin, "Not bad, isn't it?"

That was the moment when my friend Hiram Sen took a photograph, my only one with Ray, whom I had



Ray's letter to Mukhopadhyay



Ray's letter to Mukhopadhyay

been meeting for years.

Q Did he ever give you anything that you consider a matchless gift?

Apart from many books, periodicals, photographs and memorabilia, he had once given me a special audio cassette made by the National Film Development Corporation of India that contained the theme music and rare audio clips of *Ghare Baire*. It was a limited edition, meant for foreign film journalists. Ray gifted me a copy, signed by him -- it was priceless.

Q Do you think that many of Ray's creative sides are still unexplored?

Yes. After years of research, I have written an article showing Ray's connection to theatre.

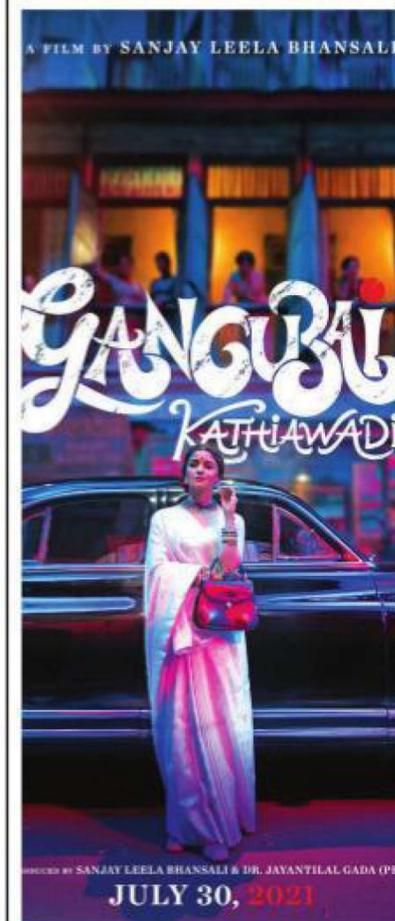
Many don't know that after Rabindranath Tagore, Ray was a master letter-writer. He wrote a lot of letters, most of which are still unpublished.

The writer is a freelance contributor

starred.

The independent

Reign begins



In the wake of the ongoing coronavirus outbreak, the makers of Sanjay Leela Bhansali's Alia Bhatt-starrer *Gangubai Kathiawadi* have finally announced the film's new release date.

The magnum opus, which will land in theatres on 25 February this year, will have its much-anticipated world premiere at Berlin's 72nd International Film Festival. The news was shared on Bhansali Productions' *Instagram* page. The caption read, "Witness her reign in cinemas near you on 25th February 2022. #GangubaiKathiawadi. (sic)"

Ajay Devgn also stars in the upcoming film, directed by Bhansali. Bhatt plays Gangubai, one of the most powerful, loved, and respected madams from Kamathipura during the 1960s, in the period drama based on a chapter from Hussain Zaidi's book, *Mafia Queens of Mumbai*.

Vijay Raaz, Shantanu Maheshwari, Indira Tiwari, and Seema Pahwa appear in *Gangubai Kathiawadi* as well while Emraan Hashmi and Huma Qureshi are slated to be doing cameos. Jayantilal Gada and Bhansali (Pen Studios) have produced the film.

