

## SATYAJIT RAY BIRTH CENTENARY: A BLUEPRINT FOR ACTION\*

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Satyajit Ray continues to be inspiring. I remember my first meeting with him, sometime in early 1986, at his residence in Kolkata. I had earlier corresponded with him, written on his work and reviewed his book *Our Films, Their Films*. Ray was so cordial that we chatted for over an hour on various aspects of his vision and craft. The quiet power that female protagonists of his films exude, the role coincidence plays in art creation, the way ‘deeper truth’ is articulated in cinema, and how he used to leave space for innovation within his taut screenplays were amongst many things we talked about, referring to specific sequences from his *Devi*, *Mahanagar*, *Kanchenjunga*, and even *Yasujirô Ozu’s Tokyo Story*. In my youthful exuberance, I sought to point out the broad similarity of treatment between a sequence in *Devi* (1960) and in Jean-Luc Godard’s *Vivre Sa Vie* (1962).

The multi-faceted creativity of Ray (May 2, 1921 – April 23, 1992) has made the world more luminous, evoking global admiration across cultural and linguistic barriers. Amongst Bengali speaking people, he is adored as the great cultural icon after Rabindranath Tagore. In the West, especially in France, UK and the US, Ray has been ranked amongst the great film-makers of all time. His cinematic vision and style have touched millions of viewers and influenced legion of film-makers from Martin Scorsese to Christopher Nolan to Abbas Kiarostami, and from Shyam

Benegal to Rituparno Ghosh to Adoor Gopalakrishnan. Other than Charles Chaplin, few other directors had perhaps been more decorated, written about and have impacted the course of cinema than Ray. No wonder the United Nations reckons him as a global icon and the novels of Nobel-winning writers like Saul Bellow’s *Herzog* or J.M. Coetzee’s *Youth*, and even Rushdie’s *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* have loving references to his work.

Ray considered cinema as the highest form of commercial art and refused to classify it into art and commercial categories. Every kind of good films interested him and his impress on this medium as a whole has been phenomenal. Intellectual deliberation and research continue on his oeuvre, and books continue to get published on him, even three decades after his demise.

But what remains unknown to many outside West Bengal and Bangladesh is that he was more than a film-maker. As a complete artist, his contribution as a prolific writer of original stories (including for children) and novels, as a music composer, as an illustrator and calligrapher (having created four typefaces: *Ray Roman*, *Ray Bizarre*, *Daphnis* and *Holiday*) have also been substantial. In his native Bengal, his books have been amongst the best-sellers over the decades.

Unfortunately, Ray has not been as much seen or read in most other parts of India. Consequently, people in those areas are not well aware of his cinematic and literary outpourings. Celebrating his birth centenary, at the state, national and global scale would provide a unique opportunity to bridge this gap and make Ray accessible to a wider audience. Here are some suggestions for the proposed course of action.

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At the global level, the United Nations may declare Ray's birthday to be celebrated in a befitting manner [In 1978, Ray received a proposal from the UN to make a film on the 'horrors and miseries of war' for worldwide TV screening]. The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, British Film Institute, Cinémathèque Française, Criterion Collection and others may like to ensure that *all* of Ray's films are restored and preserved, may be as Common Human Heritage, using the latest technology.

Renowned international journals like the *Sight & Sound*, *Film Quarterly* and *Cahiers du Cinéma* that had published on Ray earlier should also bring out special issues, underscoring the relevance of Ray in today's world, and devise means to bring his creation to the notice of present generation of viewers, especially in Europe and the US. One hopes that the major international film festivals at Cannes, Venice, Berlin, London and the like will commemorate this occasion suitably.

At the national level, in consonance of the spirit that much of India's new cinema was promoted by state intervention, the Ministries of Information and Broadcasting, and Culture of the Government of India (GoI) would do well to take the lead in this celebration. Other than issuance of postage stamps which is customary, the GoI, in association with the States, could think of setting up Ray Film Centres in different state capitals, in the way Rabindra Bhavans were set up as a part of Tagore centenary, which should emerge as enlightened centres of cinematic and related cultural discourses. A national level committee at the highest level should be set up immediately to plan for the celebration.

Organising an international seminar with the participation of leading film-makers, translating Ray's select literary works in English and other regional languages, arranging to show a retrospective of all his films with suitable regional sub-titles through the TV network, and declaring May 2-8 as National Film Week every year, should also be considered. Sangeet Natak Akademi, Lalit Kala Akademi, and the Sahitya Akademi should celebrate different facets of his creativity. Like the Festival of India, a Festival of Satyajit Ray can be organised by the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts and other organisations. Concurrently, the Ministry of External Affairs may like to involve its embassies to screen Ray's films and spread the awareness about his noteworthy contribution, especially in our neighbouring countries. As a bridge between the East and the West, who can be a

better representatives of India's culture to the rest of the world?

The year-long celebration commencing on May 2, 2020 (despite the Covid pandemic) should involve all stakeholders, including those outside the world of cinema. Ray's native state, West Bengal, should take a major initiative in this matter. How to ensure that Ray is seen and read in small towns and villages where Bengali is widely spoken should be its priority. The unfinished work on Ray-Encyclopedia in English, started many years ago by Prabodh Maitra and others, should be completed under the supervision of experts. Action should be expedited to complete the Ray archive at Kolkata, in association with the Ray Society, modelling on the best film archives abroad. Ray was born in a house at Garpar Road that is associated with the hallowed memories of his illustrious father Sukumar Ray and grandfather Upendra Kishore Ray Chowdhury. This historic building can be acquired by the state government and, as Debasis Mukhopadhyay has argued (Aajkaal, May 1, 2020) can perhaps be converted into a memorial. If imaginatively designed, it could be an attraction for tourists and scholars alike.

Other than holding of seminars, lectures and workshops, the scripts of Ray's films as also his complete literary output should be brought out, in volumes, in order to be widely disseminated, may be at a subsidised rate, in consultation with the concerned publishers and his son Sandip Ray. Arrangements should also be made for continuous screening of Ray films throughout the year, in a small ear-marked auditorium, meant for researchers as also for the interested public. All these should be accomplished by way of involving the public and the civil society at large. It would be appropriate if the dynamic chief minister of West Bengal takes personal interest in this regard.

Reviving the film societies under the Federation of Film Societies of India (once spearheaded by Ray) and encouraging them to show and deliberate on his work, with the requisite financial support from concerned authorities, would be a positive initiative. The enlightened corporate houses should also take part in the process in their own imaginative way. In addition, students and teachers in academic institutions, commercial artists and advertisement professionals, writers, printers and publishers may also like to engage themselves with different aspects of his ingenuity.

I met him last in January 1990 at a dinner party during the International Film Festival of India at Calcutta. There were many more films still in him. Though not in the best of health, his interest, enthusiasm and creativity had not waned.

Ray's deep humanism and his abiding faith in the

family of man had been influenced by the noblest of Indian and Western traditions. Yet, there were limitations of his vision, as some Marxist scholars had noted, which should also be reflected on. Then only will the legacy of Ray be more living and enduring. His birth centenary should give us an opportunity to be immersed in his work and to pause and reflect over his majestic artistry. □