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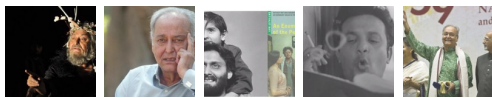
The Man Who Would Be King

How an actor's never-ending quest for the perfect role produced a lifetime's worth of great cinema

By SAYANDEB CHOWDHURY | 1 July 2012



COURTESY: SAYANDEB CHOWDHURY



{ 1 }

1959. **APUR SANSAR.** A man in his early 20s, a loner and drifter, a struggling writer, a reluctant father and a fretful widower, finally finds home in his estranged little son. His departure into the horizon with his son on his shoulders is also the moment which marks his arrival on the scene.

2011. **Raja Lear.** An elderly man in long black robes, unkempt hair and flowing white beard lies motionless and still, death relieving him at last of rage and dementia while his cry—"Who is it that can tell me who I am"—rises up in the air, daggers it into slices and pirouettes into the atmosphere beyond.

Apur Sansar completed Ray's seminal Apu trilogy (after *Pather Panchali* and *Aparajito*) and placed the filmmaker firmly in the rollcall of the global New Wave. Fifty-two years later, the first ever Bengali production of *King Lear*, *Raja Lear*, opened on the Kolkata stage. Except for the fact that both are iconic works of art, nothing binds them except the actor who plays both the world-weary young man and the raging King of Follies—Soumitra Chatterjee, in his debut film and his supreme moment on stage yet, respectively.

Not many outside Bengal would be able to recall an actor who made his debut with one of the world's most reputed filmmakers, went on to become his most repeated actor, achieved commercial and artistic success with a range of other filmmakers, greyed into an thespian of stunning consistency and, at the age of 77, found fruition on the stage.

Chatterjee, who was awarded the Dada Saheb Phalke Award in 2012 for his contribution to Indian

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cinema, has remained a talismanic presence in the Bengali movie-making fraternity (and partly the Bengali stage) for more than half a century. In an industry known for early burnouts and changing public tastes, this is no mean achievement. His longevity alone proves his indispensability to Bengali cinema. But does it explain his own motivation? In a range of recent interviews, Chatterjee has highlighted a single factor that has kept him going: the search for a role that will challenge his capacities and force him to reconsider his limitations.

Chatterjee entered Satyajit Ray's world with *Apur Sansar* and left it only at the latter's death in 1992, having acted in 14 of his 28 films, a feat unlikely to be surpassed in the history of performer-auteur pairing, the sub-genre of great cinema-making that includes stellar unions like Akira Kurosawa-Toshiro Mifune, Federico Fellini-Marcello Mastroianni, Werner Herzog-Klaus Kinski, and Ingmar Bergman-Max von Sydow.

Chatterjee, however, has attained a status beyond his achievements as Ray's staple and that is why his selection for the Dadasaheb Phalke Award is critical. The Phalke Award honours a lifetime's body of work, and is given to an individual with an influential and varied repertoire known as much for its effect as for longevity. Satyajit Ray was only half a life for Chatterjee. Ray may have caught him by his frantic fingers and helped him find a place under the magic lantern. Ray may have handed him part after part authored by himself; but after Ray (and not apart from Ray) Chatterjee has evolved on his own as a consummate artiste, the super-performer, the master thespian—especially in his successful portrayals of ageing, lonely men in film after film in the past two decades, a part that has found its climax in his role as King Lear. The Phalke Award salutes all of that and, in doing so, presents before a wider public than the audience for Bengali cinema the reason to explore Chatterjee's repertoire.

Just out of university, Soumitra Chatterjee was a student of theatre maestro Sisir Bhaduri when, in the late 1950s, he was referred to Ray by a common friend. In Chatterjee's large lost eyes, sharp nose, tall but slight build and avuncular, fair-complexioned bearing, Ray located his youthful Apu, an easily identifiable, romantic countenance that reminded him and his audience of a late-19th century Bengali *bhadrolok*.

And that was how Chatterjee burst onto the scene. He followed *Apur Sansar* with a series of critically acclaimed Ray films like *Devi* (1960), *Teen Kanya* (1961), *Abhijan* (1962), *Kapurush* (1965) and especially *Charulata* (1964). For Ray followers, *Charulata's* Amol, modelled on a young Rabindranath Tagore on whose autobiographical novella (*Noshtoni*) the film was based, was one of Chatterjee's great achievements, as much for his interpretation of Amol as for the look he cultivated with Ray's help. From a critical point of view, though, *Abhijan* was a bigger challenge for Chatterjee as an actor. In this lesser-known Ray film, co-starring Waheeda Rehman, Chatterjee played an immigrant, North-Indian taxi driver, a sort of role far removed from his milieu. In a recent interview, he said that it was a character he had barely known in real life and that he had had to draw a lot of inspiration from the script itself. His apprehensions about the role used to haunt him in his sleep, he added.

Looking back, Chatterjee's work during Ray's lifetime appears to be characterised by three aspects: his work with Ray, which is, by the hard standards set by Ray, uneven; his work apart from Ray, which has flashes of brilliance but never the command of his later age; and the imagined one-upmanship with Uttam Kumar, the legendary Bengali matinee idol who was the lord of all the cinematic land that he surveyed.

After *Kapurush*, Chatterjee appeared as the shrewd and urbane Asim in *Aranyer Din-Ratri* in 1969. This film, one of Ray's most acclaimed, concluded what could be seen as Chatterjee's first phase with Ray, one more enriching than his second, which spanned the following decades and carried on until Ray's death.

As the 1970s arrived and Ray grew more and more restive with urban angst, homelessness and hopelessness, he went back to Chatterjee more sparingly. What was once Chatterjee's asset, his *bhadrolok* lustre, now became something of a limitation as Calcutta and Bengali cinema stepped into the angry decade. Chatterjee was deemed to be too soft, too dreamy to imbibe the torments of the new urban youth—and perhaps not as young as Ray would want the new characters to be. So in the first half of the 1970s, he brought in three new actors for his Calcutta Trilogy (*Pratidwandi*, *Seemabaddha*, *Jana Aranya*), all of who could be trained to reflect that vibe.

Through the 1970s, Chatterjee's best outings with Ray (the disappointing 1973 *Ashani Sanket* included) were for young adults, as Prodosh C Mitter (Feluda) in Ray's adaptations of his own stories of the delightful sleuth. His next *adult* role for Ray had to wait till 1984, when he played the scheming Sandip in *Ghare-Baire*. His last two films with Ray were *Ganashatru* (1989) and *Sakha Prosakha* (1990). In the former, an adaptation of the Ibsen play *An Enemy of the People*, he played a well-meaning doctor locked in battle with the local administration of a small town over contaminated water at a popular pilgrimage site; in the latter, he played a guileless, demented middle-aged man who watches in frustration as his extended family is sucked into a vortex of corruption and greed. By this time, Chatterjee was greying and looked suitably mellowed to play characters fitting his age, a transition that Ray had helped him to make. That was Ray's last gift to Chatterjee and perhaps his most enduring.

Apart from the works of Ray and fellow Phalke awardee Tapan Sinha (*Jhinder Bandi*, *Ekhuni*, *Khudito Pashan*), Chatterjee also appeared in several other memorable movies of his time: *Baksho Bodol*, *Sansar Simante*, *Saat Panke Bandha*, *Tin Bhubaner Pare*, *Kinu Gowalar Goli*, *Baghini* and *AkashKusum*. This was the typically middle-of-the-road cinema that was epitomised by Uttam Kumar, in which rich content, complex storytelling and bravura performance effortlessly coexisted with songs, music and, mostly, a



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{ II }

WITH HIS REPEATED SUCCESS with Ray, a group of critics and cinephiles began to hail Chatterjee as the perfect counterfoil to the allegedly easy and commercially assuaged charm of Uttam Kumar, who was by the mid-1950s to a matinee darling. A man of middle-class birth and ordinary education, and almost no formal training in cinema, Kumar made a tentative debut as an actor in the late 1940s. But it was only with films like *Agni Porikha* (1954), an archetypal black-and-white romantic melodrama of star-crossed lovers, that he really arrived, and soon caused something of a deluge. Kumar not only became a phenomenally popular star in the next few years, but around him there soon grew a *new* cinematic establishment, complete with a retinue of co-actors, heroines, producers, directors and distributors. Kumar became a cult whose unrivalled popularity only matched his box office rewards.

What Satyajit Ray, as a filmmaker, did to Bengali art-house cinema, Kumar, as a matinee idol, did to commercial Bengali cinema. They established two entire schools of filmmaking, two celluloid ecosystems around them.

Uttam Kumar (born Arun Kumar Chatterjee) was everything that Soumitra Chatterjee was not. In fact, much to their dislike, they became, in many ways, the classic embodiments of the Apollonian-Dionysian dichotomy that every culture manages, consciously or unconsciously, to invoke in its dominant cultural figures.

Soumitra Chatterjee had the pedigree of a good university education, had worked in radio, was a talented young elocutionist, edited a literary magazine, was tutored by Bhaduri, and, to top it all, had found lavish favour with the man who inevitably became the greatest Indian export to world cinema. In comparison, Uttam Kumar was ostensibly lacking in *bhadrolok* certificates, collaborated professionally with lesser directors and producers, was an unapologetic applier of the grease paint, a romantic hero, a purveyor of fantasia in the darkened theatre galleries, a monarch of the escapist, middle-class, marquee melodrama. In short, he was merely a star and hence not the right fit for the newly minted, leftist-minded postcolonial intellectuals whom the Presidency College and its ilk were churning out with severe intent. Inevitably, they preferred Chatterjee to Kumar.

And at times the two idols faced off.

Chatterjee and Uttam Kumar were pitted against each other, most memorably in *Jhinder Bandi* (1961), Tapan Sinha's celluloid adaptation of Saradindu Bandopadhyay's Bengali trans-creation of Anthony Hope's adventure classic *Prisoner of Zenda*. In this film, Chatterjee did not only match steps with Kumar in a famous sword-fighting scene, but even surpassed him in places as the wily villain Mayurvahan. Later that decade, they came together in Salil Datta's *Aparichito* (1969), an underrated adaptation of Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*. This film is the only one apart from the above which had Kumar and Chatterjee play out a complex script and both rise to the occasion.

In both these cases, says Moinak Biswas, film scholar and professor of film studies at Kolkata's Jadavpur University, Chatterjee benefited from being pitted against the charisma and power of an actor of Uttam Kumar's stature, though Biswas doesn't believe that there was any genuine sense of oneupmanship between them.

In the next decade, they came together in *Stree* (1972), but here Kumar, though not in prime form, ran away with the accolades in the role of a decadent zamindar. At the end of the 1970s, with both of them well past their prime, they were miscast as Devdas (Chatterjee) and Chunilal (Kumar) in a poor adaptation of the Saratchandra Chattopadhyay's literary classic *Devdas*.

It is unfortunate that Bengali cinema could not further exploit the combined talents of these two actors, their appeal to their respective constituencies and their (imagined) rivalry for creating filmic history.

Until the time Uttam Kumar was in command (he died in 1980), none of Chatterjee's films could hope to match his in either their box-office numbers or their impact and longevity. Kumar was the undisputed star of Bengali cinema, Chatterjee was a talented Ray actor and, in some cases, an occasional visitor into Kumar's terrain.

Ironically, no one realised Kumar's artistic worth beyond his coterie until Chatterjee's mentor Ray himself freed Kumar from the mould by casting him, in 1966, as the protagonist of a film based loosely on the actor's own life: *Nayak*. The film portrayed, in a span of a single train journey, the loneliness and artistic and moral dilemmas of a phenomenal cinestiar. Ray's peek into the crepuscular solitude of a matinee idol's inner life gave Uttam Kumar what he needed: an author-backed role, and Kumar rose to the challenge with "considerable intelligence and sophistication", to quote critic Chidananda Dasgupta. The result was historic. Although *Nayak* upon its release had faced allegations that Ray had pandered to commercial tastes, with time it cemented both his and Kumar's reputation. *Nayak* remains one of Ray's best films ever (buttressed with several awards at the Berlin Film Festival) and without a doubt Kumar's greatest.

What *Nayak* also did, eventually, was take away from Chatterjee any claim to having been the more intelligent and artistic of the two actors. That equity remained intact for the following decade or so. Kumar lived and died the star that he was (and an actor of no less talent), and it was only with his sudden death in 1980 that the comparison, fragile as it may have been, ended.

KUMAR'S AFTERLIFE and Chatterjee's post-Ray screen life have followed two very different and distinguished trajectories. Kumar has over the years emerged as Bengali cinema's biggest ambassador besides Ray. He has managed to attract an entirely new and ever younger generation of viewers to his charming performances and their inherent, effortless modernity. What he was to Bengali cinema was immediately obvious after his death, when the entire industry failed miserably in filling a cultural void left by the loss of a cult actor and the system that he reigned over.

A number of other factors also contributed to Bengali cinema's decline and decimation in the 1980s: the passing away or retirement of a certain school of educated filmmakers, the movement away from literature-based realistic scripts, the arrival of television, the fondness for cheap melodrama and populist kitsch, and a genuine lack of talent. Kumar was actually saved by his death in not having to be a part of this living rot (which his death partly caused), a fact that has helped preserve his legacy.

As reason and logic left the scripts, the entire middle class left the theatres. And when they did come back occasionally, to fill in some of the seats in the gaping darkness that was 1980s and early 1990s Bengali cinema, it was because of some of Soumitra Chatterjee's films. Chatterjee, unburdened by any comparison with Uttam Kumar and gradually unhinged from Ray's overwhelming shadow, managed to come into his own. He was never the lord, so he could comfortably sidestep the prevalent mediocrity and hoard for himself and his posterity a series of brilliant portrayals (outside Ray) that came his way. Some of the characters he played are now proving to be the only takeaways from the vacuous inheritance of Bengali cinema from that era.

The second life of Chatterjee started with *Koni* (1986), the underdog-to-hero story of a discredited swimming coach who fights discrimination and poverty to produce his one last champion. Only two years prior Chatterjee was Sandip, seducing Bimala in Ray's *Ghare-Baire*. But *Koni* revealed a salt-and-pepper haired Chatterjee with the finely toned body of a swimming coach and a new confidence.

He continued the coup with TapanSinha's late-career hurrahs, *Atanka* (1986) and *Antardhan* (1992), two tearing social critiques of a climate disparaging to helpless and upright ageing citizens. But this period in Chatterjee's career is most notable for Raja Mitra's 1988 film *Ekti Jibon* where Chatterjee played an earnest school master, greying and poor, who spends the remaining years of his life in the throes of an obsession to finish a complete Bengali dictionary. With his talent for details and command of body language and speech, Chatterjee startled the viewers in his portrayal of a man who deliriously collects words and phrases oblivious to the inevitable weariness of time and his surroundings.

In the next few years, as Bengali cinema recovered some of its momentum, Chatterjee continued with memorable performances in Mrinal Sen's *Mahaprithibi* (1991), a tale of a middle-class family in Calcutta, headed by Chatterjee's character, whose lives tumble out of control under the impact of the global downfall of communism, and Tapan Sinha's *Wheelchair* (1994), where he portrayed a paraplegic doctor who brings back to life a suicidal rape victim. In the same year came *Uttoron*, scripted by Satyajit Ray and directed by his son Sandip, in which Chatterjee plays a doctor whose journey to a distant village awakes him to the still-persisting horrors of abject poverty and medical myopia in the rural heartlands. In Rituparno Ghosh's *Asukh* (1999), Chatterjee played an embittered father living off the earnings of his actress daughter, their relationship straining once the mother is taken ill by an unidentified malady suspected to be AIDS. In *Paromitar Ek Din* (2000), the story of the deep bonding between a battered woman, Paromita, and her mother-in-law, Chatterjee plays the pathetic, phlegmatic lover of the mother-law Sanaka. Sanaka pities him but still meets him on lonely afternoons, a secret that is shared and understood only by Paromita. Next came Gautam Ghose's *Dekha* (2001), in which Chatterjee played an elderly poet who only learns to feel the words and sensations around him when he turns blind, while the political and moral universe around him snowballs into a giant black hole; and Suman Ghosh's *Podokhep* (2007) where he is an old man with an unusual bond with a five-year old girl.

He brought to life on screen the sad and ineffectual tenderness and anger of his generation, which, politically and physically muted, could only see the changing world from its window and rage at its indifference and intolerance, its moneyed frenzy, its post-Marxist orgy.

As this series of tragic characters led him towards cinematic immortality, he continued with one great role after another in the next decade: *Sanjhatir Roopkathara*, 2002 (a lonely ageing father), *Jara Brishtite Bhijechilo*, 2007 (a flamboyant, old womanising poet), *Ballygunge Court*, 2007 (the longing father of children who have left for distant shores), *Anshumaner Chhobi*, 2009 (a superannuated actor who reluctantly makes one last appearance under the arc lights), *The Bong Connection*, 2006 (the dying patriarch of a household in decay) and *Dwando*, 2009 (a successful neurosurgeon). "Unless one sees these films, one is not in a position to know the range and virtuosity of Chatterjee. Ray gave him the looks and the body language in his later films which Chatterjee stuck to and then immensely improved upon," Biswas says.

Bengal, which since the 1970s has turned into an industrial wasteland, saw entire generations leave home, in search of opportunities and perhaps a life elsewhere, abandoning the old and the ageing to an unending cycle of longing and anxiety. Chatterjee's eyes, a permanent home for the sadness of the generation, betray that feeling unflinching every time. In his debut, he was a reminiscent of a 19th century *bhadrolok*. In the closing gloom of late 20th century, he was one of its last surviving members, and in the new century, he is a fragile reflection of older, perhaps more charitable times. Now 77, and fighting pancreatic cancer, Chatterjee has come to embody in Bengali cinema the archetype of the

helpless, almost-senile patrician.

With *Raja Lear*, directed by Suman Mukhopadhyay, Chatterjee has fulfilled, by his own confession, one of his last wishes: to create at least one legacy on stage.

Chatterjee remains active in the movies and likely has a couple of more aces under his sleeve before he retires, if he does at all. But enough material exists to secure his greatness on screen. And the Phalke Award is a small but reassuring acknowledgement of his monumental career.

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Sayandeb Chowdhury is Assistant Professor of English at Ambedkar University, Delhi (AUD), where he teaches courses on twentieth century European literature, cinema and cultural history. He also writes on current affairs, books, cinema and cultural politics. His articles have appeared in *DNA*, *Hindustan Times*, *The Bengal Post*, *The Caravan*, *Biblio* and *The Moving Arts Journal* among others.

anguy E; j?gfont-style:italic'—*An Anthology of Poems* (2008) and *Poetry with Prakriti* (2007-2008). She is the writer for a collaborative Indo-French Poetry and Photography Project (2012). Her first book of poems is forthcoming.

C ao j?gLand of Fire which was also made into an iPad App available at: www.runaphotos.com/short-stories. She has placed in important photojournalism contests such as World Press Photo and POYi; mso-a In j?g mso-fareast-language:#00FF;mso-bidi-language:AR-SA'>Image photography festival in Perpignan and he is currently working on a story about the reconstruction of post-genocide Rwanda. You can see his work at www.benjaminloyseau.com.

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READER'S COMMENTS

2 THOUGHTS ON “THE MAN WHO WOULD BE KING”



Mallarika Sinha Roy

July 2, 2012 at 1:42 pm

Dear Author, This is a truly enjoyable reading. I do have some points and please remember that they are coming from a fan-girl of Chatterjee, and Ray, and Bengali films; and also from one who has learnt to like Uttam Kumar much later in life, not for his easy matinee-idol charisma but rather for 'his ability to portray romantic love so beautifully on screen' – Chatterjee's words on Kumar, said in a recent interview. So much for the disclaimer. Some factual details first. In Ekhoni (not Ekhuni) there is a Chatterjee, but Shubhendu, not Soumitra while the other male character (of importance, there are actually a few in the film) is played by Swaroop Dutta. In the context of stage performances of Soumitra Chatterjee, you have missed a number of crucial productions – Fera, Neelkantho, Rajkumar, and Tiktiki. I think they are important not only for their popularity and artistic material (translated from several famous plays) but also for Chatterjee's conviction to remain within 'public theatre' and still produce good theatre. Your omission of a few personal favourites – Chatterjee in Samapti, Chhutih Fande, Basanta Bilap, Saat Pake Bandha, Patalghar – left me wanting more of your analysis of Soumitra in the ostensible 'commercial' lot of films. The entire section, devoted to the hackneyed comparison between Uttam Kumar and Soumitra Chatterjee, is a little disappointing. I expected some innovative comparative analysis. My own favourite comparison is always between the ways in which Chatterjee played Feluda, and Uttam Kumar played Byomkesh in Chiriakhana. Since both were Ray films (of course in case of Feluda two films, but the character does not change) and you devote quite some time to the relationships among

these three – Ray, Kumar, and Chatterjee, it would have been really great to see how this troika can be made to talk to each other through two of the most enduringly popular Bengali characters. Let us not pass verdicts like you have done that Nayak took away from Chatterjee any claim that he was the more intelligent and artistic of the two. It sounds ungracious. Especially when we have heard from Chatterjee that they wanted to work together in a screen version of Tiktiki, but a producer was wanting. Even Uttam Kumar could not convince a producer to make a film with two actors of considerable talent and box-office pull (one of them was a star and actor, as you claim, and should have been having producers eating out of his hands). This probably puts the entire notion of 'star system' in a smaller industry like Bengali films in a rather sticky position. The last section is brilliant. It is indeed important to remember how Chatterjee has portrayed in film after film ageing, fragile, Bengali men. His work of the last two decades stands testimony to the many shades of autumn in the ideal of Bengali masculinity. His claim, in a very recent interview, was that he has always been a quick-learner and his inquisitiveness has kept him alive as an actor. For an enduring fan like me, who gave half her heart to the 'loner, drifter' Apu and the other half to that menacing, charismatic Mayurvahan, the twinkle in his eye when he performs Raja Lear, or the Husband in Tiktiki makes him the star that he is! Warmly Mallarika



kaushik majumdar

July 4, 2012 at 10:44 am

Interesting read about two of India's finest actors. Tried to put it on Twitter but the link doesn't seem to work.

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