

SHOT ON LOCATION

Nemai Ghosh's photographs capture Satyajit Ray in various poses and places, finds **Sayandeb Chowdhury**.



Nemai Ghosh, *Ray on the beach while shooting the documentary *Baia** (1976). Inkjet print on archival paper, 16" x 24". 2012.

Nemai Ghosh has attained the distinction of being Satyajit Ray's photo-biographer, though he began accompanying Ray only after 1968, nearly a decade and a half into the filmmaker's career. Indeed, Ghosh's well-known oeuvre includes stunning pictures of the maestro at work – Ray in deep discussion, Ray caught in a moment of candour, Ray in thoughtful solitude and, of course, Ray on location. None other

than the great Henri Cartier-Bresson has praised Ghosh's *Satyajit Ray at 70* (1993) in a foreword to the book, noting the photographer's ability to make his viewers "feel with great fidelity the drive, the alertness and the profundity of this giant of cinema in all his majestic stature". Ghosh has also chronicled Indian artists and doyens of Bengali theatre at work in separate books and has emerged as a master of photo-portraiture in India.

Satyajit Ray and Beyond, held at the Delhi Art Gallery (DAG) from the 7th to the 28th of January, was partly a retrospective of Ghosh's photographs of Ray – the man himself, the sets and scenes from his films. Culled from an archive of nearly 1,20,000 images that DAG acquired in 2006, this exhibition, curated by Pramod Kumar K.G., was the gallery's first foray into photography and was timed to coincide with other events marking 100 years of Indian cinema. The highlight of the show, however, was the promise to re-examine Ghosh's career in the light of his romance with Indian cinema beyond his fixation with Ray. Evidently, Ghosh has tried to step out of Ray's tall shadow. Yet, the largest section in this exhibition of 250 photographs focused on the filmmaker, featuring many images that have acquired iconic status.

Nemai Ghosh, A still from Satyajit Ray's *Jana Aranya* (1975). Inkjet print on archival paper, 23" x 34.5". 2012. All images courtesy Delhi Art Gallery.

The singular impression one carried back from the exhibition was that the biggest asset and the biggest limitation of Ghosh's oeuvre was Ray himself – an asset because Ray is an exceptional subject and it is impossible to find better portraits of Ray. In picture after picture, it is a delight to see

Ray – reclining on the beach, in pensive thought on the sets, crossing an empty stretch of Chowringhee and sitting alone on a film trolley against rain-washed greenery. Or, Ray in the large and crowded study at his Bishop Lefroy Road residence, mostly in chiaroscuro solitude beside a midnight lamp,





Nemai Ghosh. A still from Satyajit Ray's *Ghare-Baire* (1984). Inkjet print on archival paper. 34.5" x 23.0". 2012.

often writing or sketching. However, as a subject, Ray is also a limitation for Ghosh because the filmmaker was a talismanic figure in the truest sense – an uncommonly tall, mesmeric and handsome person who dominated each frame he was in. In photographs without Ray, Ghosh seems somewhat at a loss – for a centre, for an axis.

What then comprises the 'beyond' part of the exhibition title? Except Ray at work and Ray at home, the bulk of the photographs in the exhibition are from the sets of Ray's films, populated by known and lesser-known actors. Some of them stand out as film stills but not necessarily as interesting specimens of photography. Ghosh's unease at shooting without his great subject is evident in some of these works. Even figures like Utpal Dutt (in Ray's *Jana Aranya* or *Agantuk*) or Balasaraswati (in *Bala*, Ray's documentary on the famous dancer) do not quite turn Ghosh's photographs into images of great prospect. However, he does manage to capture effectively the atmosphere on the sets – images featuring Sharmila Tagore, Soumitra Chatterjee, Amjad Khan, Shabana Azmi and Naseeruddin Shah, among others, depict shifting moods and moments.

Chronicling an era, these photographs are high on archival value. They often open a window into the lives of actors, recording moments when the movie camera is not trained at them. This is no easy task. Performers are often ferociously conscious of being caught off camera and to Ghosh's credit, he never fails to put a gentle sparkle in each of his photo-portraits. But, the question remains: had his subjects been ordinary citizens would Ghosh have been able to infuse the pictures with such beauty? This exhibition leads to the realisation that in spite of having shot some impressive portraits that could well adorn the photographic section of any museum of Indian cinema, Ghosh will primarily be remembered as Ray's photo-biographer. Which is a considerable feat in itself.