

A legendary legacy

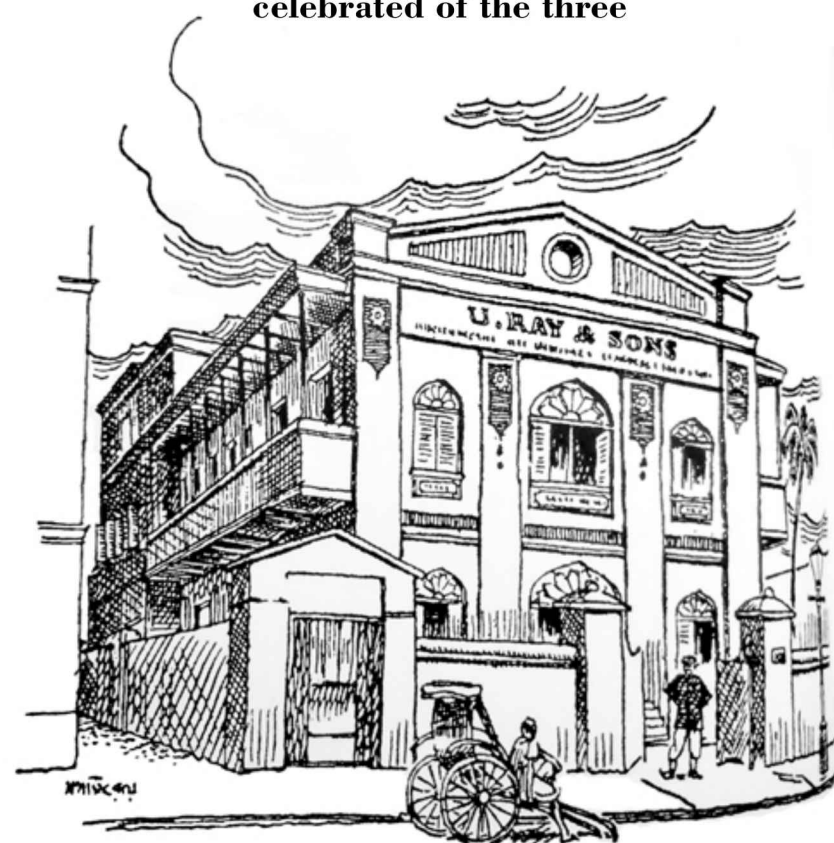
3 Rays: Stories from Satyajit Ray
 Edited by Sandip Ray; co-edited by Riddhi Goswami
 The Penguin Ray Library, Penguin Books/Penguin Random House India, 2021, 475 pp, Rs 799 (PB)
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The three Rays of this collection – Upendrakishore, Sukumar and Satyajit – were always connected but perhaps not in the way that would be immediately perceptible. For example, if one looks closely at cinema in Bengal one would see that all its early exponents – Hiralal Sen, Dhirendranath Ganguly and Charu Ghosh – were, like the Lumière Brothers, devoted photographers before they took to cinema. They stand testament to a fascinating continuity that connected the awed amazement by the photographic image to the irresistible fascination with the ‘bioscope’. But what is usually missed is that the best example of this continuity and tradition was encapsulated in the Rays. The first, Upendrakishore’s fame in mastering the nuances of halftone photography went much beyond the confines of India. His son, Sukumar, was a master illustrator. Satyajit, heir to his grandfather’s scientific temper and his father’s wondrous imagination, took to cinema instead.

And yet, this is half the story. For apart from being an experimenter with photography, a radical illustrator and a trailblazing filmmaker respectively, all the three Rays were also writers of a distinct voice and vocabulary. This anthology takes this transgenerational connect as the centrepiece of the literary legacy that they have together created. To that end, *3 Rays* can be considered, simply, as an anthology that brings together three generations of storytellers, translated as they are by the most celebrated of the three.

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Satyajit Ray’s illustration of his ancestral house at 100 Garpar Road, Kolkata (‘Jokhon Choto Chillim’, Ananda Publishers, 1982)

The first section on Upendrakishore is largely made of Ray’s translation from his grandfather’s folk retelling *Tintunir Boi*, of which ‘Matanjali Sarkar’, the story of a cunning cat, which is modelled on the archetype of the too-clever-by-half colonial taxman, is the highlight. The translations of the stories are accompanied by Upendrakishore’s original drawings. There is also a detailed profile of Upendrakishore by Ray, which gives a rather thoughtful overview of the cosmopolitan learning the revered photographer and printer (U Ray & Sons being his concern) could bring to

his literary works. Here one stops to wonder: what if Ray had undertaken the translation of Upendrakishore’s inimitable and irreverent retelling of the Indian epics for children? Would they be considered too dangerous for a publisher to bring out today given the prevalent intolerant sensitivities in this country?

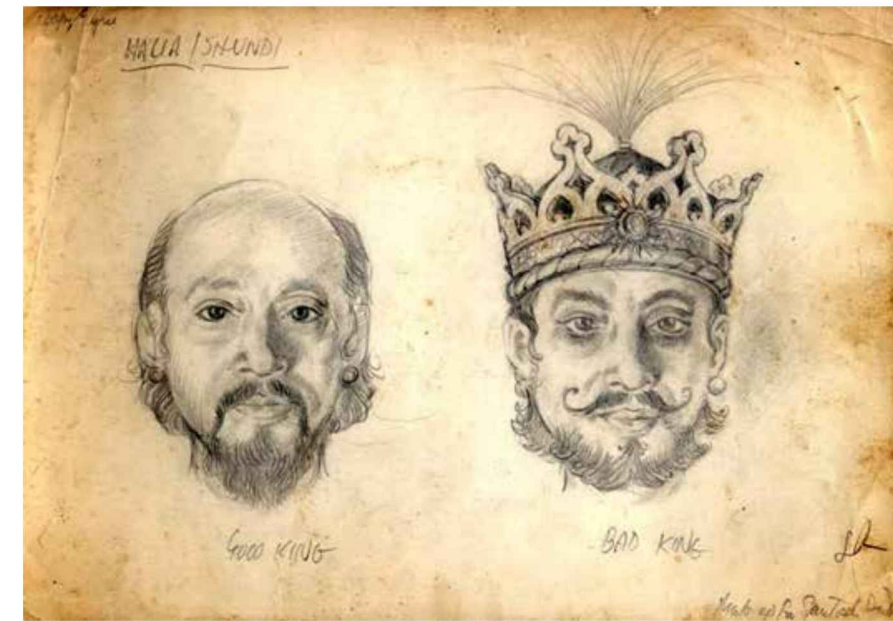
Anyway, the best part of the section is Ray’s detailed film treatment (along with some marvellous illustrations) of Upendrakishore’s *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne*. One is well aware of Ray’s reputation as a meticulous craftsman but every time one sees his preparations

for a film, one cannot help being awed. I consider *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne* one of cinema’s most profound political allegories and hence to read Ray’s hitherto unpublished treatment for screen in this anthology was indeed a treat.

The section on Sukumar is a terse reminder of the onerous task of the translator, the difficulties of which Walter Benjamin, in his essay ‘The Translator’s Task’, made known. For Benjamin, the *translatability* of a text is coded within its purpose. This is more so the case with Sukumar, who often played with the encoded nature of language. He was particularly invested in developing a unique lexicography of bizarre literary beings – a kind of menagerie of fantastic beasts (long long before JK Rowling) – which were put together as much by pollinating known animal forms as by an inspired portmanteau of words in existence. Translating him is arduous and exciting in equal measure. Ray has been followed in this endeavour by two experienced and esteemed translators, and there could always be differences in how best to translate, say, an oddity called Voracithierium or name a quirk called Glumothrium (both by Ray from the ‘Diary of Heshoram Hushiar’). What matters more is that Ray even undertook to bring his father’s cabinet of curiosities into English in the early 1980s, perhaps anxious that if he didn’t translate them, no one would. And even a cursory glance would reveal that Ray’s rendition is far from being unsatisfactory.

A fair share of the book is of Ray’s translations of his own stories and to begin with, the inclusion of the hitherto unpublished *Bonkubabu’s Friend* is a cause for some cheer. This is, after all, the source story for Ray’s Columbia Pictures script for *The Alien*, which could well have been the first big-ticket film in the West about a friendly alien who befriends an unsuspecting, unpretentious simpleton. Ray’s account of the script’s fate has already been published some years ago (Satyajit Ray, *Travails with the Alien: The Film That Was Never Made and Other Adventures with Science Fiction*, HarperCollins, 2018). This translation compliments that account and allows another chance to mourn one of the most celebrated films that was never made in the history of cinema. Those not native to Bangla might also be pleased to find the inclusion of *Potolbabu*, *Film Star*, the story on which Dibakar Banerjee based his stunning short feature in the anthology film *Bombay Talkies* (2013). Likewise, there is *Bipin Choudhury’s Lapse of Memory*, one of the four stories that were lent to most unworthy adaptations in the recent anthology film *Ray* (2021). Satyajit Ray’s short stories are a masterclass of brevity, wit and how the extraordinary resides in close proximity with the ordinary and the everyday. The 20 stories here provide a robust sense of Ray’s world. The two original English stories by Ray – *Abstraction* (1941) and *Shades of Grey* (1942) – are new to me too. They reveal the young Ray’s (he was 21 in 1942) fascination with life’s essential unpredictability, and how he was juggling with means of expressing the same.

This is the first publication of the much anticipated Penguin Ray Library, published to commemorate the centenary of Ray’s birth anniversary. It



Satyajit Ray’s draft illustrations of the characters King of Shundi and King of Halla from his script notebook for the film ‘Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne’ (1960), based on Upendrakishore Ray’s short story ‘Goopy Gyne’ that was serialised in ‘Sandesh’ from April 1915 – September 1915

promises to preserve a legacy. In India, intangible intellectual heritage is more often than not lost in family skirmishes, or lack of opportunity or inclination, or both. Alternately, there is a tendency to over-mine that legacy, as has happened with Tagore in Bengal. So far, the Ray Society – custodians and preservers of Ray’s estate – has shown an appreciable willingness to stay away from either of these tendencies. This first volume of theirs in collaboration with Penguin

Random House India – designed and produced handsomely and without the least parsimony in making it visually attractive – is certainly a collectible emprise. And it raises genuine hope and promise that Ray’s work and his world – cosmopolitan, humane, modern, curious, witty and fantastic in equal measure – would not be forgotten and be left either to rot through neglect or be turned into commercial merchandise. ■

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Illustration for the story ‘Bonkubabu’s Friend’ by Satyajit Ray. The story was first published in ‘Sandesh’ (February, 1962) as ‘Bankubabur Bandhu’

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