

## Remembering Ray, 25 years on

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**By Gautaman Bhaskaran**

A quarter century ago on April 23, one of India's greatest citizens, Satyajit Ray, died in what was then called Calcutta. The name was messed up into Kolkata later — a sad trend that not only demolished a sense of history, but also coincided with the sharp decline of all things that were charmingly Calcutta.

For me, who grew up there and happily soaked into the metro's artistic sensibilities and magnificent tradition and culture, that famous mid-day halt of Britisher Job Charnock which turned into the foundation for and the founding of Calcutta in August 1690 was a wonderful city to spend my early years. And part of Calcutta's rich history was Ray, and like Charnock — whose name was deleted from all official documents as the founder of Calcutta after a landmark 2003 Calcutta High Court judgement — the memory of the maestro, too, is being obliterated into oblivion.

I found this to my sorrow during my visit to Kolkata last January. There was a time during my school and college days when just about every other man or woman in the metropolis would know precisely where Ray lived — 1/1 Bishop Lefroy Road. But today, nobody seems to have the vaguest idea of the famous address, where his son, Sandip, resides even today. Compare this with Chennai, and any auto rickshaw driver or cabbie will be able to point out where Sivaji Ganesan or Gemini Ganesan had their homes.

And when the taxi driver took me to Ray's house — which is in the heart of the city — I decided to do a little quiz and asked a few passers-by whether they knew Ray's flat. Not one of them could answer me, and believe it or not, I was standing bang opposite the building!

Stepping into Ray's abode that evening, I was startled to see Sandip looking so much like his father. With books and sketches and drawings cluttered all around him, he looked every inch Ray Senior. Sandip's study, once Ray's, flooded me with haunting memories.

Twenty-five years later, I realised that my memory of Ray remained unclouded, and I still remembered some of the great moments I have had with him. As a cub journalist in *The Statesman*, I had walked into 1/1 Bishop Lefroy Road. His flat was right on top, and there was no lift — which was later installed by the West Bengal Government after the auteur had suffered a heart attack. As I stood panting outside the flat, Ray answered the doorbell — and welcomed me with remarkable warmth, my equation with him having been strengthened by the fact that Sandip and I had been classmates in the same political science graduation course at the St.Xavier's College.

Earlier during my days at school, when I lived in an apartment just adjacent to the Basusree Cinema, I had enjoyed the privilege of not just watching some of Ray's greatest works, but also seeing the man himself attend a movie there. He had no star trappings, and he would sit with the audience and watch a Mrinal Sen film or a Hollywood classic. And from my balcony that overlooked the road and the theatre, I had the best view of men and women trooping into the auditorium.

Many years later, when I moved from Calcutta to what was then Madras (now Chennai), to *The Hindu*, Ray remained with me. And I still remember a long interview with him during my first years at *The Hindu*. What I recall best about the meeting was Ray's extraordinary ability to appreciate anything that was out of the ordinary. I had taken along with me a recorder — given to me by my editor, N. Ravi, and it was really attractive. In a rich leather case, it looked like a slim book. "That is a beauty", Ray remarked admiringly. "You can place it in a book rack, and it would look like an elegant volume".

That was Ray, and I understood this then and I understand this even better now. I think that he was one among the very few in this world to have been so accomplished. And what is more, most people I meet outside the country invariably talk about Ray. Yes, even today after all these years, and not very surprisingly hardly anybody refers to any other Indian director! Sometimes, yes a Girish Kasaravalli or an Adoor Gopalakrishnan.

Given all this, it is not surprising that I should have decided to write about the year 1956 for a book being published by the Cannes Film Festival. That year proved to be a turning point for both Ray and the Indian cinema. Asked to pen a chapter on any one of the 70 years that

the Festival has been on for a volume commemorating the milestone, I chose 1956 — which saw Ray's debut work and undoubtedly a masterpiece — Pather Panchali or Song of the Little Road being screened at the Festival.

A black and white classic in the Bengali language — shorn of glamorous stars or even professional actors and performed by an extremely ordinary looking cast of men and women and children — Pather Panchali was initially dismissed by a critic as renowned as Francois Truffaut. He walked out of the movie's late-night screening at Cannes, irritated and angry at having to watch, as he averred, "natives eating with their hands".

But luck was with Pather Panchali, with Ray and with India. It had a second show with members of the jury, led by Maurice Lehmann, watching it. They were spellbound, and decided to honour it with Prix du Document Humain. If one were to look at the 1956 prize list, Pather Panchali, figures at the number three position after Louis Malle's and Jacques-Yves Cousteau's *Le Monde Du Silence* (which won the *Palme d'Or*) and Ingmar Bergman's *Sommarnattens Leende* (*Prix De L'Humour Poetique*).

And mind you, that year the feature film selection included such gems as Akira Kurosawa's *Ikimono No Kiroku* (*I Live in Fear*), Vittorio De Sica's *Il Titto* (*The Roof*) and Alfred Hitchcock's *The Man Who Knew Too Much*. Not one of these got an award. And a virtually unknown and unsung director from India walked away with an honour that had far-reaching implications for his country.

Pather Panchali's accolade at Cannes opened the eyes of the world not only to Ray's genius, but also to Indian cinema in general. The Festival on the French Riviera affirmed that India had the potential to be a great movie-making country. And India realised that Ray had the makings of a genius. Bengal certainly, a Bengal which had been some months before Cannes lukewarm to Ray's *Song*.

On the film's 50th anniversary in 2005, *Time* magazine placed Pather Panchali among the 100 best movies ever made.

And Pather Panchali's recognition at Cannes proved to be the perfect launchpad for Ray: he made 29 feature films (plus some documentaries and shorts) in his long career; won laurels at Cannes, Venice, Moscow and Berlin festivals, besides 32 Indian National Film Awards; and was given the Bharat Ratna, India's highest civilian honour, a lifetime achievement Oscar and an honorary doctorate from Oxford University, making him only the second cinema personality after Charlie Chaplin to be accorded this privilege by the institution.

Finally, I feel privileged and a deep sense of satisfaction that I could write about Ray's Pather Panchali in the 70-year celebratory volume being released in Paris at the end of April — a few weeks before the Festival unfolds on May 17, a Festival that a long time ago had the foresight to recognise a gem. And I hope that my chapter would be one small but significant step towards re-kindling the memory of a master. And what better place than Cannes for this.

\* A part of this article has been culled from a chapter written by Gautaman Bhaskaran in the commemorative book, and he may be e-mailed at [gautamanb@hotmail.com](mailto:gautamanb@hotmail.com)