

The Master and the Actor



Ray directing Chatterjee

[In 1959 Soumitra Chatterjee first appeared on screen in Satyajit Ray's Apur Sansar/ The World of Apu. Out of his twenty-seven films, Ray had placed Soumitra as his protagonist in fourteen of them. As an actor Chatterjee learnt the vital crafts from the filmmaker, but within the garb of a teacher, Chatterjee found in Ray, a father figure, who expressed deep concern about the personal wellbeing of his protégé].

“He had reprimanded me only once and that too quite severely. It was during the shoot of his film Abhijaan. Though I had had received scolding from him on occasions in the past, those were nothing compared to what I had received during filming Abhijaan; and that increased to me stature of the man”—says Soumitra Chatterjee, with a hint of emotion in his choked voice as he was speaking about his mentor, Satyajit Ray, at his home at Golf Green, the sunlight of late afternoon coming in.

“He had scolded me once or twice before Ab-

hijaan, and that was particularly to set me on my track. I was young at that time, about twenty-three years of age when I began working with him”— Chatterjee reminisces the days of Apur Sansar. After Aparna's death, Apu left everything behind and went on a hiatus, to work in a colliery. The sequence was shot at Chirmiri in Madhya Pradesh. “I had never seen such pristine beauty of the forest which I had experienced at that colliery during the shoot. We went there during the winter; there was a sequence, where I would drink water from a fountain. As I already befriended many of his crew members, perhaps I was frolicking too much for his liking. Manikda pulled me up and in that deep baritone voice of his said, ‘put your heart in your work’. Now I realize, he wanted to school me in the craft, and that's why I was scolded”.

Soumitra started shooting for Apur Sansar in 1958, after that Debi and in that time, he was friends with many of his contemporaries amongst Ray's crew members, most of who were about the same age as him. For exam-

ple, cinematographer Soumendu Ray, Nityananda Dutta amongst others. The days of the shoot would be spent with a lot of adda, fun and good-natured banter between them. Though Ray did not object to this camaraderie between the crew and Chatterjee; at times he would pull the actor up, just so that nothing went out of hand. Once Ray was shooting by the Ganges at Murshidabad for Debi and prior to the shot, he asked Soumitra, “Where’s your dialogue sheet?”, “I did not bring it” was the fumbling reply from the actor. Immediately there was a stern rejoinder from Ray, “Go and bring it”. Soumitra had to comply, and he ran almost a kilometre to the Palace at Nimtita, where the crew was set up for the shoot and returned panting with the piece of paper; and only then did the shooting start.



Soumitra Chatterjee and Wahida Rahman in in Abhijan

“Though Manikda was never very fond of keeping the dialogue sheet at hand at all times, he advised it to have it nearby, just in case we needed it. I didn’t take it with me that day, however I have never repeated the mistake ever again. Actually, he wanted to impart this habit within us, to be serious and careful during acting at all times.”—Chatterjee went on speaking, as a master actor-student speaking about his mentor. “About these two times did I get a scolding from Manik da, but during Abhijaan, it was severe”.

Ray was shooting at Dubrajpur in Birbhum, first during severe winter and later at the time of extreme heat. Soumitra had to start his

makeup at 3 am as they would have to leave by 5 am for shooting. Soumitra himself would drive one of the cars which ferried the crew members from and to the location of shooting. This act itself had become an integral part of the actor’s preparation for his role, which was of a driver. “The amount of makeup I had to put on for playing Narsingh, I did not have to do for any other film”- says the actor. “Manikda from the inception had sketched how the character would look, and the way Ananta Das, the makeup artist had followed Manikda’s sketch, completely transformed my look making me almost unrecognizable. Apart from that, the amount of driving I did with that Chrysler, I had almost mastered the machine making it move to my tune. The speed with which I drove through those narrow winding roads, forced the people to move out of the way. At times I would get abuses hurled at me—‘almost drove me over, bloody Punjabi’. I understood that the makeup was so good, nobody realized who I was”. Soumitra believes now that “the maturity and command over perceptibility of acting that I had gained playing the character of Narsingh--- and also the ability to imbue characters with masculinity and personality, was hitherto beyond my capabilities”.

Yet Soumitra Chatterjee was reprimanded by Manikda? Why? “I think you can certainly recollect that there was a sequence where the car would overtake a train? There was one scene where I would cross a level crossing as the train was about to pass it. This was what was planned, though eventually it was not included. Manikda was in the engine with his camera, and I sped up towards the unmanned level crossing. As I was speeding up, I could realize that the vehicle was getting stuck in potholes in the village road. Inadvertently, I had to press the accelerator and the car almost leapt past in high speed and I could feel the train go past behind me. After I reached my destination, I asked Soumendu, the cinematographer, a few times, “How was the shot?

Was it okay?” He just replied in a terse voice, “Go and meet him, you are in for something”; I did not understand a single word of what he meant. I saw Manikda sitting under a tree. I just asked, ‘Manikda, was the shot okay?’ He replied in a fit of rage, ‘Are you a stuntman? Have you come here to do stunts or act? Who asked you drive with such a risk? There could have been a massive accident. I almost had a heart attack...’ the signs of searing anger were written large on Manikda’s face.” One could feel a lump in the actor’s throat as he takes a pause after the narration. “I will never forget that day” he continues, “I could see how concerned he was about me.”



Soumitra Chatterjee and Sharmila Tagore in Apur Sansar

Ray was equally concerned about his lead actor’s livelihood also. He felt the need to guard his main actor almost like a father-figure. It was the time when the filming of Apur Sansar was about to begin and Soumitra had made his mind up that he was going to resign from his job at the All India Radio, Kolkata. Upon hearing this, Ray was visibly concerned, even

worried. To allay his fears, Soumitra claimed, “Even if nothing comes up, I have the degree to get a teachers’ job”. After the film, during a conversation Ray spoke “After the work that you have done in this film, you will get more offers. And even if that doesn’t come about, you can always work as my assistant”—reminders Soumitra Chatterjee. “I feel Manikda felt a sort of responsibility towards me”—says the octogenarian actor.

“My father felt this responsibility towards Soumitra kaku, which speaks about his dependence on him”—says Satyajit’s son Sandip Ray, seated in his Bishop Lefroy Road residence while selecting from a pile of photographs for an upcoming exhibition celebrating the Satyajit-Soumitra relationship. “My father always had a photograph of Soumitra kaku with him. Whenever he used to think of him, for a certain character, he would sketch his idea of the makeup on it. For certain unique roles, like Ashani Sanket, my father would make Soumitra kaku sit in front of him as a model to sketch”.

In 1990, a retrospective on Soumitra Chatterjee was held, for which Ray was asked to pen a message. He wrote back, “I don’t think Soumitra requires any certificate from me. As an actor the fact that he is in fourteen of my twenty-seven films speaks of my dependence on him as an artist, which I am sure will continue till I breathe my last.”

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(Siladitya Sen is a Member of the Fipresci-India)