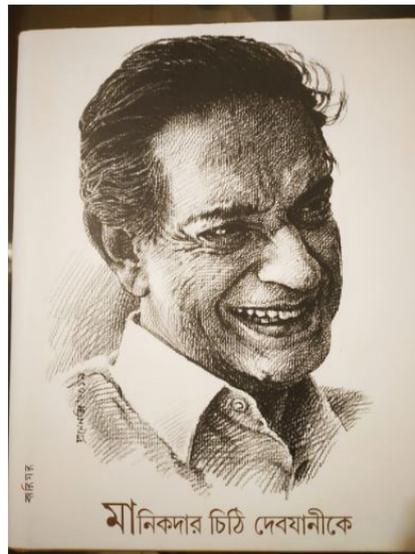


Opening the Door to Newer Understandings



Letters and correspondences of artists are fascinating and important artefacts which offer insightful glimpses not only into their lives but also open up avenues of understanding of their art which were hitherto unknown. On the very important ensuing occasion of the one hundredth birth anniversary of Satyajit Ray, Debjani Ray's *Manikdar Chitthi Debjanike*, a compilation of Ray's letters is one such effort, the first of its kind in Bengali. The correspondences provide the readers a vision into the artistic processes of the master filmmaker.

One such instance is Ray's letter dated 30th January, 1991, where he recalls, "Returned recently after spending seven days shooting at a Santhal village near Santiniketan." The letter to Debjani Ray records the filmmaker during the making of his final film *Agontuk* (The Stranger).

We vividly remember Manomohan Mitra, of *Agontuk*, who left this country in 1955 (the same year *Pather Panchali* was released). Be-

tween leaving his home and leaving the country as a whole, he had spent some days at the Santhal village near Santiniketan. Returning many years after to his niece Anila in Kolkata, this 'stranger', the globe-trotting anthropologist made a sudden escape to that very village in Santiniketan; under the guise of sorting out his inheritance it was an act which was possibly motivated by the urge to sense his own roots again. Anila and her husband Sudhindra reach Santiniketan to bring him back to Kolkata for one last time. Manomohan meets them at the village. His eyes light up as he speaks, about the tribal population of India, about their history of existence, their struggle, their revolt against the oppression of the colonial British rulers.

Debjani Ray's admiration of Ray's writing, drawing and films went back to her days as a student and Ray's letters to her (from 1975-1991) transports us, the readers into the process of germination of the film, from its preparation, making and even the artistic intention

that governed the entire process. In a letter dated 16th October, 1990, Ray writes about *Agontuk*: “Have suddenly become busy. Beginning the shooting of my next film *Agontuk* from 22nd November! ... An excellent content/storyline has come to my head; have completed the script, casting in ten days.”

In one of his prose works, poet Sankha Ghosh reminds us, “Just think of the Santhal dance sequence at the end of the film. Standing beside Manomohan, Anila and Sudhindra are witnessing the tribal dance like fascinated tourists. But as moments pass, Anila feels the rhythm the primitive tune touches her soul and she is moved by the beat. She expresses her wish to join the Santhali folk dancers. Sudhindra urges her to join them; Anila enquiry of her husband, “May I?” is the joy in finding the kindred spirit in him; her eyes exposing the rapt illumination of her heart. She joins the Santhali group and the ‘togetherness’ creates a most wonderful dance sequence; it was their dance. Calling Sudhindra, Manmohan, the ‘stranger’ uncle finally gives his own approval as says in his ear: “Now I am sure she is my niece” (The gesture continues).

Not just *Agontuk*, the poet compares in the context of dance sequences, *Jukti Takko o Gappo*, the final film of Ritwik Ghatak and says “This is how the image of amalgamation with the primitive social order through the medium of dance, was explored by two of our foremost filmmakers”. Besides this, he remembers another thing about Satyajit Ray, “In his final film, *Agontuk*, we find an interest to position himself as an artist, beyond the realm of a rational urban civilization”.

We remember Prithwish. He asks Manomohan “So according to you, at which level of civilization, does cannibalism fall into? Manomohan’s reply was underlined by a tone of utter cynicism and ridicule—“Do you know who is civilized? A civilized man is one, who by the press of one button can launch a weapon so devastating that it can obliterate totally a

city with its inhabitants from the face of this earth”. And those who can take the decision of using such a weapon, he thinks them to be even more dangerous.

At the end of the film, when Manomohan leaves the family, gifting his entire inheritance to the repentant Anila and Sudhindra, he utters the longest word in the English dictionary and even gives its meaning: “setting little or no value”. He smiling parting words to Sudhindra relay the irony of modern civilization that the essence of meaninglessness requires the longest word to convey it.

The two films prior to *Agontuk*, *Shakha Prosakha* and *Ganashatru*, too find important spaces in these letters from Satyajit to Debjani Ray. Ray writes in the letter dated 15th June 1990, “I have given all my 35 years of experience as a filmmaker and of knowing people into the making of *Shakha Prosakha*”. In the next letter dated 29th August, 1990, the filmmaker speaks about the private show of the movie and informs of the audience reaction, that everyone present hailed it as his best work. In a previous letter dated 3rd March, 1990, Ray writes, “I believe that you will like *Shakha Prosakha*, I have given my all in the film”. In that very letter Ray remarks “I am very happy that you have liked *Ganashatru*. The way the critics’ idiocy has been exposed in their reactions has not happened for any previous film of mine. Yet, I was very satisfied making this film”.

The real problem lay in the fact when Ray adapted *Ganashatru* from Ibsen’s *An Enemy of the People*, all the critical attention was focussed on the relative merits and demerits of the film, but no attention was paid to the exploration of the inter-relationship between the two art forms of theatre and cinema. Questions of how Ray adapts Ibsen’s theatrical realism into cinematic realism, the artistic deviations, and processes that he utilizes in his cinematic adaptation remain unanswered in the superficial reading of the critics. The result of which

was that the happiness Ray attained while making the film was counteracted by the affliction he had received from the idiocy of the commentators.

According to some, the last three films represent a new stylistic direction that Ray had undertaken. Since *Ghare Baire*, ill health had prompted him to find a newer stylistic path which found expression in *Shakha Prosakha* and *Ganashatru* and which perhaps found maturity in *Agontuk*. Noted filmmaker Shyam Benegal speaks in a similar vein, “Ray’s last three films were the creations of a man physically restricted by illness... ‘*Agontuk*’ was a very fine film all the same, even though I can’t say the same of ‘*Shakha Prosakha*’ and ‘*Ganashatru*’. There has been debates on this in the past and there will be in the future as well, but there is no denying the fact that Ray was deviating from his own artistic position in his last films, definitely in *Shakha Prosakha* and more so in *Agontuk*, where the realism explored in the narrative events become extraneous to the film itself, which focused deeply into the internal-realism. The artist focuses on his own understanding and philosophy and the protagonist is but the voice of the artist and in this context, dialogues becomes suggestive. In *Agontuk*, Manomohan Mitra speaks in a playful mood throughout the film. Mrinal Sen, while speaking on the dialogues in *Agontuk*, comments, “The working out of the words and lines may be likened to a master painter playing with brush and colour”.

In a similar vein, references of films like *Jana Aranya*, *Shatranj Ke Khiladi*, *Joy Baba Felunath*, *Hirak Rajar Deshe*, *Piku* and *Sadgati*... and many others from Ray’s canon, comes through in these letters, through which a re-reading of these artistic creations become

possible opening the door towards newer understandings. Ray himself at times explains his thought process that guided his own films. While speaking of his two films on Feluda, Ray writes “I believe it would be unwise to compare *Sonar Kella* and *Joy Baba Felunath* as films because the mood and tone of both are different. Whereas *Sonar Kella* is emblematic of the hearts journey into a distant place which was absent in *Felunath*. Furthermore, there was a sense of innate poetry in Mukul’s narrative. *Felunath* on the other hand, is more tight, urban and sly”.

Apart from films, Ray speaks on writing Feluda and Shonku in almost every letter. “In time both Feluda and Shonku has become so near and dear to me that it gives me great pleasure writing stories with them as characters—yet the trove of plots in not endless, and there I feel worried”. Along with these, sketching, editing Sandesh, music...all the things which the master filmmaker indulged in finds space, giving us an intimate glimpse into his everyday life.

The excitement of hand-written letters has been consigned into the realm of nostalgia in modern existence today. Debjani writes about the same in the Preface as well, “As I look back now, this pen-friendship with Manik da seems surprising and unreal”. Now everything seems illusory.

Manikdar Chitthi Debjanike

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