

# SOUMITRA CHATTERJEE: A LEGACY OF TRUE BENGAL

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**Abstract:** On 14<sup>th</sup> of November, 2020, Bengal did not lose just an actor but a poet, philosopher, dramatist, painter, leftist and above all a great human being. Soumitra Chatterjee was mourned by millions of fans on this day as a person who had truly loved Bengal from its roots. As a responsible citizen he had evoked the essence of this language through the poetries, plays, movies and lots more. Awarded by the Dadasaheb Phalke and the Padma Bhushan are just a few as the list of honours is unending. The essay below is a tribute to the accomplished man, Soumitra Chatterjee.

As the light faded at the 'Minerva' theatre, a tall handsome man made a princely appearance on the stage. There was perhaps a halo all around him. He was smart, energetic and above all a blessed actor. I was awestruck. Soumitra Chatterjee was there in front of me, enthraling the spectators with his unparalleled performance at the drama called 'Tiktiki'. I came out of the spellbound state only at the curtain fall to realise that it was all a drama and not reality!

Our amicable neighbourhood often held badminton matches amidst whatever little space we could get in the jungle of concrete. One fine evening, a car stopped and I found a tall person approaching us and enquired whether he also could join us in the game. We readily agreed and found him to be a seasoned player. I later came to know that not only that day but Soumitra Chatterjee along with his wife has often been an active participant in the local badminton tournament.

Amazing! Such an esteemed actor and so down to earth!

If I could recall anybody making the ultimate wielding of the finer strokes of life it could only be Soumitra Chatterjee. He has perhaps touched all the realms before one exits his entity. An actor, a

poet, an outstanding recital, a playwright—he has all the facets of art and culture. Blood of literature, music and poetry ran in his veins and he has never ventured into the ordinary walks of life.

## SATYAJIT RAY'S EXPLORATIONS OF SOUMITRA:

Apart from the innumerable commercial Bengali movies, Soumitra was the pivot of experimentation of the famous filmmaker, Satyajit Ray. Ray had chiselled him into the character of 'Feluda', a reputed character of the popular mystery series. Not only that, Ray's keen eyes could foresee Soumitra Chatterjee as the only actor who could deploy any role to the utmost. The role of Apu in Apu Trilogy will be remembered through ages. Ray has cast him in more than ten films and perhaps more other actor has been privileged enough like Soumitra Chatterjee. The chemistry worked well between the Oscar winner Ray and Soumitra and the film making gradually descended to selfless bonding.

Critics often opine that the heroes cast in Ray's movies have diminished as they are not found in other films. But Soumitra Chatterjee has been an exception. He has been a dominant hero in the mainstream cinema as well. An

extremely focussed, challenging and a person containing profound foresight regarding his future could do it. He was a man who was not at all bothered with stardom but with the manifestation of the character.

During my project on Ray and Apu Trilogy I often visited the Satyajit Roy Archive at Nandan, Kolkata and came across the huge photographs of Soumitra Chatterjee, the costumes and props said by him. It clearly reveals the fact that Ray and Soumitra Chatterjee went hand in hand.

Soumitra Chatterjee has always been extremely grateful to Satyajit Ray for incorporating and harnessing the latent talent in the actor. In the books 'Manikdar Shonghe' and 'Master and I', the words do not merely portray the relationship between an actor and a film maker but two learners who are eager to grasp whatever comes their way.

Soumitra in his autobiography has always posed to be an humble learner of life who is keen on experimenting every moment and finding the finer nuances of life.

#### **REMINISCENCE AS A VERSATILE ACTOR:**

Even the mainstream cinema had also realised this actor's genius and he was cast into various roles. He was extremely versatile and in spite of the presence of Uttam Kumar in 'Jhinder Bondi' (translated from The Prisoner of Zenda), Soumitra stood apart. For Soumitra, performance was not only a livelihood but a relief from the pain and enigma of the day to day reality. Perhaps he found solace in one shot where he embraced the role and escaped from the pangs of actuality. He had performed extensively with the heroines who were ruling the Bangla film industry.

In the yesteryears Uttam Kumar was the matinee idol of the Bengali cinema whereas Soumitra Chatterjee epitomised an erudite actor.

He had an immense regard for Bengali language, culture, films and society. In spite of being offered virtuous roles in Bollywood, Soumitra Chatterjee was never tempted to abandon his passion and devotion to 'Sonar Bangla'. Then we would have lost a masterpiece in West Bengal.

In majority of the interviews I found him referring to various quotes of Tagore which reflected his knowledge and spirit of Bengali Literature.

Theatre is for any actor a tremendous challenge as it doesn't provide a retake as in films. It is also a thought provoking process as to how the set and props could be made real. But in the words of Soumitra Chatterjee, "I feel bored sometimes as I need to wait for hours for a single shot. But in theatres I can exhibit my innovativeness".

It requires guts to sustain the energy throughout alone on the stage.

During his stardom he had received many temptations from the Bollywood film industry. But he refused them all as he had no intention of juxtaposing himself into only films but always trusted in widening his arena to other arts like poetry, publishing, drama etc. It requires enough courage to wean oneself away from the offers of fame and wealth and just concentrate on one's creativity and passion.

#### **THE POET SOUMITRA:**

I scarcely remember anybody who had the power to recite Tagore's poems with such a thundering voice. His pronunciation, accent, equivalent emotion could mesmerize anyone who was a novice in poetries. Be it Tagore's 'Shesher Kobita' or Jibanananda Das's 'Banalata Sen'-he has the charisma of bringing to life every single line of poetry. In 'Sreshtho Kobita', the actor has forayed himself in the enigma of life....he transcends the barriers and establishes himself in the strata of a great poet, philosopher and above all a supreme human being. Often in his poems, he talks of death and glorifies it as perhaps he was in need of the eternal sleep.

During the early phase of his career, he was the publisher of 'Ekkhon' which contained some of his amateur works. It was not just a magazine but it enabled many aspiring writers and poets to come together, share views and enrich the true essence of Bengali culture.

**THE STAGE AND SOUMITRA:**

As we take a sojourn in his childhood years it was evident that the family nurtured the spirit of literature, drama, poetry etc. Back in Krishnanagar where Chatterjee had spent his boyhood days, the house 'Shudha Niloy' still stands proud with the performing arts of Chatterjee. The entire family was passionate about the stage and in every auspicious occasion rehearsed for days together to give finer strokes to one's abilities. The neighbourhood was fond of the young Soumitra who would inspire all to give the utmost on the stage.

As a spectator I somehow concluded that the stage was a place where this actor was at home with. It appeared as though the actor found himself totally at ease- extremely passionate, vivacious and ejecting tremendous bursts of energy through the dialogues, gestures and subtle body movements. Cancer, the monstrous disease could not subdue him at any cost. During the staging of Sumon Mukhopadhyay's 'King Lear', Soumitra Chatterjee was already an octogenarian, battling with the deadly cancer. But even age and illness had been hurled headlong due to his urge and passion for the drama. With the crown on his head and an aura round him he seemed unbeatable.

The actor had always trod in the footsteps of the connoisseur Shishir Kumar Bhaduri and his love for Shakespaerean plays evoked his desire to act it out. Figuring out Hamlet to be out of place for his age he literally embraced the role of King Lear and devoted his utmost to produce the best.

I was a witness to his earlier dramas too and I still find it incredible as to how a performer could be so impeccable.

**POLITICS AND SOUMITRA:**

Soumitra Chatterjee was well aware of the contemporary politics and never hesitated to express his opinion. He was never actively into politics but definitely mouthed his views wherever necessary. He joined the protest against the Citizenship Amendment Act 2019, and the National Register of citizens. He never supported the BJP as he had firm faith in the Leftist Government.

He was an ardent supporter of the Communist Movement and believed in the supremacy of the Communist Party of India above all.

**CONCLUSION:**

It is a rare example to live upto one's dreams and expectations. Moreover, we scarcely dig ourselves to cultivate or even retrospect our feelings, thoughts, passions etc. To get swayed away or even chasing the unknown in the cat and mouse race is the usual trend of the human race. But to give the best of oneself to the realms of a state/region is according to me a true life which is fulfilled in itself. We come to the world once and Soumitra Chatterjee's deeds are so vast that no mortal ashes can perish his existence from the earth.

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