

cinema



✱ A scene from *Pather Panchali*, directed by Satyajit Ray.



✱ Satyajit Ray: The auteur's works had to be rescued by Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in the US.

India's celluloid heritage fades away

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

Preservation has never been a passion in India, let alone a priority. A cursory visit to any of the historical monuments will amply demonstrate this. I have seen even the Taj Mahal, the country's best known icon, being ravaged, and I remember translating my mental distress into a verbal volley when I began an article on it years ago. "Shah Jahan must be a very unhappy man. Wherever he is", I wrote before describing the kind of neglect and disrespect heaped on an emperor's divine tribute to his beloved empress. Things are somewhat better today, but that is not saying much, for the attitude of sheer callousness persists in India.

It does not, therefore, shock me a great deal to see Indian film heritage facing a fate as sad as that of the stone. There can be no better example of this than *Alam Ara*, India's first ever movie that actually talked. It opened on March 14, 1931, 80 years ago — surprisingly commemorated some days ago by a Google Doodle. Directed by Ardeshir Irani, the picture played at Mumbai's Majestic Theatre, and a large police force was deployed to prevent a crowd stampede. The rush of people was unimaginable, and men and women flocked to see sound emerging from the screen.

And, they were even more enchanted by the songs, the first ever in Hindi cinema

that set off a legacy which still endures, and endears. A new word was coined for this kind of cinema: melodrama. With actor Wazir Mohamed Khan singing *De de khuda ke naam par*, the audiences were delirious with joy, and of course this was before playback singing pushed stars to lip-sync lyrics.

Khan's melody coupled with actress Zubeida's portrayal of the title role got big bucks for *Alam Ara*. She went on to be India's first woman director while making her mark as an actress in *Balidaan*, inspired by Rabindranath Tagore's *Sacrifice*.

But what is really sad is that *Alam Ara* is lost forever. The film's last prints were destroyed in a 2003 fire at the National Archives of India in Pune. A hunt across India could not find any print. So, as one report (erroneously) said that *Alam Ara* would now remain in people's recall. Who are the people? I wonder if there is anybody living who might have seen the movie. What will remain in memory in just the title of the movie. Shame, really it is.

A few of Adoor Gopalakrishnan's films themselves are lost in a certain sense. *Kathapurushan* is one whose negative is all but lost, although as the auteur-director says, the master positive is still available out of which prints can be made.

Ideally, movies should be available on disks, and some of Adoor's are, notably his latest features, *A Climate for Crime*, and *Four Women* — though not yet commercially. It is only *Rat-Trap* that has been released by a London firm on a DVD and is being marketed.

At least one more work may soon be out on a DVD.

On the other hand, the brilliant work of Satyajit Ray, who is arguably the only Indian auteur-director that much of the world knows even today long after his death, could have suffered a terrible blow had not the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in the US stepped in.

Let me quote two paragraphs from the website of the Satyajit Ray Society: "The background and origins of the Society for the Preservation of the Satyajit Ray Films, better known as the Satyajit Ray Society, go back to March 30, 1992. The world watched a frail Satyajit Ray speak clearly and firmly with wry humour from his intensive care unit hospital bed in Kolkata. It was the 64th annual Academy Awards night at the Dorothy Chandler Auditorium in Los Angeles where Ray was honoured with a lifetime achievement Special Oscar. Audrey Hepburn emceed the event.

"Behind the scenes, Daniel Taradash, a past president of the Academy and distinguished screenwriter, worked hard to win the unanimous approval of all 36 Governors of the Academy's Board for Ray's Special Oscar. Both Hepburn and Taradash had become acutely aware of the deteriorated condition of the original negatives of the Ray films. They vowed to do something about it.

"The Academy's Grants Committee, chaired by Taradash, gave a modest grant to Dilip K Basu, Director of the Satyajit Ray Film and Study Collection, and the one

entrusted by the Academy to take Ray's Oscar to Calcutta two weeks before the Oscar night to film Ray's acceptance speech. The grant enabled Basu to accompany David Shepard, a pioneer in film preservation, to India to examine the original Ray film negatives and file a technical report. Shepard examined eighteen of Ray's 36 feature films and ruefully commented in his report: "The work of no other world class filmmaker hangs on such a thin thread as Satyajit Ray's."

Subsequently, the Ray Society was formed, and the Academy helped it to restore and preserve an invaluable piece of visual history. Some of it, at least. The Academy has till now restored 19 Ray titles which include his early classics like *Pather Panchali* (the movie that got the world singing about Indian cinema), *Aparajito*, *Parash Pathar*, *Jalsaghar*, *Apur Sansar*, *Devi*, *Teen Kanya* and *Charulata*. His controversial documentary on Sikkim, which disappeared after country's merger with India in 1975, has also been fixed. This is a priceless gift to every Ray admirer.

Admittedly, there are still a number of the master's films that have not yet been restored and conserved, and two among them are *Kanchenjunga*, his first colour feature, and a remarkable documentary on Rabindranath Tagore.

Not just movies, Ray also left behind a treasure trove of 70,000 paper documents, each revealing the multifaceted genius of the man. Graphics, posters, illustrations, book covers, literary manuscripts, screenplays, film-related art works, music notations, books by him and on him have all been decaying in Kolkata's (the city that was home to Ray) harsh climate. Fortunately, these are now being processed and preserved.

Hopefully, the rest of Ray will see brighter days. Thanks to the Academy, whose dedication and expertise may well serve as a motivation for others.

(Gautaman Bhaskaran, author of a recent biography of Adoor Gopalakrishnan, grew up in Kolkata watching Satyajit Ray create virtual treasures, and may be contacted at gautamanbhaskaran@yahoo.in)