

cinema



* Soumitra Chatterjee and Swatilekha Sengupta in a scene from *Ghare Baire* and (left) in a more recent picture.

The many masks of Soumitra Chatterjee

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

Soumitra Chatterjee, who has just won the 2012 Dadasaheb Phalke Award, has often been called Satyajit Ray's alter-ego. If there has not been another Indian director as brilliant as Ray, I really wonder whether the country has produced another actor as versatile as Chatterjee. Together, they created some of the greatest movies ever seen anywhere in the world, 14 in all — which is just about half of the features the auteur helmed in his lifetime.

My earliest recollection of Chatterjee was in *Charulata*, as the devastatingly handsome Amal, who visits his elder cousin in Kolkata. The cousin's young wife, Charulata, is bored, her husband's passion and time stolen by the patriotic newspaper he edits and publishes. An unspoken sexual attraction between Amal and Charu is exciting of course, but threatens home and harmony, and the young man leaves, not wanting to betray his cousin.

By the time *Charulata* opened in 1964, Chatterjee was already four Ray films old. Introducing Soumitra in his *Apur Sansar* in 1959 (as he did teenage Sharmila Tagore), Satyajit saw in him a unique kind of talent, a sort of actor who could be moulded — like potter's clay — to play a wide, wide range of characters. As Apurba in the movie, a man who is forced into marriage by a tragic turn of events, Chatterjee brought the pain and pathos of having to lose his young wife and lead an estranged life with his son.

In *Devi* (1960), Chatterjee's Umaprasad finds to his horror that his new wife, egged on by her father-in-law, begins to believe that she is a goddess. Much later, Ray and Soumitra would return to the subject of irrationality and superstition in the 1989 *Ganashatru* (based on Henrik Ibsen's play, *An Enemy of the People*, and screened at Cannes), where, as Dr Ashoke Gupta, he tries to convince the largely illiterate and highly religious masses that the holy water ("charanamat") from the temple is infected with a disease-causing virus.

In 1962, Chatterjee essayed a non-Bengali character, a proud Rajput taxi driver called Narsingh, in *Abhijan*

who after years of reckless living realises that he must get on to the righteous road. Soumitra never worked in Hindi cinema, and the closest he came to getting into Bollywood was in Anurag Basu's *Life ... In a Metro*.

Chatterjee could not ultimately work for Basu because of ill-health, and the role went to Dharmendra. In any case, the Ray hero was absolutely happy and content living in Kolkata and working in Bengali cinema.

And what a fantastic variety that cinema offered him: as a scriptwriter trying to rekindle his romance with a woman he once loved (*Kapurush*), as a famished Brahmin teacher (*Ashani Sankeel*), as a playboy of sorts (*Aranyer Din Ratri*), as a detective (*Sonar Kella*), as a radical revolutionary (*Ghare Baire*) and as a mentally retarded son of an ageing patriarch in *Shakha Proshakha*. Indeed a phenomenal mix.

Chatterjee, who was born in 1935 in a small town 100km away from Kolkata, lived for a number of years in one of Ray's old flats — an association that eventually led to the helmer casting him in *Apur Sansar*. This bond grew stronger, and Soumitra became as integral a part to Ray's work as Mifune was to Kurosawa's, as Mastroianni to Fellini's, as De Niro to Scorsese's and Max von Sydow to Ingmar Bergman's.

In fact, Ray said that he had tailored many of his screenplays for Soumitra. If Chatterjee could not work in many more of Ray's films, it was only because the parts were unsuited.

However, like a true artist, Soumitra went beyond Ray (which he encouraged) to work with some of Bengal's master directors.

He earned critical acclaim for his role of an impostor in Mrinal Sen's *Akash Kusum*. He was equally captivating playing the swashbuckling horse-riding villain in Tapan Sinha's *Jhinder Bandi* giving the legendary matinee idol, Uttam Kumar, a tough fight. In *Teen Bhubaner Pare*, he was the flamboyant lover wooing Tanuja with the song, *Ke Tumi Nandini* that earned him star status. As the unhappy screen husband of Suchitra Sen in *Saat Pake Bandha*, he moved audiences to tears.

Now, although afflicted with cancer, Chatterjee continues to act in cinema and theatre, sometimes reciting poetry, sometimes getting into the thick of folk drama.

Saif bonds with 007

The Saif Ali Khan-Kareena Kapoor starrer, *Agent Vinod*, opened last week in a flurry of publicity, box-office projections (followed by "impressive" weekend collections) and blow-hot-blow-cold reviews. Reviewers and publicists spared no newsprint or air time to argue and counter argue that neither was Mr Khan trying to copy Mr Bond (the refusing-to-die character whom Ian Fleming created, and who is now being kept alive by a battery of writers, pumping fresh oxygen into him ever so often) nor was Sriram Raghavan's *Agent Vinod* inspired by the death-defying adventures of 007.

I disagree. Sorry if I irk the fans of Saif or Raghavan. As much as Khan needed extra doses of boosting up after his recent knock-out session in a five-star Mumbai restaurant — and hence this PR exercise — he seemed very much like a Indianised Bond, dressed in Savile Row suits, a gun in hand and girls on each arm. What is more, the movie is a virtual romp around the world — from Riga to Somalia to Moscow to Morocco to London to Karachi and finally to New Delhi, which provides both the messy political climate and dirty greed for the climax to play out. But I vaguely remember a similar end in some other picture.

The never-ending fracas between India and Pakistan provides the umbrella for India's RAW agent (Vinod/Khan) to get into the act — dallying with bikini babes on the beach, being chased across the globe and meeting the deadliest of villains (essayed among others by Ram Kapoor and Prem Chopra with a pony tail). There are other bad men, one portrayed by Dhritiman Chatterjee (once a Ray hero), who pretend to be do-gooders, but are actually instigators of war, because they want to keep their arms deals going (how clichéd this can get). When Agent Vinod is not dealing with these tension-packed situations, he is trying to size up Dr Ruby Mendes (Kareena Kapoor, now all set to marry Saif). She works for Pakistan's ISI (the country has banned the film, because, well, Raghavan mentions the country's intelligence agency).

If all these do not remind us of the many, many Bond thrillers we have watched over a long, long time, we must be surely hallucinating or trying very hard to play publicists to Raghavan and Khan. Yes, the one essential difference between a Bond movie and *Agent Vinod* is the emotional quotient. There is quite a bit of it in Raghavan's work.

But the story of a nuclear holocaust waiting to happen is childish. There are no smart dialogues (with Saif mumbling his lines, which are hardly audible, given the intrusively loud background score — and what an irritation this is). The music is nothing to be taken home, and performances are passé. Yes, the action is fast, forever on the race track, but the noise is deafening — and mind you, Khan punched his co-diners because they were loud.

Agent Vinod, in the end, tastes like a badly shaken cocktail.

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* Saif Ali Khan as Agent Vinod ... where you calling Bond?