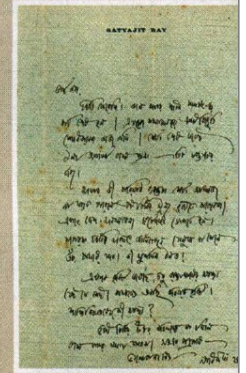
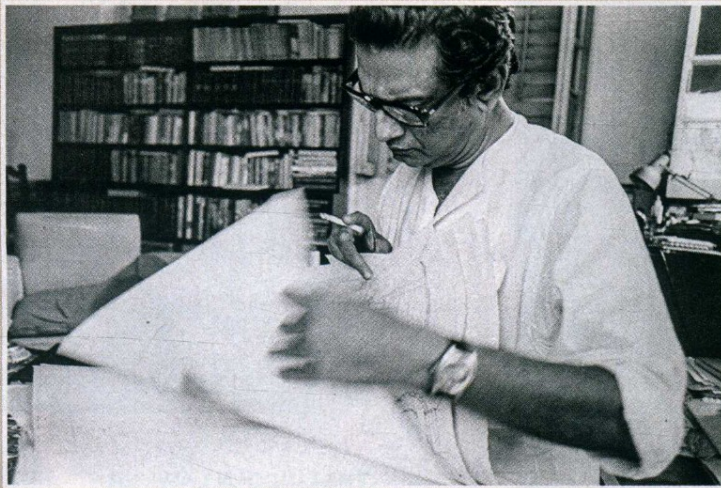


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Photos courtesy MUSUI ART FOUNDATION



RAY OF GOLDEN SUN

(Left) Satyajit Ray at work, (top left) an illustration for the cover of *Sandesh*, and a letter to Nilanjana

EXHIBITION

DOWN TO THE LETTER

DISPLAYED AT AN EXHIBITION IN KOLKATA, SATYAJIT RAY'S LETTERS TO A YOUNG FRIEND MAKE HIS WARMTH CONSPICUOUS

Part of the tributes and events in Satyajit Ray's centenary year, *Iti, Satyajit Da: Letters to a Friend from Satyajit Ray* (on display at the Kolkata Centre for Creativity until June 7) makes for an engrossing visit. Curator K.S. Radhakrishnan assumes that most visitors will be thoroughly familiar with Ray's films and his multi-faceted output as graphic designer, writer, publisher and music composer. There are, therefore, no hagiographic panels explaining who Ray was or how he was one of the great directors of world cinema.

As we enter, we are greeted

by clusters of photographs. While many are familiar with the work of Nemai Ghosh, here you can see Ray portrayed by other photographers as well. We see the director shooting on location or on the sets in Tollygunge. Some show Ray in his study, reading, writing, speaking. Yet other photos are lit by the harsh glare of flash: Ray with the good and the great of the film world—Raj Kapoor, Dilip Kumar, Uttam Kumar, Sharmila Tagore, Tapan Sinha and Mrinal Sen. Displayed also are posters that Ray designed for his films, covers for his children's

magazine *Sandesh*, and reproductions of some filming notebooks. All of these circle around the core of the exhibition—a set of letters Ray wrote to Nilanjana Sen (later Chakraborty) between 1972 and 1988.

Ray meets the young student in Shantiniketan when shooting *Ashani Sanket* (*Distant Thunder*). Nilanjana, only a couple of years older than Ray's son Sandip, strikes up a friendship with the director and the two write to each other regularly over the next 16 years. We don't see any of Nilanjana's letters but presented in double-sided glass frames are letters Ray writes to her in the middle of a packed and

hectic work life. Ray's exquisite handwriting, mostly Bangla with the occasional English word or phrase, traverses various kinds of stationery.

Even in the one-sided epistolary exhibit, you can see this famous and busy man taking time out to reply as if to a daughter. The letters

Ray's letters show a famous, busy man who had the energy to write to a young person for pleasure



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speaking of daily things: the weather, current work, piled up tasks, travel plans, the constant load-shedding... Occasionally, there are small complaints—for example, about Victor Bannerjee's inadequate spoken Bangla, and later, the unaffordable amount he asks to act in one of Ray's last movies—and then there are the questions of an anxious quasi-parent, about Nilanjana's impending marriage, her putting on weight and so on.

Poet Sampurna Chattarjee's clean and deft English translations are presented alongside the originals, conveying Ray's eloquent but unadorned language. Posited against the other material, the letters show a man who was obsessed by his work and yet had the energy and warmth to communicate with a younger person just for the pleasure of it.

Except for the curving dark walls, this quaint exhibition design could have been from any time between the '60s and '90s. What is on offer is sumptuous, but there seems to be no good reason for the tiny cards with photo-credits pasted at the ideal reading height for a seven-year-old. ■

—Ruchir Joshi