



MURMURS

*Silent Steals with
Soumitra Chatterjee*

Amitava Nag

Revised
Second
Edition

Featuring an
Exclusive Bonus

20 Poems of
Soumitra Chatterjee
Translated

+

Rare & Unseen
Photos

Foreword
Shyam Benegal

About the Author

Amitava Nag is an independent film critic based in Kolkata and editor of *Silhouette* (silhouette-magazine.com). His most recent books on cinema are *75 Years 75 Films: India's Cinematic Journey*, *The Cinema of Tapan Sinha: An Introduction*, and *Soumitra Chatterjee: His Life in Cinema and Beyond*.

His earlier writings include the acclaimed books *Murmurs: Silent Steals with Soumitra Chatterjee*, *Satyajit Ray's Heroes and Heroines*, and *Beyond Apu: 20 Favourite Film Roles of Soumitra Chatterjee*.

Amitava also writes poetry and short fiction in Bengali and English and has a few collections of writings in each of these genres to his credit including the first translation anthology of Soumitra Chatterjee's English poems titled *Walking Through the Mist*. He can be reached at www.amitavanag.net.

Praise for the Book

“Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end.” Remembered Virginia Woolf from ‘Modern Fiction’ going through this book. First, because of the narrative style, the stream of consciousness, which strikes a chord with the range and density of internal reflections synonymous with Soumitra Chatterjee. Second, for exploring the random slices of thoughts, feelings, moods, and observations that defy design and in fact, often indulge in disharmony. Some of his words are definite and even conclusive. Or, he is ambivalent at times. He is hopeful, and yet he is doubtful. There are moments, nicely portrayed, where the man is in a commotion that he knows would never subside. Yet he moves on, trying to navigate with empathy, creativity, and curiosity. It’s this rambling reflection of the luminous vulnerability that sets the book apart.

Atanu Ghosh

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AMITAVA NAG



BLUE PENCIL

Murmurs: Silent Steals with Soumitra Chatterjee

Amitava Nag

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*This book is for my son Akash – who teaches
me every day the finer nuances of living*

And...

*Soumitra Chatterjee, who allowed me to have
a glimpse of an artist as a human being*

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Publisher's Note

Murmurs: Silent Steals with Soumitra Chatterjee received wide critical acclaim on its first release with appreciative reviews in leading newspapers and journals. Soumitra Chatterjee's profound inner world and Amitava Nag's intimate observations touched readers deeply.

We believe this book deserves a renewed life. In this special second edition, we bring together a rich selection of photographs and twenty of Soumitra's poems translated by Amitava. These additions reveal more of the sensitive artist behind the legend.

It is our privilege at Blue Pencil to ensure that this remarkable creative journey continues to reach new hearts.

Antara Nanda Mondal



*A young Soumitra Chatterjee
(PC - Sukumar Roy)*

Foreword



Soumitra Chatterjee was one of those extraordinary actors who straddled both the Theatre and Cinema with equal ease. A thinking actor whose performances eliminated that fine line distinction between performing and being. He made any role offered to him, his very own. It was as though no one else could play that part anymore. Very much like the great Bengali cultural icons before him, such as Rabindranath Tagore and Satyajit Ray, Soumitra Chatterjee was a man of many talents; actor, writer, poet, painter – in short, a renaissance man.

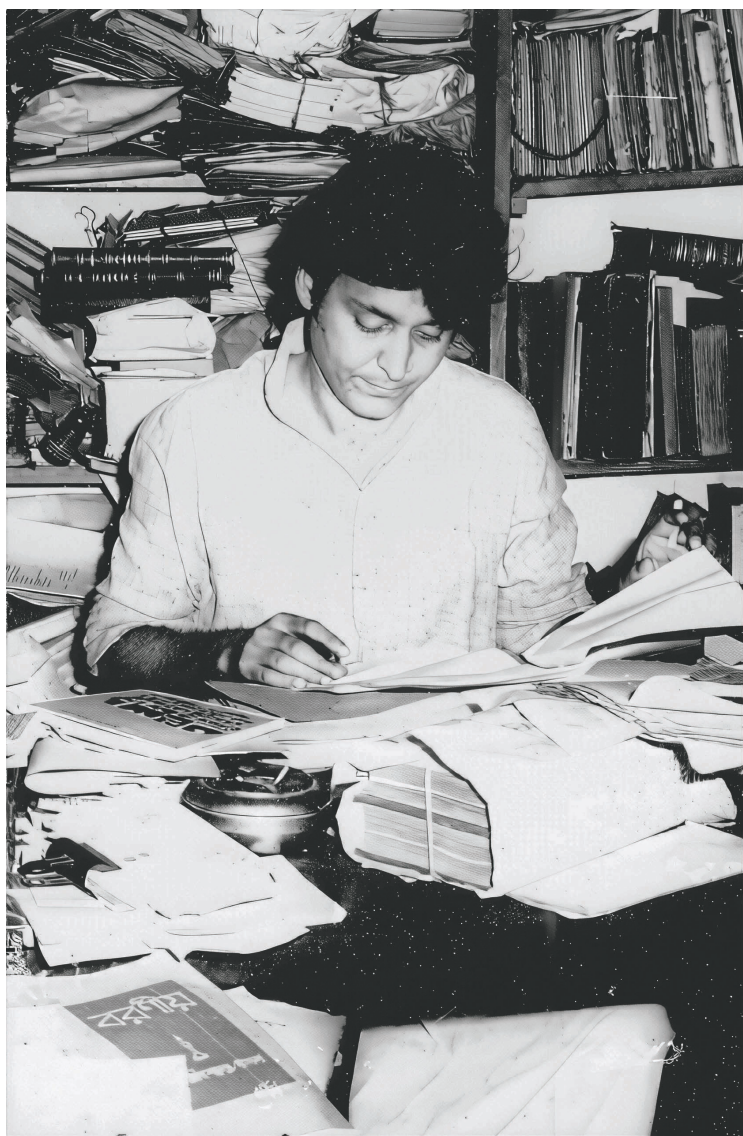
In the films of Satyajit Ray, he totally personified what Ray had in mind or imagined – it was as if they thought and responded exactly alike to the world in which they lived and belonged.

About four decades ago, I wanted to cast him in my film *Kalyug* as Shashi Kapoor's older brother. He was required to speak in Hindi as it was a Hindi language film. Being the perfectionist that he was, he declined the part, as he felt he did not know the language well enough to speak in the film, nor would he allow his voice to be dubbed. In short, I lost the one opportunity I had to work with him.

Murmurs—Silent Steals with Soumitra Chatterjee is a marvelous portrait of this great actor. You get to hear him, know him, in an extraordinarily intimate fashion. Once you have finished reading these musings of Soumitra Chatterjee, it is as though you were listening to a close friend, almost a confidant.

Shyam Benegal

December 17, 2020



*An editor at his desk— working on the magazine 'Ekkhon'
(PC- Sukumar Roy)*

Trees



Trees listen to us humans. Certain trees do more than others, in every corner of the earth. Trees inhale whispers that roam around the city speaking of the dead. They become friends; trees outlive us, see life as a whole, forgive and remember.

I remember addresses through trees. Not the names, but the shapes, sizes, colour, fragrance, frames. Probably because I tend to write I find stories in trees, about their tresses. Always. Addresses without trees are barren, unidentifiable, lost.

Trees, to me define gravity, balance space, murmur peace and arrest time. Trees make us believe that life has been the same, and also that it has flown down our winter sleep.

Trees remind us of timelessness. Eternity.

Trees also connote shelter, shade, support. The green interconnect between the red earth and the blue sky.

‘Gaach’, in Bengali meaning tree, is the name of the first documentary on *him*.

My friend Catherine Berge, of mesmeric energy and French efficacy looked for the roots in search of a tree.

I watched it first twenty years ago, in Brussels after a vegetarian dinner in the cozy, half-lit apartment of Bo van der Werf.

‘Gaach’ reminds me of time standing still. Looking at the unrepeatable moments of time.

Soumitra Chatterjee reminds me of the same – the unrepeatable moments of standing still.



*A young Soumitra Chatterjee
(PC - Sukumar Roy)*

Tension



‘Call *him* at 3 pm. *He* will be at a shooting, but probably will have a break then,’ Atanu-da announced over cellphone. I had requested him if he could speak to Soumitra Chatterjee and fix a short interview slot for me.

This was the end of August in 2009. Fifty years of *his* acting career. I wanted to ask a few questions on this journey.

‘I will take half an hour, just that,’ I pleaded with Atanu-da. Atanu-da was just one film old then. *Anshumaner Chhabi* was an intense personal film with frailties and Atanu-da was just shaping up to be a sensitive film maker. And, beyond all these, a friend indeed.

1995. I was still languishing the last year in our quarter allotted to the teachers of Jadavpur University. My father used to teach Physics there.

1995. We got the first telephone from Calcutta Telephones. No, not the heavy, black dialer ones. Rather, it was with sleek black buttons on a creamy white base and a maroon bottom.

I called *him* once, having found *his* name in the Telephone Directory, to hear *his* voice. And twice did I persuade my best friend to accompany me when I stood as a shadow outside *his* gated residence in Golf Green.

Why I never mustered courage to walk in is unknown. I might have feared the feeling to be lost and unwelcome. What if the experience left me bitter?

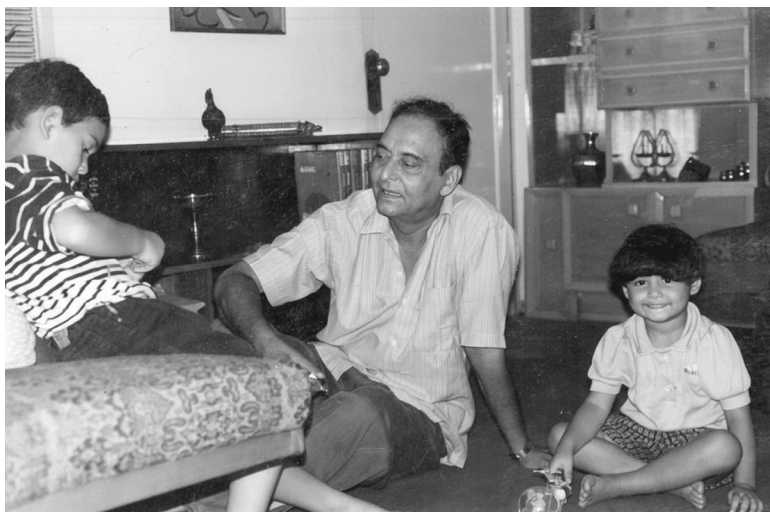
I have this known fear to meet the unknown. I do need to relieve myself seeking toilets, I sweat through the collars of

my half-sleeve bush shirts regularly and more often than not I awkwardly pull the gun before the bullets are even loaded.

Not once, but more, I encountered sturdy women blocking the entrance of their doorway demanding justification for my appearances. I have been asked to leave in the same dispassionate way that I made myself to approach. As I dragged myself out of the groove, slowly I have seen paper balls and occasional pebbles thrown at me, missing me just by a whisker. Surely, a paper ball is not a bullet piercing the tiny vessels of my heart. Yet, in this imagined violence a damage is surely done. You may ask if I ever, reaching the farthest my aim provided me with, look back and hurl one at them. Yes, I did always and missed never. But that is another story.

Soumitra Chatterjee asked me to call again a week later and then again till we finalized a date.

18 October 2009, Sunday.



*With his grandchildren when they were young
(PC - Catherine Berge)*

Letters and interviews



Years back, in 2000 when I worked in the then-languid city of Pune, I used to write letters a lot. This was a habit which we, most of us born in the twentieth century, indulged in quite often.

Whom did I write letters to in those pre-Social media ages? Did I get replies to every letter I wrote? That is not the most important question. What is however important, letters were preserved, stored and reread. Not so much for the content as for the fragrance of the tears and laughter of the time past.

They were mostly repetitive and always, strikingly similar. Yet, looking at them was an obsession. And an admiration for the different colours of the pages, the different inks of the writings, and the varied fonts.

I never quite understood the concept of pen-pals even though I was lonely and distant. I wrote letters to friends and family. Also, to blank envelopes nowhere to travel. Almost like me. Monotonous, placid and measuring silent waits.

And I wrote a lot to myself. Not diaries which never left shores but letters that traveled around the city to come back different, at a later time. Because memories are not always nostalgia. And yet, both as facts and irony are things of the past as much as they build the road to our future.

2000. That same year I wrote two letters to *him*. In foolscap sheets of paper before they shrunk in size to be called A4. Holding the first one I waited for an hour beneath the tree opposite of the post office to decide whether to drop the



Lines and words— the inner world
(PC - Catherine Berge)



Scribbles during a break
(PC - Catherine Berge)

envelope or not. It started raining suddenly before winter. Umbrella-less, the only choice I had was to throw the envelope containing the letter in the hearth of a red cylindrical post box outside the local post office in a friendly city. No, I never got a reply.

The second one, shorter, and in emerald green ink was torn into pieces and strewn with the pigeons making stupid smiles at tourist photographers.

My other obsession at that time was interviews. Are letters different from interviews? They probably have the same essence – looking at self and the other through the prism of introspection. Letters are never about just ‘How are you?’ and ‘I am fine.’ They convey much more in the handwritings, the choice of ink and paper. They are interviews when the other side accepts your soliloquies.

I loved setting up questionnaires for imaginary conversations to the extent of interrogation. All fictitious, all raucous and arrogant. Mostly, of footballers I admired and a few teachers I despised. I did have a few on film persons as well – Hitchcock, Bergman, Chatak, Uttam Kumar, Madhubala and also *him*.

Do you agree what Erskine Caldwell says, “To be popular you have to be exploited”?

The question of exploitation surfaced a number of times later in my interactions with *him*. But I had to wait for nine more years to ask *him* this question for the first time, finally, a Sunday morning.



*Looking at the stills of his films
(PC - Sukumar Roy)*

Water



When I started translating a few of *his* poems I felt it to be an arduous task. Language is fragile and delicate in itself. Much like the soul of a poet with a tender articulation of it. I have thought a number of times how the soul responds to the crevices of language. Can I ever rummage through it and hold that blue clot in my heart – the one caused by language? Or else why is there pain, a defeat in the inner eye of every poet, a fluctuating loss and gain of hurt? An over-encompassing solitude of failing my emotions with my expressions.

As I flipped through *his* poems, a few insouciant, some cold and yet quite a few are deeply sensitive, lonely and hesitant. Not the swagger of a celebrity, but the diffidence of a poet.

In my choice, I realise now, I opted for the ones that engulfed water in the lines and words.

‘When a river moves away

Love leaves’

Water comes back in literature as a metaphor so many times—a cleanser, and a flow of life. It is indeed a cliché with its overuse. And yet, I fall into it every time I read one and write keeping one in my blood.

‘I have kept a few rivers in my blood’

Water holds me captive. It is refreshingly powerful, weightlessly dangerous and evocatively potent in every form of art. It soothes as much as it storms and destroys the inner cockles of us. And yet when we swim, or hold a river inside we feel calm, in control, divine.

On lonely nights when language severed its ties leaving me feeling redundant water connotes a battle of nerves, so

END OF SAMPLE

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