



Joi Baba Felunath (The Elephant God) is one of Satyajit Ray's least known feature films in North America. It is also one of his least impressive. Below is Kino Ken's review of that detective mystery.

Key: *indicates an outstanding technical achievement or performance
(j) designates a juvenile performer

7 of a total 20 points = a very unsatisfactory film; not recommended

India 1979 color 112 minutes live action feature drama in Bengali with English subtitles Producer: R. D. Bansal (R. D. B. & Co.) Disc 2 of a double-disk The Satyajit Ray Collection set

Points:

- 1 Direction: Satyajit Ray
- 0 Editing: Dulal Dutta
- 1 Cinematography: Soumendu Roy
Still Photography: Nemaï Ghosh, Sandip Ray (Satyajit's son)
- 0 Lighting: Abhimanyu Das, Deben Das, Shankar Das, Sudarshan Das,
Manoranjan Dutta, Sukharanjan Dutta, Haren Ganguly,
Binoy Ghosh, Manglu Kurmi, Parish Mondal, Abani Naskar,
Sudhir Sarkar
- 0 Screenplay: Satyajit Ray from his own novel
- 1 Music: Satyajit Ray Playback Singer: Reba Muhuri
Music Recording: Samir Majumdar

2 Art Direction: Ashoke Bose*

Set Decoration: Sunil Das, Ramdhani Ghatua, Khetra Nayek

Makeup: Ananta Das

Sculptor: Jiten Pal*

1 Sound

Sound Mixing: Robin Sengupta

1 Acting

0 Creativity

7 total points

Cast: Soumitra Chatterjee (Prodosh Mitra a.k.a. Feluda, a private detective), Utpal Dutt* (Maganlal Meghraj, a dealer in antiquities with European collector connections), Santosh Dutta (Lalmohan Ganguly a.k.a. Jatayu, writer of sensationalistic cheap detective novels and friend of Feluda's), Siddhartha Chatterjee (Tapeshe a.k.a. Topshe, Feluda's cousin and assistant), Haradhan Bannerjee (Umanath Ghosal, a heavily indebted businessman), Satya Bannerjee (Niranjan, hotel manager), Bimal Chatterjee (Ambika Nath Ghosal, father of Umanath and grandfather of Rukshmini), Biplab Chatterjee (Bikash Singha), Moley Roy ('Bishwashree', a conceited bodybuilder a.k.a. Gunamoy Bagchi), Santosh Singha* (Shashibabu, sculptor and storyteller), Kamu Mukherjee* (Arjun, a knife-thrower), Monu Mukherjee (Machli Baba), Paranita Banerjee (Mrs. Umanath Ghosal), Jit Bose (j) (Ruku a.k.a. Rukshmini Kumar Ghosal, son of Umanath and grandson of Ambika), Indubhushan Gujra (Inspector Tiwari), others

An admirer of Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes and Georges Remi's Tintin, Indian director Satyajit Ray used them as models for his own sleuth Feluda, a name meaning "old protector of the world." Feluda's actual birth name is Pradosh Mitter. He's a Bengali private investigator on vacation in Vanasri, a city also identifiable as Benares and Kashi. Joining him on this excursion is his cousin and assistant Tapeshe (or Topshe) and a pulp author of hastily penned detective stories Jatayu (or Jotayu). This trio takes lodgings at a moderately furnished hotel where they share a room with muscleman "Bishwashree," a sort of Indian version of Charles Atlas. Proprietor Niranjan

(a.k.a. Nibaran) Chakravarti serves there as a secondary newspaper, feeding Feluda updates on neighborhood customs, personalities, and happenings.

When the film opens, aged sculptor and storyteller Shashibabu is regaling a transfixed listener, the grandson of his employer Ambika Nath Ghosali, with tales from ancient Hindu myths about various gods and goddesses. He mentions the deity Durga, whose vehicle of transport is the back of a lion. This is important information, as Durga's lion will become a sort of sanctuary for a Maltese Falcon type treasure nearly every other chief character in the movie seems to be vainly seeking.

One such pursuer is a wealthy trader by the name of Maganlal Meghraj. He comes by night to Ambika's son, Umanath, whose business indebtedness has come to Meghraj's attention, offering the man a substantial sum in return for surreptitiously handing over a small Durga jewel-studded emblem from Nepal that Umanath's father had received as a gift of gratitude for service rendered a Nepalese prince. Umanath rejects the offer. But for an unknown reason he chooses not to inform his father about it.

Two eavesdroppers have overheard at least part of his conversation with Meghraj. One is Rukshmini, nicknamed Ruku, who happens to be his superhero-besotted young son. The other is a lodger named Bikash Singha, whose connection to the Ghosal family is never clarified by the screenplay. Perhaps he pays room rent. Bikash's only apparent duty is to function as doorkeeper for the Ghosal manor.

Having heard Meghraj's threat to take the Durga idol by force or stealth the next evening, Ruku spills this information to Grandfather Ambika. The two partner in a scheme to outwit potential robbers by moving their goal inside the gaping mouth of a lion statue being renovated in one of their rooms. Ruku fastens it there by chewing gum.

When the next night arrives, the second snooper takes action. This is Bikash, who was smoking behind a curtain in an adjacent room when Meghraj and Umanath held their tête-à-tête. He surreptitiously enters Ambika's sleeping quarters where the Durga emblem is supposed to be stored but fails to find it. Because a. Grandfather and Grandson have relocated what he wants and b. Grandfather has lied about where and what it is. Only at the film's conclusion will part b. become clear.

Soon thereafter, Umanath, finding the renowned private eye Feluda in the neighborhood, arranges for him to meet with Ambika. The latter claims a property theft attempt has been made in his home. He desires Prodosh Mitra and his two associates to identify the culprit. Feluda, like Umanath a man in need of ready cash, accepts the assignment, permitting a rather leisurely stay in Vanasri to transform into a business outing.

The tourist trio observes a highly publicized blessing ritual being performed in the city by a publicly acknowledged saint. During that performance, Meghaj arrives by boat and brings to Machli Baba some stolen goods wrapped in a concealing blanket. Which the "saint" graciously accepts. Machli Baba is apparently Meghaj's fence. Yet Feluda dares not make an open accusation. That would only instigate mob violence against him for daring to charge a "holy man" with being part of a criminal conspiracy. Time and place aren't yet ripe for action.

So investigators must instead wait for an opening to come from Meghaj himself. One soon arrives: an invitation to meet a middleman in a narrow Vanasri market street. That anonymous individual will bring them directly to Meghaj's lodging place free of charge.

Okay, Feluda and companions take the bait. Once at Meghaj's in-town residence the intrepid threesome is hosted with seeming benevolence by its owner until the latter offers Feluda a bribe to withdraw from the Durga treasure case and obtains a firm refusal. Topshe has meanwhile noticed a hidden gunman on an overhead balcony with his revolver pointed downward in their general direction. As negotiations seem to have reached an impasse, the overeager hireling shoots and misses, revealing his presence to all three intended targets. Meghaj verbally castigates him for inefficiency and calls for the presence of another menacing associate. A retired circus performer emerges from an adjacent room and offers to present a knife-throwing exhibition in spite of apparent palsy and general decrepitude. To accomplish this, a poster containing the life-size outline of a human figure is set against one wall. Then his boss asks Jatayu to step in front of it. After several last-minute comic postponements the author creates, Arjun then hurls about ten knives at the placard, narrowly missing unresisting Jatayu each time. This is Meghaj's graphic warning of what will transpire if Feluda persists in research and interrogations.

A thoroughly shaken master gumshoe departs with his two sidekicks. He vows to either wreak revenge upon Meghraj for Jatayu's embarrassment or else quit his job entirely.

Further complications arise when Ruku and Bikash lie during interviews and Shashibabu the sculptor discovers a Durga emblem on the floor below a lion sculpture he's refurbishing. The senior artisan then makes a fatal error of entrusting the sacred object to Bikash's care. That untrustworthy fellow conveys it not to Ambika as requested but instead to Meghraj, who promises in exchange some cash useful in reestablishing Bikash in a different location. One further stipulation is made: Bikash must identify both residence and name of the individual who brought him the prized goddess figure. This the betrayer eventually does, resulting in stabbing death of someone completely innocent of any crime.

Meanwhile Feluda shadows a nimble, clean-shaven young man whose general features and telltale tattoo match Machli Baba's. This leads him to a room containing wig, decorative robe, and mysterious locked trunk. It's clear the "holy sage" has no natural waist-length beard. His customary wardrobe is also radically different from the costume worn at puja events. Though unable to open the chest he believes contains stolen goods, Feluda has seen enough to know Machli Baba is not what he claims to be.

Escaping the latter's detection, the famed supersleuth beats a retreat and pays a call on old friend Police Inspector Tiwari to set up an arrest of Meghraj and bring in likely confederates for questioning. First, though, he plots an extremely shaming reprisal against violently corrupt Meghraj.

To detail more plot would eliminate all suspense.

The Elephant God is no masterwork. It's a minor offering from Ray, with no biting social commentary, mostly superficial performances, surprisingly lax editing, and dismally unstable color gradations. Its finest music accompanies opening film credits. Absence of song lyric translations and intermittent snatches of conversation lacking subtitles further distance Western viewers from close involvement with proceedings. Transitions are frequently choppy as are key tracking movements. Three vertical lines often appear onscreen, as if a series of slides was being projected rather than a continuous strip of film. Some artifacts appear unexpectedly. At least twice action completely freezes. In a couple spots, pixel decay or horizontal barring

disfigure scenes. Print quality here is substandard, partly due to loss of the original master.

Further drawbacks are obnoxiously overplayed comedy scenes featuring Santosh Dutta, the disappointingly lifeless performance of Jit Bose as Ruku, and Soumitra Chatterjee's flatly unenergetic rendering of the lead character.

The film's three central themes, all directed at children for whom the production is quite unsuitable, are 1. always explore beneath surface appearances of persons, 2. brains triumph over muscle, and 3. engaging in deception never produces ultimately rewarding results. Those who lie are frankly scolded and humiliated by Feluda. The most musclebound model present gets eventually dismissed as a preening coward. Ruku, Ambika, and Machli Baba turn out to have far less innocent characters than they first disclose. Their deceptions make for substantial obstacles to the film hero's quest for truth.

Asok Bose's art direction is the principal delight of this release. Particularly notable are minimalist scenes on ghats, in alleys, and within Meghraj's urban hideaway. These are contrasted with lavishly ornate furnishings at the Ghosals.

Utpal Dutt radiates thinly disguised malevolence as Meghraj and his superb acting is matched by that of Kamu Mukherjee in the role of assassin-for-hire Arjun, who conceals deadly cruelty under a veneer of crotchety clumsiness.

Though marketed as family fare, emphases on corruption, menace, and hypocritical posturing make *The Elephant God* completely unfit for preteens. Storyline complications are difficult even for adults to follow and would probably prove impossible hurdles for Western adolescents.

In this instance, reading an English translation of Ray's original novel is almost a necessary prerequisite for enlightened viewing. One edition currently available is titled *Adventures of Feluda: The Mystery of the Elephant God*. Published in India as a paperback Puffin Book in 2019, it contains one hundred twelve pages.

When will an enterprising distributor such as The Criterion Collection make an earlier Feluda novel adaptation, Ray's *Sonar Kella* (*The Golden Fortress*), available for English-speaking audiences to compare and enjoy? It's wildly overdue as a North American dvd release.

Coming soon: Kino Ken's review of Satyajit Ray's *Mahapurush*
(*The Holy Man*)