

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Anwasha Maity, PhD.

THE ELEPHANT GOD / JOY BABA FELUNATH (1979)

Satyajit Ray

Bengali language

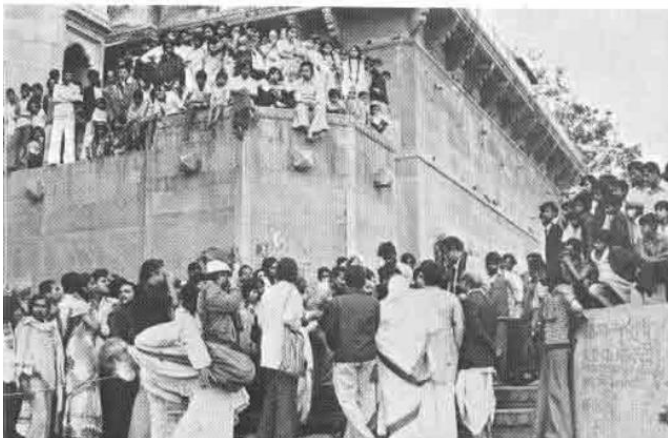
OVERVIEW

The Elephant God (or *All Hail Lord Felu*, as the title reads in Bengali) is the second and last of Ray's genre films, again featuring the detective of his own creation, Pradosh Chandra Mittir, a.k.a. Feluda. Unlike the previous film *The Golden Fortress*, which is essentially a long chase, moving quickly between different locations, *The Elephant God* is set entirely in Benares, and mostly located indoors. Feluda is again accompanied by his cousin-cum-sidekick Topshe, who again saves his life, this time from a bullet, as well as by the bestselling suspense-mystery author Jatayu. The film is a classic whodunit, with both Feluda and the viewer in the dark as to who committed the crimes. These crimes, interestingly, are not always shown directly— indeed, with the realistic depiction of corruption, bribery, paid hitmen and other unsavoury facets of contemporary society, it would hardly remain a family-friendly film if these were actually shown.

Ray again worked with a child artiste here and this allowed him to explore Feluda's kindness of character further. He again drew on Utpal Dutta to portray the "villain" Maganlal Meghraj; indeed, it is hard for Bengali audiences to imagine anyone else in that role, just as Santosh Dutta is the quintessential Jatayu. After Dutta's untimely death soon after the film, Ray decided never to make another Feluda film, as anyone else playing Jatayu was unimaginable to him.

Much of the history of Bengalis' migration to Benares is also present in the film. For instance, there actually was a Bengali family who had settled there for some 400 years and their Durga puja is the oldest in the region. Further, the renowned narrow gullies and paths of Benares hid old, ornate, maze-like mansions, for instance, Maganlal's residence and the building in which Machhli baba was living. Shooting in Benares also proved to be more of a challenge than a typical outdoor shoot— the crowd was bursting at the seams for every one of them. So much so that Ray almost had to cancel the long sequence when Feluda, Topshe and Jatayu go for a stroll and accidentally discover the murdered old idol-maker. He was able to shoot that the next night only because a local Bengali youth organization promised to keep the area crowd-free.

দ্বারভাঙ্গা ঘাটে শুটিং দেখার জন্য ভিড়।



কাশীর ঠঠেরি বাজারের বিখ্যাত মিঠাইয়ের দোকান শ্রীরামভাণ্ডারের সামনে শুটিং।

LIST OF CHARACTERS

Prodosh Chandra Mitter/Feluda	A private detective (age early 30's)
Tapesh Ranjan Mitter/Topshé	Feluda's teenager cousin and sidekick
Lalmohan Ganguly/Jatayu	A renowned author of suspense novels
Maganlal Meghraj	A Marwari businessman; the main antagonist of the film
Rukminikumar/Ruku	A boy, central to the mystery
Ambika Ghoshal	Ghoshal family patriarch and Ruku's grandfather
Umanath Ghosal	Ruku's father
Bikash Singha	A member of Umanath's household
"Biswasree" Gunomoy Bagchi	A bodybuilder
Inspector Tiwari	A police inspector who helps Feluda

SYNOPSIS

The mystery revolves around a rare gem-studded, gold figurine of Ganesh, the elephant-headed God much revered in most of Hindu India. This figurine was the Ghoshal family's heirloom and lucky charm. The nefarious businessman Maganlal Meghraj set his sights on it, but before he could get his hands on it, the statue is stolen. In the meantime, Feluda, Topshe and Jatayu are visiting Benares. Umanath and Ambika Ghoshal give Feluda the task to find the thief. Matters are complicated by Machhli baba, the new godman in town, whom Maganlal favours. After an incident where Maganlal invites and tries to bribe Feluda off the case, threatening Jatayu with death by knife-throwing, a murder and some canny deduction on Feluda's part, the mystery is solved.

Ruku Ghoshal, the Ghoshal heir, with the direct support of his grandfather Ambika Ghoshal, inspired in turn by one of Jatayu's novels, had hidden the Ganesh statue in the mouth of a lion, itself part of a statue of the goddess Durga. The Ganesh statue was tragically found by the old idol-maker and given to a non-related family member, who succumbed to Maganlal's threats and gave it to him. Then Maganlal had the old man killed. Finally, with the police's help, the evil mastermind was brought to justice. But a final twist remained— the statue was actually a duplicate!



SCENES

Opening credits feature Ray's artwork with a "medieval map" of Benares.

Opening scene It is evening; crickets chirp loudly in the background. An old man, the idol maker, tells the small boy, Ruku, the mythological story of Goddess Durga's creation in front of an unfinished clay idol featuring Durga and her children. Ruku wants to believe all these stories are true, from Durga's foe, the demon, Mahishashur to comic book heroes like Captain Spark, Tarzan and Aranyadeb.



Maganlal Meghraj visits An untimely visitor pulls up in a chauffeured car. Ruku peeks and runs to fetch Bikash, who invites the man in. He is Maganlal Meghraj, a college junior of Ruku's father, Umanath Ghoshal. Maganlal requests to see the family heirloom idol, the Golden Ganesh, but Umanath refuses; Maganlal doesn't have the best reputation as he sells heritage Indian artifacts to foreign collectors. Calm but threatening, Maganlal says, "If you make as much money as I have, you too will have a bad reputation" and offers to buy the Ganesh outright. "I don't always ask first", he says, "sometimes I just take it". But Umanath refuses again. Someone opens Ruku's grandfather's safe at night, but escapes when the old man calls out.



In Benares Feluda, Topshe and Jatayu are spending a vacation in Benares. Feluda and Jatayu keep up a light-hearted banter about the 33000000 gods in Benares and the devotional feeling that automatically arises at such a holy place.



Machhli baba The lodge owner takes them to a soiree of the new godman in town, Machhli baba, who hands out blessed fish scales to alleviate his devotees' troubles. They stand at a distance and watch what happens there. The owner says the "cream of Benares" are in attendance. Maganlal Meghraj arrives there in his luxurious personal boat. Feluda comments that the adage "too much devotion is a sign of the thief" is appropriate for him. As Machhli baba sermonizes, Jatayu says he has a "great personality". Feluda notices an airplane tattoo on the baba's hand which is completely out of place. Ruku's parents also arrive and are introduced to Feluda by the lodge owner. He requests Feluda's help in finding a stolen object.



Meeting the bodybuilder

Returning to the lodge, Jatayu is stunned at the view of a bodybuilder drying his body. The bodybuilder invites them for his next show and lets Jatayu touch his biceps, even lifts and spins him around Jatayu is literally floored— he couldn't believe that a human body could be so muscular and well-sculpted.



The Ganesh has been stolen Feluda, Topsy and Jatayu arrive at Umanath's palatial mansion. Ruku is shooting an air pistol standing at the edge of the third-floor terrace wall. Umanath tells them that the heirloom Golden Ganesh, three inches tall and studded with diamonds, rubies and emeralds, has been stolen from his father's home safe. The idol was considered a bearer of luck and prosperity for the family. He doesn't suspect anyone from the household.



Ruku is reprimanded Ruku, accompanied by Bikash, enters and Umanath scolds him. Ruku answers that if Captain Spark could stand on the terrace wall, then why wouldn't he? Jatayu tells everyone about the comic book character, but Umanath is not amused. He reprimands Bikash for giving such delusive books to Ruku and generating such dangerous ideas. He threatens to lock Ruku up if he does that again.

Meeting the patriarch Then they meet Ruku's grandfather, a cantankerous but fit old man who is an avid fan of detective novels. He shows them his keys and safe and says that his evening opium habit usually made him dead to the world. But that night he was woken by a sound and he called out, letting the thief escape. He does not suspect the servants; the rest is up to Feluda to decipher.



Captain Spark On the terrace, Ruku pretends to be Capitan Spark and tells Feluda that the Ganesh is "with a king in Africa" and needs to be retrieved soon, otherwise it will "go to Atlantis". They see his playroom on the terrace. Feluda makes Ruku promise not to climb on the terrace wall in exchange for showing him his revolver. His other weapon, the unseen "mind-weapon", can peer into others' minds to reveal what they're thinking. Ruku is pleased and they exchange verbal puzzles.



Questioning Bikash

They meet Bikash again, who says he plays the sidekick Raxit to Ruku's Captain Spark. While roaming around the mansion, Feluda questions him, saying that he had both motive and means. He says that he could have stolen the Ganesh earlier if he wanted to and diverts suspicion to Umanath's failed businesses.

Through Benares Back at the lodge, Jatayu complains over lunch about his rival, the author of Captain Spark comics. Feluda receives a call from Maganlal and they set out to visit him, walking through some of Benares's famous markets and narrow roads.



Visiting Maganlal Meghraj They enter a palatial mansion, where Maganlal is lounging on a beautiful white floor bed, with framed pictures of many Hindu gods and goddesses behind him. He jovially asks Feluda why he's looking into the matter of the stolen Ganesh. Topshe notices a man holding a pistol on them through an ornate skylight. Maganlal tries to bribe Feluda to stop looking for the thief, saying that Umanath stole it and sold it to him. Feluda has "extraordinary intelligence", he says, so he should drop the case. When Feluda asks to see the artifact, Maganlal grows calmly threatening and accuses Feluda of calling him a liar. Feluda also calmly retorts that he doesn't take bribes and throws the bundle of cash back at Maganlal.



Maganlal angered

Turning his attention to Jatayu and noticing the novelist hesitating, Maganlal says that the cold drink that was served is not poisoned and calls for a more dangerous game— a knife throwing show by a wizened, coughing circus master named Arjun. When Feluda tries to get up and leave, the man holding the pistol shoots and Topshe dives to save Feluda. Maganlal is livid; his instructions were to shoot only if Feluda took out his weapon. He threatens Feluda, saying that two pistols are pointed at him and commands them to sit, shouting that they insulted him and he "cannot guarantee their safety" if they return to Ghoshal mansion.



Knife-throwing Feluda is ashamed at not being able to do anything while Jatayu becomes the knife-thrower's guineapig. To the background score of a common funeral chant "Hari Bol" (often used for comedic effect), Jatayu gulps down the smoothie, empties his pockets and stands in front of the target board with his eyes closed. One by one, the knife-thrower's knives narrowly miss Jatayu and hit their mark on the board. Maganlal really enjoys the show, shouting encouragement, while Feluda and Topshe look away, sweating. Though he is unhurt, Jatayu has fainted standing up. Maganlal calls for "brandy and warm milk" for Jatayu.



Feluda takes an oath Later on, relaxing in the fresh air at a famous riverside ghat, Feluda blames himself for Jatayu's horrible experience, but Jatayu, stretching and walking around, says it was his fate and he's happy to be alive. But Feluda vows that he will either avenge Jatayu's harassment or quit being a detective.



A warning note At the lodge, the bodybuilder has received a threatening note— “BEWARE”— and is packing to leave. When Jatayu asks him why, he says that he’s not a coward but it’s too risky to stay; his body is a “work of art” like Michaelangelo’s David and must be preserved. Feluda, supine and dejected, with his hand covering his face, tells the bodybuilder that the note was not for him and guarantees his safety.

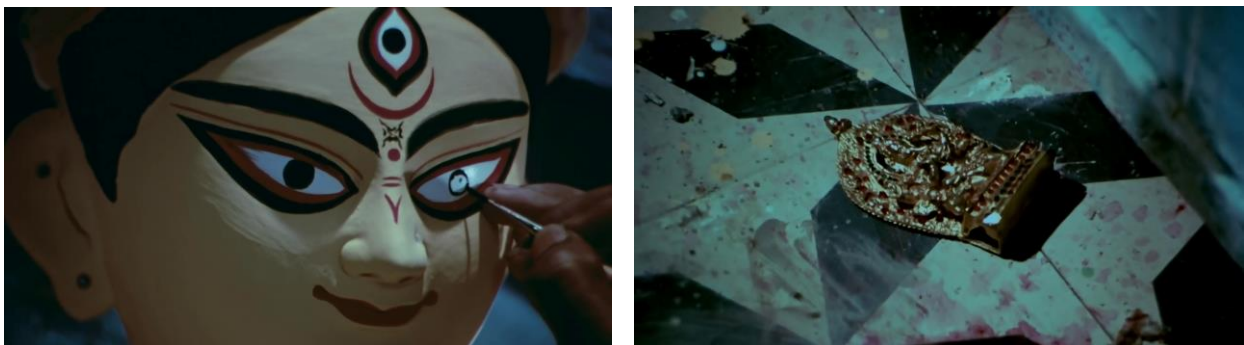
Another warning At the Ghoshal mansion, Ambika (the patriarch) tells his son that he saw the thief leaving— it was a “gentleman”. He also knew about Maganlal’s visit and offer for the Ganesh. He warns Umanath that he will be punished if found guilty.

Feluda’s deductions That night, Feluda realizes that Maganlal does not yet have the Ganesh otherwise he wouldn’t have offered the bribe. But he is unsure which member of Umanath’s household could have stolen it.

Machhli baba’s disguise Next morning, Feluda sees a beardless Machhli baba, identified by his unique airplane tattoo, bathing at the riverbank. He follows the conman, keeping himself hidden, to a large, ancient and ornate mansion. Roaming around shadowy corridors and stairs, he reaches Machhli baba’s room, where the godman’s costume, wig, fish scales and even a revolver are in full display. Feluda is able to escape undetected.



A meeting with a police inspector Back at the lodge, Feluda meets Inspector Tiwari who he’s well-acquainted with. Inspector Tiwari tells him about the theft of another rare Shiva statue days after Maganlal had visited the owner’s house. He confirms his standing offer to help Feluda whenever needed.



The Ganesh statue appears At Ghoshal mansion, the idol of Goddess Durga is almost ready, with the old sculptor painting the eyes— the finishing touch. Suddenly, he notices the Ganesh on the floor.

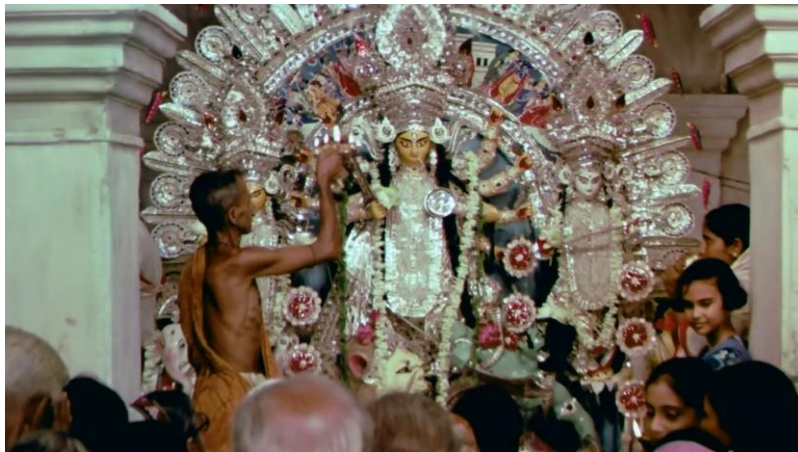
Jatayu’s new novel Feluda, Topshe and Jatayu go for an evening stroll in one of Benaras’s famous narrow gullies. Jatayu is afraid that all the houses there are haunted. He also tells them that in his most recent novel, the villain hid a rare diamond inside his pet lion’s mouth— stuck it on with cello tape—and the hero sees it when the lion opens its mouth. Feluda sarcastically comments, “Amazing!”

Idol-maker murdered Suddenly they see the old idol maker teetering on the street— he has been shot or stabbed in the back. He passes away in Feluda's arms, saying "Shing..." Inspector Tiwari says that the murderer is the idol-maker's son. Feluda is unconvinced.



Feluda's deduction

Feluda says three things don't add up— "King of Africa", the idol-maker's "Shing..." and a radio broadcast of a particular singer's song that Bikash had mentioned earlier. Feluda realizes that "King of Africa" means "lion", here, specifically the lion at Goddess Durga's feet ('lion' is *singha*).



Feluda confronts Ruku They rush to Ghoshal mansion, where the idol is already being worshipped in front of a large gathering. Ruku had apparently jumped on the idol lion just before the festivities began, was scolded and was sulking in his playroom. Feluda (with Topshe and Jatayu) goes there and shows the boy his Colt revolver.



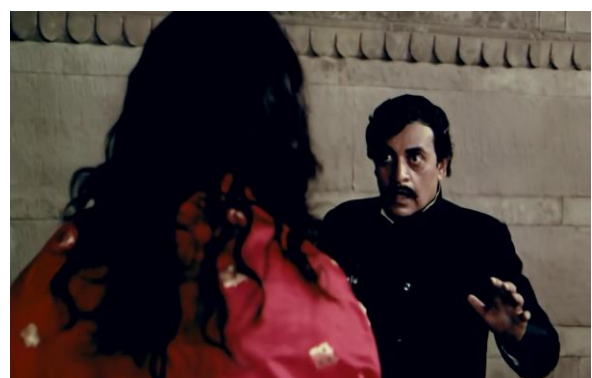
Ruku's revelation Ruku confirms Feluda's deduction that he stuck the Ganesh statue inside the idol lion's mouth with chewing gum as Maganlal would otherwise take it. While pretending to be Captain Spark, he reported the businessman's offer to buy the Ganesh to Raxit, who was surprisingly not Bikash but his grandfather Ambika. Ambika had previously told Ruku the story from Jatayu's novel, which gave him the brilliant idea. Ambika comes there and Feluda introduces Jatayu to him as the author of the novel on which his idea was based.

Bikash confesses But the Ganesh is nowhere to be found. Feluda rushes to Bikash's room and sees a suitcase with the initials "B.S." Ambika confirms that his full name is Bikash Singha. Feluda finds and interrogates Bikash at a sweets shop, where he confesses that Maganlal had bribed him to steal the Ganesh. He opened Amkiba's safe but it wasn't there; a few days later, the old idol-maker brought it to him. He sold the Ganesh to Maganlal that night. The businessman forced him to show the way to the old idol-maker's house, where a hired killer murdered him (the murder is not shown). On cue, Inspector Tiwari, whom Feluda had phoned earlier, arrives to arrest Bikash.



Jatayu and Topshe in disguise The bodybuilder shows off his physique to Jatayu, who writes down the name of each muscle. Feluda calls to tell Topshe and Jatayu to go to Machhli baba's soiree that evening, disguised as sadhus. Jatayu overacts the role with ancient-sounding dialogue and loud chants.

Climax Maganlal arrives and gives an offering to Machhli baba. But he is faced with a pistol because Machhli baba is actually Feluda in disguise. The soiree breaks up and Jatayu yells, "All Hail Felunath", the Bengali title of the film. Maganlal is terrified as Feluda shoots at the wall behind him (copying the knife-thrower with Jatayu) while listing his crimes— hiring a hitman to kill an innocent man, smuggling national treasures abroad and bribing to get out of a tight spot. Inspector Tiwari appears to arrest the criminal mastermind, and Maganlal faints.



A final twist— all's well that ends well! At Ghoshal mansion, Jatayu autographs his book for Ruku. Feluda arrives with the Ganesh idol and returns it, then asks for it as his remuneration instead of a cheque. Everyone is stunned! The real Ganesh, he reveals, is at a bank safe-deposit box and the one they recovered was a duplicate that Ambika had commissioned.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Feluda Conscientious (Intelligent, Gentle)

Feluda is the protagonist of this film and a private detective. He is extremely intelligent, very observant and aware of his surroundings, dedicated to solving mysteries for the sake of the thrill. He is usually not concerned about payment, though uncharacteristically, in this film, he does request “remuneration” in the form of the Ganesh figurine duplicate, perhaps to repay Ambika for his elaborate deception. He also cultivates a serious, sometimes sour demeanour (a trademark of the actor Soumitra Chattopadhyay) and usually keeps his emotions tightly in check, with the occasional sarcasm and dry wit.

Intelligent Like Holmes, Feluda’s prime asset is his “mindweapon”, his intellect, though he does not shy away from occasional physical combat. Striking in particular is his ability to notice his surroundings and draw the correct conclusions from them. These habits serve him especially well in solving this particular mystery, as there are no concrete clues to go on— his deductions are solely based on observation and chance bits of information from the other characters. For instance, he correctly deduces that Bikash is not the mastermind behind the theft because he always had the chance to steal it earlier and would have promptly disappeared had he stolen the Ganesh figurine. In fact, the viewer and Feluda himself have a few tense moments trying to find him after he left the Ghoshal mansion; thankfully, he was still at the sweets shop, unconcerned about getting caught. Again, he deduces from Ambika’s behaviour (making the mystery-solving a challenge and a game) that not too much was at stake; again, he is right. And of course, the most inspired of these deductions is linking Jatayu’s novel’s plot to how Ruku hid the figurine.

Gentle In this film, as with the earlier one, Feluda has to interact with a child and this shows his gentler side well. Ruku, true to his age, has a healthy scepticism for strangers and disapproval for adults who try to force him to do things against his will. Feluda quickly takes a measure of the boy and realizes that the only way he could extract any useful information from him would be by being gentle and bringing himself down to the boy’s level — which he literally does. He gets on his knees to speak to Ruku, promises to show his real revolver as a reward for stopping dangerous behaviours like standing on the third-floor terrace railing and also answers his puzzles and quizzes him in turn.

Maganlal Meghraj Unconscientious (Evil genius, Moody, Greedy)

Maganlal is possibly the most chilling “villain” created by Ray. “He’s a very polished and ruthless kind of baddie,” said Ray, “certainly the most ferocious character that I have created. I wanted a really colourful and cruel villain— a strong adversary for Felu[da].” Maganlal is played by the brilliant actor Utpal Dutta, who uses his large eyes and almost-ugly facial features to the most frightening effect in

several scenes. Maganlal is a rich businessman and, like many of them, engages in nefarious activities like smuggling that are hard to pin on him. Police Inspector Tiwari mentions that they have been helpless in that regard. He wants the Ghoshal family's golden Ganesh and won't let anything stop him.

Evil genius His evil genius keeps him steps ahead of Feluda, leaving the detective guessing. He threatens Umanath directly, saying that he doesn't always ask first but takes what he wants. He bribes and intimidates Bikash behind the scenes to literally have the Ganesh in his grasp, with no one the wiser. He cultivates hitmen for the specific purpose of not getting his hands dirty, as when he sends one to kill the old idol-maker. He also patronizes Machhli baba's con and uses him as a dealer for smuggling goods. His corrupted reach runs far and wide, like the roots of a weed and similarly hard to pull out.

On the surface, though, he cultivates the most sophisticated, aristocratic and pious appearance. His living room is like that of a typical wealthy businessman, with a pristine white, comfortable floor bed topped with luxurious pillows; an ornate wooden chest cum floor-desk for keeping papers and small amounts of money; expensive lamps, which cast him in a shadow while shining brilliantly on guests; and a double row of framed pictures of Hindu gods and goddesses behind him on the wall. He dresses well, owns and frequently uses a large *bajra* (leisure boat) and is the very picture of his class. This contrast of appearance versus reality lends another aspect to the success of his evil genius.

Moody Coupled with his intelligence, he is also very moody and likes to flex his power, notably in toying with his prey, accentuated with a warped sense of fairness. This is best revealed in the scene where he invites Feluda, with Topsy and Jatayu in tow, to bribe him off the case. The meeting starts off well, with him offering them appropriate hospitality, but sours quickly when Feluda rejects the bribe and calls him a liar. He immediately gets angry and flexes his power by calling for the knife-thrower. But it has to be a fair game; when one of his minions keeping Feluda in his sights shoots, he calls out the man and promises to cut his wages, as he was supposed to shoot only if Feluda brought his weapon out first. He has complete control over the space and decides that toying with and insulting Feluda for the affront would be the most appropriate punishment for rejecting his offer. Of course, no one in their right mind would think a knife-throwing game with Jatayu as the target is fair game; Maganlal knows this and it heightens his enjoyment. That said, he's not completely inhuman; he doesn't poison the smoothies and after Jatayu faints standing up, he orders someone to fetch some milk and brandy to revive him.

Greedy Maganlal believes that everything, from objects to loyalty, can be bought with money— bribery is his calling card. He is also quintessentially greedy, coveting what does not belong to him and making profits off these ill-gotten spoils. Moreover, his greed makes him unpatriotic and immoral in that he smuggles heritage artifacts to foreigners— another affront to Feluda and the viewers' morality. In fact, his greatest mistake stems from this; if he had left Feluda well enough alone, then he would likely have got away with his crimes as he always has. But trying to bribe Feluda, plus putting Jatayu through the life-and-death game, ensured that the detective would exact revenge.

Ray has been critiqued for depicting Maganlal as a stereotypical representative of his class—the Marwari businessman— living in Bengal but disrespecting Bengali culture and the not-so-veiled Bengali envy towards their wealth. Of course, in this particular film, the setting is entirely in Benares and we aren't told of Maganlal's dealings in Bengal. But his almost flawless, if accented Bengali points to his roots in Bengal, where he studied with Umanath. In fact, to this day, the Marwari/Rajasthani community in Bengal maintains an uneasy coexistence with native Bengalis on the basis of some of these stereotyped qualities.

Rukminikumar Ghoshal/ Ruku Open (Imaginative, Daring)

Ruku is the youngest member of the Ghoshal family and a rambunctious boy, around seven or eight years old. He inadvertently becomes the key to the mystery of the stolen Ganesh, with the support of his grandfather Ambika.

Imaginative The film opens with Ruku asking the old idol-maker about gods and goddesses from

the Hindu pantheon, particularly the story of how Mother Durga came to be. The old man, who believes in the mythologies, says that the stories must be true. Ruku, in full pretend-play mode, extends that list to include his favourite superheroes, showing his imaginative side right at the beginning. Thereafter, we see his imagination developed fully when he pretends to be his favourite superhero, Captain Spark, written by one of Jatayu's competitors. While playing the superhero, with mask and cape in place, he overhears the meeting between Maganlal and Umanath and promptly reports it to his sidekick, Raxit, i.e., his grandfather Ambika. Then he suggests that he will hide the Ganesh in the lion idol's mouth with chewing gum. Then, after meeting Feluda, the first thing he does is quiz the detective with some verbal puzzles (like that of the Sphinx), testing his mettle before deciding if the man was worth his attention. He also cryptically tells Feluda that the Ganesh was with the King of Africa and if not recovered soon would be lost in Atlantis— a veiled reference to the lion idol and the practice of immersing the Durga idol in the river on the tenth day of worship.

Daring Compared to the young boy Mukul from *Golden Fortress*, Ruku is much more of a daredevil; he isn't easily frightened or intimidated. Feluda's introduction to Ruku is when he arrives at the Ghoshal mansion. Suddenly he hears shots from an air pistol and sees a boy standing on the railing of the third floor terrace— quite a dangerous place! When Topshe asks Feluda to call out to him, Feluda rightly surmises that the boy wouldn't pay any attention to them. Even when reprimanded by his father, Ruku is defiant, running away to hide and sulk in his own playroom on the terrace, full of adventure comics and toy guns. Even Feluda has to appease him by promising to show his real revolver just to get him to answer his questions.



THEMES

SOCIETY (Culture- bodybuilding)

Culture- Body building Body building has a long history in India, and Bengal, and Ray carefully inserts it in the plot. In a chance meeting, Feluda, Topshe and Jatayu share a room at the lodge in Benares with the renowned bodybuilder, “Bishwasree” Gunomoy Bagchi. Given his strength, the viewer might expect the bodybuilder to help Feluda, but he is actually a bit of a practical coward, almost deciding to leave after receiving a threatening note meant for the detective.

The scenes with the body builder and Jatayu in particular are largely comic relief in the contrast between the two characters. Jatayu is sedentary, unfit and in awe of the man’s musculature, even stating that he was lucky to have witnessed such a masterpiece with his own eyes and asking to touch the biceps. He takes copious notes while the muscle man flexes each prominent, well-developed muscle and mentions their names in turn. The man is also very careful about his hygiene and appearance, using creams and powders to accentuate his “body- temple” and “work of art”, whereas Jatayu (and the typical middle-class male) would draw the line at soap and shaving cream. The comedy accentuates ideas of male body-image, poking fun at Jatayu’s rounded, unfit body versus the bodybuilder’s over-developed, landscaped body, positing, perhaps, Feluda’s yoga-practicing, nimble body as the golden mean. Of course, it is to Ray’s credit that he ironically represents male body-image (including subtle and unarticulated homoeroticism) in an era when male body awareness was mostly limited to hairy chests peeking out of shirts.

JUSTICE (Crime)

Crime The crimes in this film are more sophisticated and serious than in the previous Feluda film. Moreover, many of them are not directly shown, but mentioned by the characters. For instance, we do not see the old idol-maker getting stabbed or shot, but just his few dying words and a single frame of his bloodstained back. Neither are we shown Maganlal’s smuggling deals, or how Machhli baba fools people, or his police interrogation leading to a confession, or the theft of the Ganesh from Ambika’s safe. That Machhli baba acts as a “fence” for stolen artifacts, where these are given to him in the guise of offerings to the godman, is also only hinted at. In fact, the only major crime directly shown is Maganlal bribing Bikash, who genuinely tries to save the old idol-maker but is intimidated into submission.

Given that this film (and the novel it was based on) were targeted towards a young audience, there was no question, really, within Indian cultural norms, that it would depict the sinister and serious crimes the film mentions. In fact, compared to *The Golden Fortress*, *The Elephant God* is not really a children’s film at all, as Utpal Dutta, playing the evil genius Maganlal, agreed. Maganlal’s schemes are so nefarious in a completely realistic way that one finds it hard to reconcile the gravity of the crimes with the children-and-young adult genre.

Of course, the pessimistic mood arising from contemporary events in India, notably the Emergency (1975-77), lent the material a sombre, realistic bent, with corruption and injustice leeching into every social structure and practice. And what’s more pitiable, ultimately, is that the authentic Ganesh figurine was never in harm’s way— the old idol-maker died over a cheap duplicate. The satisfaction of the criminals Maganlal and Machhli baba getting arrested does not make up for the lost life, though this would be too grim an aspect for the film to explore in any detail. Instead, we are offered the satisfaction inherent in the genre— the detective solving the mystery and bringing the criminals to justice.

QUEST (Investigation)

Investigation If Feluda is around, can an investigation be far behind? While he was on vacation in Benares, he gets embroiled in this mystery purely by chance and on the strength of his reputation as an excellent detective. Structured as a whodunit, the film keeps us and Feluda guessing how and by whom the various crimes are committed, while the sinister Maganlal hovers in the background. Feluda’s quest begins innocuously, with a challenge from Ambika to find the thief who stole the Ganesh, but not the figurine itself. An important clue pointing to the murderer was the old idol-maker’s last word, “Singh...”, which was the first part of Bikash’s last name, Singha. After suspecting Umanath and Bikash, Feluda is stalled without any way to directly tie the crimes, including the murder, to

Machhli baba and Maganlal. Until, of course, he realizes from Ruku's cryptic words and Jatayu's description of his novel's plot that the most likely location of the stolen figurine was in the lion idol's mouth.

A highlight of the investigation occurs when Feluda is caught somewhat unaware by Maganlal's treacherous invitation; he is helpless while the villain toys with Jatayu's life. Two pistols are aimed at them from the skylights, so any attempt of heroism on his part would surely result in tragedy. He can only sit and watch as the doddering knife-thrower throws ten knives at Jatayu, each promising certain death, in one of the most thrilling and memorable sequences in Bengali cinema. Though everyone finally gets away unscathed with luck and thanks to Maganlal's whimsical nature, Feluda vows to avenge the harassment. Which is exactly what he does in the climactic scene. Feluda is a master of disguises and pretends to be Machhli baba, to whom Maganlal hands the stolen Ganesh for smuggling. And of course, the cherry on top is Feluda's final deduction that the real Ganesh was never in danger. Uncharacteristically, but in keeping with Ambika's ruse, he requests the duplicate Ganesh as "remuneration" for services rendered.

APPEARANCE (Deception)

Deception This theme is best seen in the few sequences with Machhli baba. Although he is a non-speaking character, he is central to the plot. Much more sinister and threatening than Birinchi baba, the conman from Ray's earlier film, *Mahapurush*, this godman dons and sets aside his entire character like a costume, sports an airplane tattoo (which Topshe remembers having seen on some gang members) and owns a pistol, which he leaves lying around in his room for easy access. Feluda, with his healthy scepticism for all things supernatural, suspects him from the beginning, but finds proof of his deception only by chance after seeing him without his costume at the riverside ghat one morning. So behind the facade of the holy godman is actually a nefarious conman and dealer/smuggler for stolen goods. In fact, the scenes set on the famous ghat in Benares, with a singer singing beautiful devotional songs placed right next to the conman's deception, is akin to smugglers spiking communion-wafers with cocaine. This contrast between appearances and reality excited Ray, particularly as the devotional songs were so well sung.

And in order to unmask the deception, Feluda and his companions have to engage in deception themselves. Ray fondly remembered the sight of the actors playing Topshé and Jatayu, dressed as sadhus, making their way to a certain point on the ghats for filming and having to stop every ten seconds or so "because people were falling at their feet". Jatayu even half-closed his eyes and gave blessings to supplicants. And of course, Feluda's own disguise as Machhli baba takes the cake— not even the observant and canny Maganlal is able to spot it. To be fair, though, until the point where Feluda reveals himself, the scene was shot with the actor who played Machhli baba.



CHANGE (Old age)

Old age Ambika Ghoshal, the patriarch of the Ghoshal family, is an old but imaginative man. Just as Ruku represents childhood (like Mukul in the previous Feluda film, *The Golden Fortress*), ageing is represented by Ambika. He has not yet let the reins of the household out of his grasp; this is literally represented in the keys to the safe. It is not clear whether he does this out of necessity or choice, given his son Umanath's business failures. Nor does he seem to want to "retire" gracefully, again typical of the patriarch stereotype in Bengali families. But the authoritarian, jaded aspect is here

tempered by his fascination with the “popular” genre of detective fiction, as contrasted with any “high-class” hobbies/interests (for instance, classical music). In the wisdom of his years, he does keep a major secret, and this is of course the key to the mystery (the real Ganesh figurine safely in the bank deposit box), while suggesting that Ruku hide the duplicate in the lion idol’s mouth. Additionally, this otherwise open and trusting relationship with his grandson provides an uncommon angle on the treatment of old age as a theme. The relationship between the two highlights how grandparents and grandchildren can be the best of friends and confidants. And even past one’s prime, it is possible to retain imagination and playfulness.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1) Analyse Maganlal Menghraj’s character using any two sequences of your choice. Is he a successful villain in your eyes? Why or why not?
- 2) Discuss the location of Benares— with its riverside ghats, narrow gullies, architecture and history of Bengali migration— and the impact of this setting on the plot.
- 3) Which do you think is a more interesting minor character— Machhli baba or the bodybuilder? Why?
- 4) Compare and contrast childhood and old age as themes in the film.
- 5) In what ways does the film follow or deviate from traditional crime movies?

