SCIENCE fiction stories are always regarded as the incredible communion between the ethics of literature and probable feats to be achieved by the scientific and technological progression in the near future. Doyens in sci-fi like Robert Silverberg, Arthur C. Clarke, Jules Verne, Ray Bradbury, H.G. Wells and Isaac Asimov had predicted the popular emergence of submarine, space travel, computer, mobile phones, robotics and telecommunications through their literary oeuvres.

In the same avenue of sci-fi, Bengal’s erstwhile literary genius and also the Oscar-winning film director Satyajit Ray never lagged behind. Satyajit imbibed the ancestral literary bravura of his illustrious father – Sukumar Roy and his grandfather Kamadaranjan Roy (popular as Upendra Kishore Roychowdhury). Being endowed with such cerebral inspiration, Satyajit’s bibliophilic genius helped him to create an astoundingly prodigious, inimitable, versatile, scientist character, a la model of the eccentric, yet talented scientist, created by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle in his sci-fi story The Lost World – Professor Challenger. The name of that phenomenal character, chiselled by Satyajit is Professor Trilokeshwar Shonku, whose name might have been inspired by one of the gems in Chandragupta Vikramaditya’s Royal Court.

It is also said that the sedate, publicity-shy, inquisitive and daring, bespectacled academican with a bald pate and salt and pepper beard was also inspired by Sukumar Roy’s parodic rendition on Prof. Challenger – Prof Heshoram Hushiar. Recently, the 50th anniversary of the emergence of Professor Shonku, an inhabitant of Giridih, Jharkhand, on the bank of River Ushri, is being observed unnoticed. Prof. Shonku belonged to the legion of other globally renowned sci-fi characters like Flash Gordon, Buck Rogers, Captain Han Solo, Captain Nemo in Verne’s magnum opus Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea and Doctor Victor Frankenstein.

Prior to Yuri Gagarin’s space flight on board the “Vostok”, Neil Armstrong’s “giant leap forward” on the lunar surface and Alexei Leonov’s space-walk, Professor Shonku made his phenomenal appearance in Ray’s 1961 story “Byomyatrir Diary” (Diary of A Cosmonaut) with his self-manufactured spaceship. In the story, the rocket’s design was credited by Satyajit to the excellence of two pioneering space scientists – Robert Hutchings Goddard and Hermann Oberth.

During that space Odyssey, Prof. Shonku takes the robot invented by him “Bidhushekhar” (meaning – “the apex of intelligence”) and a specially invented weapon – the “Snuff-gun” (Nasyastra) – which would make his enemies sneeze miserably for at least 33 hours. Prof. Shonku wrote down this story in a diary form with an indelible ink, which changed its colour from red to yellow on pages that were imperishable and elasticized like rubber.

Insomnia or lack of sleep seems to be one of the maladies happening to the contemporary humans. In order to remedy this, Prof. Shonku invents a new sleeping pill, “Jambhrinstra”, which liberates humankind from the bane of insomnia. Prof. Shonku also invents a unique “fish-pill” for his feline pet Newton (Satyajit’s obituary to the doyen). Prof. Shonku also takes a space-suited Newton to the lunar surface – which makes us call up the spatial journey by the Soviet dog Laika Kudriwka and two U.S. apes Abel and Baker.

Prof. Shonku’s rocket is incredibly made of some exotic mushrooms (agaricus), snake’s moulded skin, tortoise eggshells, mixed with Tantrum Boropaxinate and aqueous velosilica. Prof Shonku is also an astute botanist, whose passion towards our green friends remains Satyajit’s homage to Acharya J.C. Bose and Carolus Linnaeus. Prof. Shonku grows a special breed of Golancha flower, with five finger-like petals. Those petals are found emitting lights or phospholuminescence, which hints at the innovative scientist’s phytological expertise. He also invents a special capsule called “Batika Indica” with the extract of Banyan fruits to curb a day’s appetite.

Most of Prof. Shonku’s incredible tribulations and scientific odysseys had been printed in the premier and traditional, juvenile, Bengali monthly – “Sandesh” (The News), once edited by Satyajit’s renowned writer grandfather, Upendrakishore and later, by Sukumar. Prof. Shonku is presented by Satyajit as an inquisitive, mystery loving scientist and a courageous, geographical explorer in an immaculate combination – a pleasant and paradigmatic amalgam of Sven Hedin, Sir David Livingstone, Dr Alexander Fleming, Albert Einstein and Thomas Alva Edison.
Satyajit always believed that no benevolent scientific feats can be gained without devotional assistance and cumulative works. Fleming might not have invented penicillin without the help of Dr. P. C. Mahalanobis and Dr. U. N. Dhawan. The inspiration for the discovery of insulin without the assistance of Dr. Best, was none other than Dr.Prodosh Chandra Mitra.

The characterization of Prof. Shonku, like the sci-fi comics character Flash Gordon’s scientist friend – Dr. Hans Jarkov – helps us realize that we must befriend the boons of science to elevate the grandeur of our collaborative existence and peaceful civilization. This 50 years old sci-fi character should inspire us to get united against clandestine nuclear weapon heads, greedy commercialization of scientific wonders and human’s prevalent beliefs in talismans and rituals, while pretending to bow before science.

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