Article

Ujjal Chakraborty

‘Hukumdar’! ‘Hukumdar’!

“Hukumdar!... Hukumdar!...”
You hear that cry again and again in the film ‘Postmaster’ by Satyajit Ray.
‘Hukumdar’! What a strange word. The kind of word we hardly ever use anymore. People in our country must have said it once, somewhere, long ago—but who were they? And when exactly did it echo through our lives like that?
So let’s try to unpack it a little.
In many old words, when the tail **‘–**dar**’** gets attached at the end, it changes the meaning in an interesting way. Take **‘**pankhabardar.’ During the days of the East India Company, there used to be those giant cloth fans hanging from the ceiling. Someone had to pull the rope so the fan would sway gently, sending soft air drifting across the room. The person who did that job? He was called the pankhabardar.
Or think of the **‘**hukobardar**.’** That was the man who lit the hookah and carried it carefully to the babu who wanted to smoke.
So naturally, one might guess that the ‘hukumdar’ is the person who carries out orders. The one who obeys. The one who jumps up the moment a command is given. If the hukobardar rushes in with a glowing hookah whenever the master asks, surely the ‘hukumdar’ must be just as eager to carry out instructions—ready on one foot, waiting.
But is that really true?
If it were, then how the Turkish translation of Machiavelli’s The Prince could be called ‘hukumdar’? A prince doesn’t follow orders. A prince gives them.
Which means the word ‘hukumdar’ has nothing to do with obeying commands. In fact, it means the exact opposite.
The ‘hukumdar’ is the one who *issues* the command.
The ruler.
The sovereign.
The emperor.
The Jahapana, the Rajadhiraj, the Shahenshah**.**
Remember the King of Halla in Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne? After the magician’s strange medicine drove him half-mad, the poor king started behaving in the most ridiculous ways. At one point he even ordered ambassadors from faraway lands to sing along with him.
That’s what real ‘hukumdar’ looks like—power speaking without hesitation.
The word itself carries such weight that even today the name of Osman I, founder of the Ottoman Empire, is sometimes preceded by the title ‘hukumdar’**.** Osman had once been the

leader of a Turkish tribal group. And that alone makes it clear enough: the word ‘hukumdar’ has deep Turkish roots.
But then a question remains.
What on earth does our quiet, ordinary the village postmaster, ‘Nandababu’ have to do with emperors, empires, and all these towering rulers of history?

Crazy Bishu ’s ‘Hukumdar’

And who exactly is ‘Nandababu’?
Oh, he’s that very ‘Nandababu’—the one whose story was written by Rabindranath Tagore and later turned into a film by Satyajit Ray.
In the story The Postmaster—and in Ray’s film Postmaster—’Nandababu’ arrives in the tiny village of Ulapur after landing his first job as a postmaster. He’s gentle. Quiet. Harmless, really. The kind of man who apologizes even when he hasn’t done anything wrong.
Calling someone like him a ‘Hukumdar’—a ruler who barks out commands—would feel almost funny.
Because ‘Nandababu’ doesn’t give orders. Truth be told, he doesn’t even know how.
And who would he order around anyway? The little post office where he works has no junior staff. No assistants. No one standing around waiting for instructions.
So how did the word ‘hukumdar’ slip into the film ‘Postmaster’ at all?
Who keeps saying it?
It’s Crazy Bishu —the village madman.
Strangely, there aren’t many other words left in Bishu’s memory. But ‘hukumdar’—that one word—he just can’t forget.
Why?
To answer that, we have to imagine. We have to guess. Because Satyajit Ray trusted the imagination of his audience. He never spelled everything out. Instead, he left little hints scattered through his films—quiet clues waiting to be noticed.
And the word ‘hukumdar’ feels like one of those clues.
But a clue to what?
Maybe the word is tied to a memory. A bad one. The kind of memory that digs deep into your bones and refuses to leave.
Maybe it’s the memory of humiliation.
Maybe once, long before madness swallowed him, Bishu had someone constantly barking orders at him. Sharp commands. Harsh voices. And if he failed to obey quickly enough—if he slipped even a little—punishment followed.
What kind of punishment?
A whip tearing across the back? Wages cut without mercy? A job taken away just like that?

Back in the days of the East India Company, the British had almost turned whipping into an art form. One tiny mistake—and that was enough. The whip would fall again and again until the skin on a man's back curled and split open.
After that, even wearing a simple shirt would hurt.
Still, a government job was a government job. And in a small village, someone like Bishu would carry a certain swagger because of it. People would look at him differently. But swagger can disappear fast when power starts cracking its whip.
Even if he swallowed the pain in silence, Bishu could never forget the punishment.
The lash of the whip. The sudden cuts in his wages. The constant fear hanging over his head.
Through all that suffering, Bishu learned one thing: if he could just get promoted—just once—if he could rise to the position of 'hukumdar', then he would finally be free.
No more punishments. No more humiliation.
So becoming 'hukumdar' became his only ambition.
And ambition, when it burns too long inside a wounded mind, can slowly twist into obsession.

Is the hat on Crazy Bishu's head, and the coat and trousers he wears, the only remnants of his days working at the Neelkuthi (Indigo Factory)?

That's why Bishu keeps shouting the word— "Hukumdar! Hukumdar!"
Again and again. All day. All night. Even in the middle of a storm-lashed midnight.
He roams across the whole village crying it out at the top of his lungs, like a town crier announcing something urgent:
"Beware! Beware! Clear the road! The 'hukumdar' himself is coming! Move aside, or your back will pay for it!"
If you listen carefully, you realize Bishu isn't just making empty noise.
He's making an announcement. Once, such announcements would have been made by beating a drum. Now Bishu uses something else. A fishing rod.
Every now and then he pulls the reel sharply —kirrrrrrrr— the whirring sound slicing through the air. Why a fishing rod?

Because sitting with a rod cast into the water means waiting in ambush.
And to rise to the rank of 'hukumdar', you have to wait.
Patiently.
Quietly.
Ready for the moment your chance appears.
So when Bishu reels in the line, it's almost like he's imagining that moment. As if the promotion itself has taken the bait.
He's hooked it. Pulled it out of the water. Caught the job of 'hukumdar'.
Now he's beyond everyone's reach. And honestly—who wouldn't want that?
So can we really blame Bishu?
In dreams—perhaps even in waking dreams—anything can happen. But in reality, Bishu never became a 'hukumdar'. Instead, he lost his job altogether.
Yet even now he roams the village wearing what looks like a duty uniform.
Pants. A long, loose shirt. A hat.
And that raises a question. In this remote little village, where could Bishu possibly have worked?
The answer lies hidden in his clothes.
Look around the village: everyone else wears a dhoti and fatua, maybe with a simple cotton coat on top.
Only Bishu walks around wearing pants. Torn pants, yes. Shredded with age. But pants nonetheless.
Which means Bishu must have worked in an office where wearing pants on duty was part of the discipline. Not a local landlord's clerical office.
No—this had to be an office run by the British.
And during the days of the East India Company—and even later under British rule—when people in rural Bengal spoke of a "sahib's office," they usually meant one thing:
A neel kuthi—an indigo factory. From that single clue, we can almost instantly guess that Bishu once worked at such a place.
Interestingly, this madman Bishu does not exist in the original story The Postmaster by Rabindranath Tagore. Bishu is a character imagined later by Satyajit Ray.
But Tagore did mention the indigo factory. In the story, near the tiny post office of Ulapur, there stands a neel kuthi. And it is the sahib of that factory who makes special efforts to have this small rural post office established.
Now look at what Ray does. He never actually shows the indigo factory on screen. Instead, he scatters its signs across Crazy Bishu 's body.
The pants. The hat. The coat. And beneath that coat, an oddly long shirt hanging down.
Everything about Bishu's clothes whispers the same truth: he once worked in an Englishman's office.
So without showing the indigo factory building at all, Satyajit Ray brings its world alive through a few quiet symbols.

And through those symbols, we begin to see what life in that place must have been like. A life ruled by fear. By punishment. By authority so harsh that it could slowly push a man toward madness.

Now comes the real question.

When Satyajit Ray turned Rabindranath Tagore's story into a screenplay, what did he actually rely on?

Was it the scenery of the village? Was it the tiny everyday incidents that unfold around the postmaster?

Many of those moments, after all, do not exist in the original story The Postmaster.

Take, for example, the elderly men of the village who drop by to chat with the new postmaster, 'Nandababu'. To them he is almost a curiosity—someone who has come all the way from Kolkata. And so they sit around him, eager to hear little scraps of city stories from his mouth.

These old men are not there in Tagore's story.

Nor do we find scenes of Ratan washing clothes, polishing 'Nandababu''s boots, or the village runner arriving with a bag of letters and handing it over to the postmaster. Those details belong entirely to Ray's imagination in Postmaster.

But inventing small incidents is not the real brilliance of Satyajit Ray.

His deeper craft lies somewhere else—hidden quietly within those moments.

Inside each little scene, he plants a subtle strategy: revealing a human being through the smallest of objects.

But what are these "small objects"?

They are the ordinary things lying around a room—things the characters can touch, hold, and use with their hands.

A shaving razor, for instance—the one we see in 'Nandababu''s hand.

Or his notebook and pen for writing poetry. On the cover of that notebook, printed in English letters, we read: "Exercise Book." And beneath that, in bold Bengali handwriting, 'Nandababu' has written a single word: "Poetry."

Whenever the postmaster finds a little time, he writes poetry in this notebook.

Then there is Ratan's slate and chalk.
All these things can be held in the palm of a hand.
And through such small, tangible objects, Satyajit Ray gently brings the audience down from the lyrical world of Rabindranath Tagore into the solid ground of lived reality.
Because reality grows out of things. Out of objects. Out of textures you can touch.
That is why Ray's films feel so astonishingly real. He trusted the quiet truth of small objects—the kind that sit silently in a room, waiting for a human hand to reach for them.

Measuring the Mind with a Little Scale

Not everything that Satyajit Ray shows in the film is as personal as a shaving razor. Some objects belong to a larger, social world—the world of offices and institutions. Among them, I want to talk about just one.
A tiny weighing scale. The kind you find in every post office.

In the rural post office, a small weighing scale (marked off with white lines) rests on the desk. It is used to measure the weight of tiny envelopes. But by using such an instrument every day, might there one day arise in the human heart a tendency to measure the subtlest fluctuations of affection as well?

It's a delicate balance used to weigh very light things. In Bengali we call it a nikti. The same kind of scale sits in a goldsmith's shop, weighing bits of gold. And it sits in a post office too—because letters are light, and light things demand a careful measure.
In the film Postmaster, when the new postmaster first enters his office and slowly looks around, everything about the place feels unfamiliar to him. It's clear that this is probably his first job in a post office.
So Ray shows us a small moment.
On that first day, 'Nandababu' gently presses the tiny handle beneath the balance. Just a little push.
And the small scale trembles—barely moving. That slight movement is enough. Suddenly, the whole office seems to come alive.

Through that one delicate gesture, ‘Nandababu’’s new workplace stops being an empty room and becomes a living space.

In that sense, we could say that Satyajit Ray quietly steps down from the vast poetic philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore and lands on this tiny weighing scale.

Which means something important.

If we think of cinema as merely an audio-visual medium, we are not thinking deeply enough. Ray’s cinema is something more specific, more intimate.

It is a medium of storytelling through small objects. A medium that speaks through the quiet presence of things.

In Tagore’s stories, philosophical emotions spread their wings and soar high across the sky. But in Ray’s films, those same emotions fold their wings and settle gently into the smallest of objects.

Then the characters touch those objects. And through that touch, Tagore’s story is born again—this time in the language of cinema. This is what we may call Satyajit Ray’s own method.

And throughout ‘Postmaster’, there are countless examples of it. Take that little weighing scale again. Later in the film, it returns before Ratan—but this time it carries a new meaning. How?

It is evening. Night is settling in. A kerosene lamp burns softly in the room. ‘Nandababu’ sits at his desk, writing something. Since evening, the office has quietly transformed into his writing room.

Ratan stands beside the table, watching him with deep concentration.

Her eyes follow every movement of his pen. And now and then, she speaks—little questions, little pieces of conversation—while ‘Nandababu’ continues writing under the trembling light of the lamp.

Right at that moment, we notice the tiny weighing scale again—this time placed almost directly in front of Ratan’s chest.

No, not just a weighing scale.

This little girl has been assigned to assist the postmaster with his daily household chores. Yet, in time, she has come to be like a younger sister to the new postmaster.

A nikti—the delicate balance used to measure the most subtle weights. Goldsmiths use such scales when shaping ornaments, because the difference between pure gold and imitation gold can be unbelievably slight.

That is why the nikti must be precise.

So when we see that small balance resting in front of Ratan's heart in Postmaster, something quietly begins to make sense.

It feels as though the new postmaster, 'Nandababu', is trying to measure Ratan's hidden feelings—her quiet emotions, her unspoken hurt—with the same delicate care.

And in truth, that is exactly what he is doing.

Because at that very moment, the first real understanding begins to grow between them.

It is then that 'Nandababu' learns something about Ratan's life: she has no mother, no father. Her mother is almost a memory she cannot even clearly recall.

Ratan speaks about it in the smallest voice—slow, steady and almost inaudible.

Her grief is not loud. It is not dramatic. It exists in whispers.

And unless the listener has a deeply sensitive heart, that soft, buried sorrow might pass unnoticed.

So it feels as though 'Nandababu' is weighing Ratan's emotions the way a goldsmith weighs gold—carefully, gently, trying to understand the truth hidden inside.

Without that small nikti, the first attempt to understand Ratan's mind might not have felt so tender.

All the delicate subtleties of emotion seem to rest inside that tiny object. This is where we begin to see the difference between two great creators.

Rabindranath Tagore revealed human sensitivity through the flow of language—through reflection, rhythm, and thought. Rarely did he rely on the physical world of objects to express emotion.

But Satyajit Ray almost always does. For Ray, objects are not silent props. They are living carriers of meaning. And that is the difference in their artistic form—the difference in their creative language. Tagore lets emotion soar through words and philosophy. Ray lets it settle quietly into the things people touch.

And through that path, we move—almost without noticing—from the universe of Rabindranath Tagore into the world of Satyajit Ray.

Ujjal Chakraborty is a film scholar, film educator, and author.