

# What makes PROFESSOR SHONKU so special to us?

Since the publication of the first story of the Shonku series more than half a century ago, the science fiction classic has become a cult created by Satyajit Ray. The elderly scientist Trilokeshwar Shonku won hearts and minds. Here you had this Bengali eccentric scientist whose talent and knowledge were unparalleled anywhere in the world, whose expeditions to faraway places presented thrilling adventures, and whose inventions were incredibly powerful.

Presented in diary format, Shonku's stories kept generations of children busy in a world of curiosity and science.

I know someone from my childhood who once had a cat named Newton, influenced by Professor Shonku, as the scientist also had a cat of this name. Such is the love for Shonku!

What makes Shonku so special? The bounty of science fiction or science fantasy is virtually endless. So many novels and movies around the world have been made. While plenty of them are indeed great, it is Professor Shonku who reserves a special place in our hearts.

One reason is surely about the literary genius of the great polymath Satyajit Ray — author, filmmaker, illustrator, magazine editor, music composer — which, I shall not try to dissect, because I will most likely fail. Instead, let's delve in as a layman, a fan.

Professor Shonku is deeply embedded in the Bengali culture, which means that we as a people can directly relate to him. Sure, the scientist travels to many alien places and also teams up with people from other countries in his adventures, but he usually returns to his house in Giridih, Jharkhand where he works in his laboratory, often accompanied by his pet cat, Newton.

He teaches Bangla language to his robot, which later hums the tune of 'Dhonodhanno pushpo bhora' during a journey through space.

He also has a housekeeper, Prollad, who, according to Shonku, is rather unintelligent. And yet, the scientist also made him embark on that spaceship journey. He wrote in a diary entry, "I definitely do not believe that only intelligent people are needed in this kind of expedition. People with low intelligence often have a lot of courage..."



Comic reliefs indeed make reading the sci-fi series even more entertaining. Shonku's annoying neighbour, for example, is someone who really gets on his nerves. Abhinash babu is engrossed in trivial things, and is not at all of scientific mind, oftentimes challenging Shonku or making a mockery of his projects. But our good-natured scientist still tolerates him.

In a way, this neighbour may be argued to represent people in our society who are superstitious or those who downright discredit science.

And of course, there is the element of travel in a lot of the stories. Not just any travel, but adventures into the mysterious or undiscovered — strange islands, deep jungles, Egypt, Tibet, and so on — where he meets the strangest people, under the most unusual circumstances, sometimes amidst fantastical flora and fauna, and encounters dangers which he has to navigate. Really imaginative stuff!

Speaking of Shonku makes one want to walk down memory lane. There is a huge nostalgia factor for those who grew up

reading Satyajit's works like Shonku and Feluda.

Moreover, even though Shonku is often labelled as children's fiction — and perhaps rightly so — it does not mean that you will not enjoy it anymore if you revisit it again, or even if you read it for the first time now.

If you have read it already, it is sure to have left a lasting impression.

"My science teacher introduced us to Shonku in school, perhaps to increase our interest in the subject," Sabbir, a third-year BBA student remembers, and then smirks and continues, "No, it was not a life-changing moment which made me pursue a career or at least higher education in science but what did happen was that Shonku made me much more inquisitive as a person."

Meanwhile, Sazia, a mechanical engineer in her thirties who hails from Chattogram, attributes Shonku as the catalyst for her interest in chemistry and physics: "Reading those stories, I fantasised working in a laboratory myself. I always used to look forward to the very few lab

classes when I was in school."

Shonku is about crazy experiments and even crazier adventures. Add to that children's lively imagination, and you have something magical!

Another Satyajit Ray fan says, "Although I was more into Feluda, I remember how a few of my friends even till the end of college days used to fervently talk about the Shonku books, discussing his many antics and adventures. It was a time when mobile phones were still a rarity. There was no Facebook, Netflix subscriptions. It was a different era; I think that the habit of book reading is dying down."

How much you agree to the last bit is up to you. But, do introduce your children or younger siblings to Professor Shonku. Not necessarily in the hopes of getting them interested in science or even in Bangla fiction, but because they will treasure these stories forever.

**By M H Haider**  
**Photo: Sazzad Ibne Sayed**  
**Model: Mohammed Monsur Ali**