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Self-taught Film-maker: Satyajit Ray's Formative Years

'I never imagined that I would become a film director, in command of situations, actually guiding people to do things this way or that,' Satyajit Ray said in the mid-1980s, three decades after making his first film *Pather Panchali*, the beginning of the Apu Trilogy. 'No, I was very reticent and shy as a schoolboy and I think it persisted through college. Even the fact of having to accept a prize gave me goose-pimples. But from the time of *Pather Panchali* I realised that I had it in me to take control of situations and exert my personality over other people and so on – then it became a fairly quick process. Film after film, I got more and more confident.'

Ray was born, an only child, in Calcutta on 2 May 1921, into a distinguished though not wealthy Bengali family notable for its love of music, literature, art and scholarship. His grandfather, Upendrakisore Ray, who died before Satyajit was born, was a pioneer of half-tone printing, a musician and composer of songs and hymns, and a writer and illustrator of classic children's literature. His father, Sukumar Ray, was a writer and illustrator of nonsense literature, the equal of Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear. Both men were also universally considered to be the epitome of courtesy, artists in their lives as much as in their works.



They regarded themselves as Brahmos, that is, Christian-influenced Hindus who rejected caste (Brahminism), idolatry and the Hindu festivals, though not the teachings of the original Hindu scriptures, the *Vedas* and the *Upanishads*. Although Satyajit would regard the social reforming side of Brahmoism as generally admirable, he was not attracted to its theology (or to any theology, for that matter). He said: ‘As material for a film’ – for example, his film about nineteenth-century Hindu orthodoxy, *The Goddess/Devi* – ‘I feel Hinduism is much more interesting than Brahmoism. As a child I found Hinduism much more exciting than Brahmoism, and Christianity too. When I think of Brahmoism I think of solemn sermons mainly. I don’t think of being free from the shackles of orthodoxy.’ (Parts of the Ray family remained relatively orthodox Hindus, which did not prevent the maintenance of very friendly relations with their Brahmo relatives.)

Of his grandfather Upendrakisore, one of whose stories Ray adapted to make the musical *The Adventures of Goopy and Bagha/Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne* (by far his most popular film in Bengal), he wrote:

My grandfather was a rare combination of East and West. He played the *pakhwaj* [drum] as well as the violin, wrote devotional songs while carrying out research on printing methods, viewed the stars through a telescope from his own roof, wrote old legends and folk-tales anew for children in his inimitably lucid and graceful style and illustrated them in oils, water-colours and pen-and-ink, using truly European techniques. His skill and versatility as an illustrator remain unmatched by any Indian.

Of his father, who was the subject of a documentary film, *Sukumar Ray*, made by Satyajit for his father’s birth centenary in 1987, he remarked: ‘As far as my father’s writing and drawing goes, nearly all his best work belongs to his last two and a half

years' – after, that is, his father contracted kala-azar, the disease that eventually killed him in 1923 at the age of only 35.

Satyajit was less than two and a half years old then. He retained only one memory of his father. It belonged to the courtyard of a house on the banks of the Ganges outside Calcutta, where the family had gone for the sake of Sukumar's health. His father was sitting indoors by the window painting. He suddenly called out 'Ship coming!' Satyajit remembered running into the courtyard and seeing a steamer pass by with a loud hoot. As a sort of private tribute to this memory, the painting Sukumar was then at work on appears in Ray's documentary.

He had many memories, however, of the house in north Calcutta where he lived with his father's extended family until the age of five or six. It was designed and built by his grandfather as a house-cum-printing-press. Here was printed, apart from Upendrakisore's and Sukumar's books (and other books written by the family), the monthly children's magazine *Sandesh* (a title meaning both 'news' and a kind of milk sweet famous in Bengal), which was founded by Upendrakisore in 1913, edited by Sukumar after grandfather Ray's death and revived, much later, in the 1960s, by Satyajit and other family members.

From very early on he was fascinated, for instance, by the whole paraphernalia of printing, as is clear from the printing press at the centre of Ray's film *Charulata*. Manik (meaning 'jewel') – as the small Satyajit was known in the family – became a frequent visitor to the first floor. When he entered, the compositors, sitting side by side in front of their multi-sectioned typecases, would glance up at him and smile. He would make his way past them to the back of the room, to the block-making section with its enormous imported process camera and its distinctive smells. 'Even today,' wrote Ray in his memoir of his childhood published in *Sandesh* in 1981, 'if I catch a whiff of turpentine, a picture of U. Ray and Sons' block-making department floats before my eyes.' The main operator of the camera, Ramdohin, was his friend. He had had no formal education; Upendrakisore had trained him from

scratch and he was like one of the family. Presenting Ramdohin with a piece of paper with some squiggles on it, Manik would announce: 'This is for *Sandesb*.' Ramdohin would solemnly wag his head in agreement, 'Of course, Khoka Babu [Little Master], of course,' and would lift the boy up to show him the upside-down image of his drawing on the screen of the camera. But somehow the drawing would never appear in *Sandesb*.

In early 1927, however, the firm had to be liquidated, because there was no one in the family able to manage it competently. The joint family had no option but to leave the house and split up. Manik and his widowed mother were fortunate to be taken in by one of her brothers, who lived in an up-and-coming part of south Calcutta. Satyajit would live in this uncle's various houses for the rest of his childhood and youth until the age of 27, when he acquired sufficient financial independence to move out. While he was growing up he would never have much money. He did not miss it, though; and in adult life he would simply maintain the relatively spartan habits of his early years. In fact, he felt himself to be rich and seemed surprised if one queried this. 'I mean I have no money worries as such,' he said, 'thanks to my writing' – he meant his dozens of best-selling stories and young people's novels starring his detective Felu Mitter, two of which he filmed – 'not from films really. I'm certainly not as rich as Bombay actors – by no means; but I'm comfortable, I can buy the books and records I want.'

Although the move was a drastic change, Manik did not feel it as a wrench. 'Adults treat all children in such a situation as "poor little creatures", but that is not how children see themselves,' he commented in his memoir, articulating his fundamental attitude as perhaps the most natural director of children in cinema, beginning with the boy Apu and his sister Durga in *Pather Panchali*.

Nevertheless, whether he thought of it or not as a child, he was now thrown back on his own resources. He had been taken from a world of writers, artists and musicians, where West mixed

freely and fruitfully with East, science with arts, into a typically middle-class milieu of barristers and insurance brokers, with the exception of his mother, an aunt about to become a famous singer of Tagore songs and, a little later, a 'cousin' Bijoya, Satyajit's future wife, who was musical and interested in acting. There were no children of Satyajit's age in the new house. Though he often saw two other girl cousins, Ruby and Nini (Nalini Das, who would later edit *Sandesh* with him), they were somewhat older and he seldom talked to them about himself. Yet in later life Ray did not think of his childhood as lonely: 'Loneliness and being alone – bereft of boys and girls of your own age as friends – is not the same thing. I wasn't envious of little boys with lots of sisters and brothers. I felt I was all right and I had a lot to do, I could keep myself busy doing various things, small things – reading, looking at books and looking at pictures, all sorts of things including sketching. I used to draw a lot as a child.'

As with many only children, he was also a close observer of his elders and noticed that his uncles and their friends in their twenties and thirties did not always behave as if they *were* elders; they had a noisy passion for games like ludo, for instance. The adult Ray said that he must have been 'imbibing' a great deal about people at this time without being aware of it. Certainly, the two decades he spent with his maternal uncles gave him an invaluable grounding in the mores of the Bengali middle class, both as characters for films and as a cinema audience.

Like the lonely wife Charu, wandering round her house in the first seven minutes of *Charulata*, Satyajit was highly sensitive as a child to sounds and lighting. Half a century later, he could remember various vanished street cries and the fact that in those days you could spot the make of a car, such as a Ford, Humber, Oldsmobile, Opal Citroen or La Salle (with its 'boa horn'), from inside the house by the sound of its horn.

Small holes in the fabric of the house taught Satyajit some basic principles of light. At noon in summer rays of bright sunlight shone through a chink in the shutters of the bedroom.

Satyajit would lie there alone watching the ‘free bioscope’ created on a wall: a large inverted image of the traffic outside. He could clearly make out cars, rickshaws, bicycles, pedestrians and other passing things.

Stereoscopes and magic lanterns were popular toys in Bengali homes of the period. The magic lantern was a box with a tube at the front containing the lens, a chimney at the top and a handle at the right-hand side. The film ran on two reels with a kerosene lamp for light source. ‘Who knows?’ wrote Satyajit in his memoir. ‘Perhaps this was the beginning of my addiction to film?’

Visits to the cinema began while he was still at his grandfather’s house and continued when he moved to his uncle’s house. Until he was about fifteen, when Satyajit took control of his cinema outings, they were comparatively infrequent and each film would be followed by ‘weeks of musing on its wonders’. Although his uncles enjoyed going, they did not altogether approve of the cinema and for many years they restricted Manik to certain foreign films and ruled out Bengali productions as being excessively passionate for the young mind. This suited him well enough, as he had disliked the only Bengali film he saw as a boy. He went to it by accident: an uncle had taken him to see the first Johnny Weismuller *Tarzan* film, but the tickets had all been sold. He saw the dismay on Manik’s face and so took him down the road to a Bengali cinema. The film was *Kal Parinay* (The Doomed Marriage) – ‘an early example of Indian soft porn’, according to Ray, who remembered the hero and the heroine – ‘or was it the Vamp?’ – newly married and lying in bed, and a close-up showing the woman’s leg rubbing the man’s. ‘I was only nine then, but old enough to realise that I had strayed into forbidden territory.’ His uncle made repeated whispered efforts to take him home, but Manik, already precociously dedicated to the cinema, turned a deaf ear. It was not that he was enjoying the film, simply that he was determined to get to the end.

In Calcutta those were the days of Silents, Partial Talkies and One Hundred Per Cent Talkies and, at the grandest cinema

in town, a Wurlitzer played by a man called Byron Hopper. The choice of foreign films was quite impressive. Much later, out of curiosity, Ray decided to check the files of the Calcutta *Statesman* for a certain date in 1927 and found six films playing: *Moana* (by Robert Flaherty), *Variety* (a German production by E. A. Dupont), *The Gold Rush* (by Charlie Chaplin), *Underworld* (by Josef von Sternberg), *The Freshman* (with Harold Lloyd) and *The Black Pirate* (with Douglas Fairbanks).

Chaplin, Buster Keaton and Harold Lloyd made a tremendous and lasting impression on Satyajit. So did *The Thief of Baghdad* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Other memories of Hollywood films seen in the 1920s included:

Lillian Gish, in *Way Down East*, stepping precariously from one floating chunk of ice to another while fiendish bloodhounds nosed along her trail; John Gilbert, as the Count of Monte Cristo, delirious at the sight of gold in a treasure chest; Lon Chaney, as the Hunchback, clutching with dead hands the bell ropes of Notre Dame, and – perhaps the most exciting memory of all – the chariot race in *Ben Hur*, undimmed by a later and more resplendent version, for the simple reason that the new Messala is no match for the old and dearly hated one of Francis X. Bushman.

Stories of romance and passion, even of the foreign variety, remained generally out of bounds, but when he was about eleven Satyajit did get to see several of Ernst Lubitsch's films: *Love Parade*, *The Smiling Lieutenant*, *One Hour with You*, *Trouble in Paradise* – 'a forbidden world, only half-understood, but observed with a tingling curiosity', he later wrote. *Trouble in Paradise* particularly stuck in his mind, showing that Lubitsch's sophisticated wit appealed to Satyajit even then, though revealingly the scene as he remembers it is wordless – like many high points in the Apu Trilogy: 'It opened with a moonlit shot of the romantic Grand Canal in Venice. The inevitable gondola appeared, glided

up the glistening water, and, as it moved closer, turned out to be filled with garbage. The fat gondolier pulled up the boat in front of the villa, collected some more garbage and, at the point of rowing off, burst into an aria by Verdi.'

One kind of film permissible to him as a boy that did *not* appeal, either to Manik or to his family, was the British film. Technical superiority notwithstanding, it was marred by the same faults that Ray would ridicule in the typical Bengali cinema of the thirties (and after, he continued to think): stagey settings, theatrical dialogue, affected situations and acting. 'We laughed at Jack Hulbert not mainly because we were tickled, but because we did not want our British neighbours in the theatre to think that we had no sense of humour', he wrote – and this was about as close as he came to the British in Calcutta until he took a job in his early twenties.

As the 1930s wore on, Satyajit saw films more and more frequently, including some Bengali ones. He began to keep a notebook with his own star ratings and learnt to distinguish the finish of the different Hollywood studios. He even wrote a fan letter to Deanna Durbin (and received a very polite reply). But at no point did he consider that he might direct films himself. This idea did not strike him until his late twenties, well after he had left college, although an astrologer to whom his mother insisted on taking him when he was 22 had predicted that he would become internationally famous 'through the use of light'. (Ray forgot all about this prediction until after he had finished *Pather Panchali* in 1955, when his mother reminded him. He had no belief in astrology and always refused requests from palmists to supply an imprint of his hand.)

He also read a lot in these early years, but as with films he was mainly interested in books in English, not in Bengali – he read little of Bengal's greatest writer Rabindranath Tagore until much later, for instance – apart from the ancient stories and folk tales which as a young child he enjoyed hearing told in the Bengali versions of his grandfather and one or two other writers. (He recalled

making one of his uncles read him at least four times a particular grisly episode of the *Mahabharata* in Upendrakisore Ray's retelling, involving severed and exploding heads.) His favourite reading was the *Book of Knowledge*, ten copiously illustrated, self-confidently imperial volumes, and later, the *Romance of Famous Lives*, which his mother bought him; there he first encountered Ludwig van Beethoven and developed an adolescent taste for western painting from the Renaissance up to the beginning of Impressionism. He also liked comics and detective stories, the *Boy's Own Paper* (in which he won a prize for a photograph of Kashmir when he was fifteen), Sherlock Holmes stories and P. G. Wodehouse; and thus he came to believe that London was 'perpetually shrouded in impenetrable fog' and that most homes in England had butlers. Throughout his youth, and to a great extent in later life too, his taste in English fiction was light, rather than classic.

And he developed yet another interest in the arts, one that was distinctly unusual for a Bengali: western classical music. It came upon him, Ray wrote later, 'at an age when the Bengali youth almost inevitably writes poetry' and fast became an obsession. He already owned a hand-cranked Pigmyphone which had been given to him when he was about five by a relative through marriage, the owner of one of the best record shops in Calcutta. The song 'Tipperary' (which appears incongruously in *Pather Panchali*) and 'The Blue Danube' were two of the earliest pieces of music he played on it. When he was about thirteen he began listening to some other records, mainly by Beethoven, that happened to be in the house. His response, perhaps partly because he had been primed by his earlier reading, was one of immense excitement. Here was music that was completely new, totally unlike his grandfather's hymns and Tagore's songs that surrounded him and the Indian instrumental music he also listened to, if without much enthusiasm. With what little money he had, he started hunting for bargains in Calcutta's music shops and attending concerts of the Calcutta Symphony Orchestra, and he joined a gramophone club whose members were almost all

Europeans and Parsees. The number of Bengalis seriously interested in western classical music in Calcutta at this time could be counted on the fingers of two hands – even Tagore was not (though his favourite niece was).

School, which he attended from the age of nine to fifteen, meant comparatively little to Satyajit, though he was never unhappy or unpopular there. And the same was true of his college education at the best institution in Calcutta, Presidency College. As he put it in a lecture, ‘My life, my work’, given in 1982, when he had turned 60: ‘Erudition is something which I singularly lack. As a student, I was only a little better than average, and in all honesty, I cannot say that what I learnt in school and college has stood me in good stead in the years that followed. ... My best and keenest memories of college consist largely of the quirks and idiosyncrasies of certain professors’ – as is obvious from Ray’s quizzical portrayal of Apu’s college professors in *Aparajito*, the second film of the Apu Trilogy.

It was his time at Shantiniketan, Tagore’s university in a poor rural district about a hundred miles from Calcutta, where Satyajit was a student of fine arts from 1940 to 1942, which was the part of his formal education that would have a genuine influence on the future course of his life. Without his Shantiniketan experience, *Pather Panchali* would not have been possible, he later realised. No one could explain this better than Ray himself, in his Calcutta lecture:

My relationship with Shantiniketan was an ambivalent one. As one born and bred in Calcutta, I loved to mingle with the crowd in Chowringhee [the city’s most famous thoroughfare], to hunt for bargains in the teeming profusion of second-hand books on the pavements of College Street, to explore the grimy depths of the Chor Bazaar for symphonies at throwaway prices, to relax in the coolness of a cinema, and lose myself in the make-believe world of Hollywood. All this I missed in Shantiniketan, which was a world apart. It was

a world of vast open spaces, vaulted over with a dustless sky, that on a clear night showed the constellations as no city sky could ever do. The same sky, on a clear day, could summon up in moments an awesome invasion of billowing darkness that seemed to engulf the entire universe. And there was the Khoyai [a ravine], rimmed with the serried ranks of *tal* trees, and the [river] Kopai, snaking its way through its rough-hewn undulations. If Shantiniketan did nothing else, it induced contemplation, and a sense of wonder, in the most prosaic and earthbound of minds.

In the two and a half years, I had time to think, and time to realise that, almost without my being aware of it, the place had opened windows for me. More than anything else, it had brought me an awareness of our tradition, which I knew would serve as a foundation for any branch of art that I wished to pursue.

Ironically, Ray's training as a painter in Shantiniketan and its surrounding villages – along with his first-hand, awed confrontation with the wonders of Indian art on a tour of the famous sites (Ajanta, Ellora, Elephanta, Sanchi, Khajuraho, among others) by third-class train in 1941–42 – convinced him that he did not have it in him to be a painter. He admired several of his teachers, especially the artists Binode Bihari Mukherjee and Nandalal Bose, but he decided to leave Shantiniketan without completing the five-year fine arts course. A few months later, in April 1943, he took a job as a commercial artist in Calcutta, with a British-owned advertising agency, D. J. Keymer. He worked as a junior visualiser, having been recommended by someone the Ray family knew to Keymer's assistant manager D. K. Gupta: a man who, as the founder of a new publishing house, was to play a crucial part in Ray's life over the next decade or so. 'I see, you're Sukumar Ray's son. Tell me about the books your father wrote,' were Gupta's first words at the job interview. Within a few years, Ray became the agency's art director.

Although Keymer's was considered more informal than, say, the agency J. Walter Thompson – because it employed fewer British sahibs – it had its share of racial tensions, naturally exacerbated by the charged political atmosphere of the 1940s during the run-up to Indian Independence in 1947. The position of art director, for instance, had to be shared with an Englishman, 'a nice fellow but a shockingly bad artist', wrote Satyajit in 1948 to an English friend in London. 'But he has to be there, being an Englishman, and I have to be there, as part of the Post-Independence Diplomatic Managerial Policy. Of course he gets three times as much as I do.' The managers were all British in the years Ray worked there, a succession of Englishmen and Scotsmen. He liked most of them and did not allow nationalist emotions to cloud his feelings towards them; two or three became friends. They, for their part, treated him with respect and generosity, such was the high standard of design he maintained, calling him Maneck Roy to avoid the tricky 'Satyajit'. One of the managers, J. B. R. Nicholson, probably spoke for them all when he said: 'Ray was a man of real integrity. He had no *chhalaki* [trickiness] in him.'

This is not to say that Satyajit ever relished the work or the life of an advertising office, useful background though it was for such films as *The Big City/Mahanagar*, *Days and Nights in the Forest/Aranyer Din Ratri* and, especially, *Company Limited/Seemabaddha*. A laconic note in English in his shooting notebook for this last film seems to do duty for his general feelings towards advertising: 'the usual comments are bandied about' – to describe a scene when the lights go up after the screening of a typical 'ad film' and the assembled account executives attempt smart backchat. His usual reaction to this behaviour at Keymer's was an aloof silence. He concentrated his attention on the purely artistic aspects of the job. 'If you had really thought about what you were doing,' he said years later, 'you would have found it a dismaying thought. Partly because the clients were generally so stupid. You'd produce an artwork which was admirable, you'd

know it was good, and they'd come out with little criticisms that were so stupid that you'd really want to give up immediately.'

Ray's contribution to the development of advertising imagery in India was certainly distinctive, but hard to define. Like all the best graphic designers, he combined visual flair with a feel for the meaning of words and their nuances. Sometimes this meant changing a headline to fit a layout. According to one colleague, 'He interpreted the words in such a way that he often gave them a new depth of meaning.' He brought to his work a fascination with typography, both Bengali and English, which he shared with his father and grandfather and which would in due course surface in his film credit sequences and film posters for the Apu Trilogy. He also introduced into advertising more calligraphic elements than before (and created the fully calligraphic wedding invitation), as well as genuinely Indian elements: everyday details and motifs from past and present, emphatically not the limp, prettified borrowings from mythology he strongly disliked in what was then considered Oriental Art.

But it was design of a more lasting, less mercenary kind that occupied Ray's best energies during the Keymer's years. Around the end of 1943, the assistant manager D. K. Gupta started Signet Press, a publisher in both Bengali and English, and asked Satyajit to design the books. Ray was given a completely free hand in a publishing field that was as good as virgin.

He began illustrating books too. His first illustrations, created in 1944–45, were some woodcuts of simple vitality for an abridgement for children of Bibhutibhusan Banerji's 1920s novel *Pather Panchali*. Some of these scenes, such as the children Apu and Durga huddling together during the storm, later found their way onto celluloid. At Gupta's suggestion, he read the unabridged novel. 'The book filled me with admiration. It was plainly a masterpiece and a sort of encyclopaedia of life in rural Bengal', Ray recalled in his autobiography *My Years with Apu*. 'It dealt with a Brahmin family, an indigent priest, his wife, his two children and his aged cousin, struggling to make both ends meet. The

amazingly lifelike portrayals, not just of the family but of a host of other characters, the vivid details of daily existence, the warmth, the humanism, the lyricism, made the book a classic of its kind.' Gupta, a keen film fan, intrigued Satyajit by telling him that the main story of *Pather Panchali* would make a very good film. Thus the earliest glimmering of Ray's film dates from 1944.

Fruitful though all this was, and financially rewarding too, Ray's relationship with Gupta suffered from the kind of strain inevitable when a publisher tries to combine quality with commercial viability. They clashed, for example, over some books very close to Satyajit's heart, those by his father, Sukumar Ray. Signet Press republished these but changed the formats and had them re-illustrated, against the wishes of Satyajit and his mother. On balance though, Ray felt grateful to Gupta for a unique opportunity at a time when it could not have been more welcome. Signet enabled him to experiment with a wide range of styles and techniques of drawing, painting and typography and gave him a growing familiarity with fiction in Bengali to offset his earlier predilection for English literature. By his mid-thirties, Ray had acquired a clear sense of the strengths and weaknesses of Bengali literature from both a literary and a cinematic point of view.

A novel which appeared around this time and greatly impressed him was Bibhutibhusan Banerji's *Asani Sanket*. In 1972, Ray filmed it with restrained pathos as *Distant Thunder*. Through the eyes of a village Brahmin priest and his wife, it shows the beginnings of the famine of 1943–44 that killed at least three and a half million Bengalis. When the famine reached Calcutta from the villages, in August 1943, Ray had been at Keymer's for nearly six months. The causes of the famine, though undoubtedly connected with the Second World War, were complex and did few groups in British-Indian society much credit, but the government reaction, then and in the months to come, was a matter for shame. Given the extent of official apathy, it is perhaps not surprising that Ray, along with most people he knew, did nothing to help the victims, but the famine left him with a

lasting sense of shame. 'One gets used to everything ultimately,' he said four decades later, after considerable pondering – including stepping over corpses lying in the street outside his house and the 'refrain' of the victims' cries for *phyan*, the water usually thrown out once rice has been boiled. The reason that he gave for his general indifference was honest, if a bit shocking: he felt that at this time he was 'getting established in life. New fields were opening before me, and there was my *intense* absorption into western music which was then at its height. So if one said I was a little callous about the famine, one wouldn't be far wrong; because one just got used to it, and there was nobody doing anything about it. It was too vast a problem for anyone to tackle.' Nonetheless, the grim exposure prepared Ray's mind to depict poverty sympathetically in *Pather Panchali*.

The period 1943–47 was, in fact, a most extraordinary one in the history of the second city of the British empire, with the 1947 partition of India following hard on the aftermath of the famine. Trains from East Bengal (as it became East Pakistan) unloaded their contents on the railway platforms of Calcutta where they remained, whole families taking up just four to six square feet of space, including babies born on the spot. The immediate impact of the world war was negligible by comparison. Although Calcutta was bombed by the Japanese and hundreds of thousands left the city, damage was slight. It was the influx of American GIs and other Allied servicemen that changed things and gave a kick to the city's cultural life. For the first time in Calcutta it was normal to read a review of a Hollywood movie *after* seeing it, probably in a wafer-thin copy of *Time* magazine. Because of the war, Ray was able to see Hollywood films that had not been released even in London.

Music too was excellent, including jazz, which Satyajit enjoyed for a while. Apart from performances of Indian music, especially by the prodigy Ravi Shankar, which Ray had begun to attend, there were concerts by visiting western musicians such as Isaac Stern. On the BBC World Service he listened to Narayana

Menon in London playing J. S. Bach on the *vina*, and on Berlin radio to some good classical music broadcast along with Hitler's speeches. And in Bombay, where he had relatives and his 'cousin' Bijoya was living for a while, he discovered a source of miniature scores of western classical music and began buying them and reading them in bed. He taught himself western musical notation partly by comparing the score with his phenomenal musical memory, which could retain a symphony once he had heard it three times or so. At this time, of course, all the available recordings were on 78 rpm records and he discovered that 'although the top line [of the score] could be heard clearly enough, a great many details which one could *see* on the page were virtually inaudible in the recording.'

Until early 1948, Satyajit and his mother continued to live in his uncle's house. He had been looking for a flat for some time – not an easy task in wartime, as he mentioned in a 1945 letter to one of his friends from Shantiniketan days, the musical Alex Aronson: 'I propose to have a room of my own which should be a library-cum-studio-cum-concert-room affair.' The apartment he eventually found was by no means all he had hoped: 'not nearly as much comfort as I used to have in my uncle's house', he lamented in a letter to another European friend a month or so after moving. 'The noise in the neighbourhood is terrific. Radios, gramophones, yelling babies and what not. The first few days were really nerve racking. But I'm getting used to it slowly. I can play the gramophone only after things have quietened down around half past ten or eleven at night.' Nevertheless, the experience proved useful later when he dramatised the crowded, noisy, lower middle-class flat in *The Big City*.

He was writing to the man who had become his first British friend, Norman Clare. Music and war had brought them together while Clare was in the Royal Air Force in Calcutta from late 1944 until early 1946; for three months at the end of 1945, Clare stayed in the house of Satyajit's uncle, just as, five years later, Satyajit and his wife would stay in the house of Clare's mother on

their first visit to London in 1950. Each day, Clare remembered, when Satyajit returned home from Keymer's, he would immediately change out of western clothes into a *dhobi* or pyjama. Then he and Norman would chat, go and see a film, listen to music – Wilhelm Furtwängler being their favourite conductor – or play chess. 'There was a long time when I did nothing but play chess in the evening,' recalled Ray. After Clare left Calcutta he had no partner, so he took up solitaire chess; the habit wore off as he became engrossed in film-making but much later resurfaced in the form of *The Chess Players/Shatranj ke Khilari*.

Clare remembered Satyajit as a gregarious person, whatever his aloofness at the office. Throughout his life Ray was usually open with people when he was interested in what they were saying or doing; it was only otherwise that he would tend to withdraw into himself and give the 'aristocratic', even arrogant, impression for which he would often be criticised in later life. For many years from the mid-1940s he used to meet a group of friends at a coffee house near Keymer's for an *adda*, a word that embraces extended gossip on every conceivable subject (Ray once translated it as 'talkathon'). 'Do not look down upon the *addas* in the Calcutta tea and coffee shops,' an energetic Calcutta professor used to warn those who criticised Bengalis for being all talk and no action. 'They are unrecognised universities where heads clash and ideas emerge' – which was certainly true of Satyajit's *adda* during the making of *Pather Panchali* in the early 1950s. In his *addas* in the coffee house he taught his friends quite a bit, learnt something himself (especially about how to deal with people), and had a lot of fun, which included sharpening his English on the London *Times* crossword then published on the back page of the Calcutta *Statesman*. The coffee house brought out a chatty, relaxed side of Ray that non-Bengalis seldom saw, especially after old-style *addas* had rather disappeared with the post-war pressures of Calcutta life. Four decades on, the sad decline of the *adda* would form a key topic of conversation in Ray's last film, *The Stranger/Agantuk*.

Some of the members of the coffee-house group would play a role in Ray's film career, notably Bansi Chandragupta, a Kashmiri who was then a dissatisfied art director in Bengali cinema and who soon became Ray's long-time art director. Cinema was endlessly discussed, particularly after Satyajit and another member of the group, Chidananda Das Gupta, had founded the Calcutta Film Society in late 1947. 'I am taking the cinema more and more seriously', Ray wrote to Clare in May 1948. He went regularly to the cinema alone, but also took along his friends after work on Saturdays, paying for them himself. At the time he took up his advertising job in 1943 he had already read two theoretical books on film-making (by Rudolf Arnheim and Raymond Spottiswoode) while studying at Shantiniketan, and had graduated from an admiration for stars and studios to a focus on directors. Now he began to make 'hieroglyphic notes' in the dark on their various cutting methods, particularly those of the Americans. Through his contacts with American serviceman, and otherwise, he saw recent Hollywood films by Frank Capra, John Ford, John Huston, Lewis Milestone, Billy Wilder and William Wyler. He also saw a film made by Jean Renoir while he was in Hollywood, *The Southerner*, which he greatly liked. 'This was the film that first brought home to me that characters in a film needn't be black or white, but could also be grey', he later wrote. 'It also taught me the importance of shooting in and around locations rather than artificial studio sets meant to represent exteriors.'

Russian films too were available: Mark Donskoi's *The Childhood of Gorky*, Vsevolod Pudovkin's *Storm over Asia*, Sergei Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevsky* and *Ivan the Terrible Part 1*, and others. *Ivan* made a tremendous impression, though not entirely for its filmic qualities: 'The Gothic gloom of the film, [Nikolai] Cherkasov's grand gestures, and the music of [Sergei] Prokofiev stayed with me all the day and well into the night, until I fell asleep and found them back in a grotesque dream, in the middle of which I woke up gasping for breath. It turned out that a

pan [betel-nut preparation] I had bought from a shop next to the cinema had given me quinsy, swelling the inside of my throat to the point where I could hardly breathe.'

Ray came to the conclusion around this time that Eisenstein's films reminded him of Bach and Pudovkin's of Beethoven. Bengali films remained on his menu too. They had somewhat improved with the arrival of the directors Bimal Roy and Nitin Bose (an uncle of Satyajit), but chiefly in the technical sense; their acting, dialogue and settings remained theatrical. One exception, which made a virtue of its theatricality, was the dance fantasy *Kalpana*, the work of the dancer Uday Shankar (Ravi Shankar's elder brother) which Satyajit saw many times during 1948. 'I never knew Indian music and dancing could have such an impact on me', he wrote to Clare. The film also contained some daring cutting. In the darkness of the cinema hall, Ray took a series of still photographs of the shots that most appealed to him.

Around 1946, he began writing film scripts as a hobby. He acquired a copy of René Clair's published script *The Ghost Goes West* and also the 1943 anthology *Twenty Best Film Plays*, compiled by John Gassner and Dudley Nichols. When plans for a Bengali film were announced he would write a scenario for it, in fact, often two scenarios – 'his' way and 'their' way. In all he wrote ten or twelve such scenarios.

The analysis involved in this led to his first published film criticism, 'What is wrong with Indian films?', which appeared in the *Calcutta Statesman* in 1948. Anticipating the 1950s polemics of *Cahiers du Cinéma*, Ray dissected the failure of Indian directors to grasp the nature of the medium and concluded with a resounding manifesto: 'The raw material of cinema is life itself. It is incredible that a country that has inspired so much painting and music and poetry should fail to move the film-maker. He has only to keep his eyes open, and his ears. Let him do so.' Although he did not mention *Pather Panchali* by name, the idea of his filming the novel was now forming in his mind.

The Calcutta Film Society started a bulletin, which Ray designed, using the resources of Keymer's and Signet Press. Actors, directors and other film people visiting Calcutta were invited to speak. Cherkasov and Pudovkin, Renoir and Huston each spoke there at various times. Ray asked Cherkasov how he had managed to get his eyes so wide open in *Ivan*, because looking at him it did not seem possible. Cherkasov replied that Eisenstein had forced him to do it. 'He was slightly critical of the way he was handled by Eisenstein, made to assume postures that were very difficult, "so that at the end of the day I would have muscle pains all over my body".'

Then, during 1948, a member of the coffee-house group, the wealthy Harisadhan Das Gupta (a future documentary film director), bought the film rights to Tagore's novel *The Home and the World* and embarked with Ray on an attempt to turn it into a movie. They were an ill-matched pair, and the whole venture had an air of farce about it, painful though it was for both of them at the time. Satyajit wrote a script and, along with Bansi Chandragupta as art director, they began looking for locations and properties, an actress to play Tagore's heroine Bimala, and a producer. Das Gupta opened an office with a huge table and very comfortable chairs and acquired a company name and a letterhead designed by Ray. Friends gathered round for tea and *adda*. A potential producer appeared. He promised several hundred thousand rupees in backing. 'All we had to do was go to Nepal and collect some gold bars, *then* make the film,' recalled Das Gupta with a wry chuckle. But in the end the project collapsed, because Ray refused to make the changes to his script required by another producer. He felt 'like a pricked balloon' at the time, yet when he re-read the screenplay in the mid-1960s, he decided it was 'the greatest good fortune the film was never made.' He could see 'how pitifully superficial and Hollywoodish' his tyro screenplay was. He ignored it altogether when he eventually came to film *The Home and the World/Ghare Baire* in the early 1980s.

The following year, 1949, both Das Gupta and Ray were able to be of considerable assistance to Renoir when he visited Calcutta in search of locations and actors for his Indian film, *The River*. Meeting Renoir changed Ray's life; not in an abrupt manner, which would have been uncharacteristic of Ray's response to people, but because Renoir's attitudes to both life and film-making appealed to him in their wholeness. It is not that Renoir and Ray were all that similar as personalities, rather that Ray recognised in Renoir a real film artist – the first he had come to know personally – and drew strength for his own vision from the knowledge that such a person existed. Renoir openly encouraged Ray to film *Pather Panchali* and requested him not to imitate Hollywood films. 'I think what Hollywood really needs is a good bombing', Renoir told Ray. 'In America, they worry too much about technique, and neglect the human aspect.' In 1983, Ray told an interviewer: 'I think that subconsciously I have been paying tribute to Renoir throughout my film-making career.' A few years later, while receiving the Legion of Honour award from the president of France in Calcutta, Ray told him that he had always considered Renoir to be his 'principal mentor'.

The shooting of *The River* began in Bengal in late 1949 and continued through the first half of 1950. Bansi Chandragupta assisted Renoir's art director Eugene Lourié; Subrata Mitra, soon to be Ray's lighting cameraman, took stills. Ray himself was present as an observer on two or three occasions but was unable to get further involved. There was his job at Keymer's to consider, and the fact that his British boss had offered to send him to London for six months' training. 'Doubtless the management hoped that I would come back a fully fledged advertising man wholly dedicated to the pursuit of selling tea and biscuits', he later remarked.

He had also at last married the girl he had known since the early thirties. Bijoya Das was the youngest grand-daughter of his mother's aunt, which made her a kind of cousin to Satyajit: a fact that inevitably provoked comment in Calcutta. She had kept

up her love of music – and even made recordings as a singer in Bengali – and her childhood interest in acting had led to a brief unhappy spell in Hindi films in Bombay; she had also been a teacher and government servant in Calcutta. They married in Bombay in October 1948 with the minimum of fuss, just the signing of a register, but Satyajit's mother and his wife's elder sisters later persuaded them to have a very simple ceremony in Calcutta with a Brahmo flavour.

For many months their plans were uncertain. Satyajit's mother fell very seriously ill. When she recovered, he and his wife had to make sure she would be properly cared for in their absence abroad. Then there was his passionate interest in Renoir's shooting of *The River* to consider. At last, the Rays sailed for Europe in April 1950.

Keymer's London office was near the Strand and Satyajit went there every day by bus from Hampstead, where he and Bijoya were living with the mother of Norman Clare. It turned out to be smaller than the Calcutta office, which amused him. But after he had been there a month or so, an unpleasant incident occurred in which he was provoked into losing control of himself for almost the first and last time in his life. 'It was a face-to-face confrontation,' Ray recalled in the 1980s, 'the sort of thing I generally avoid.' He had overheard his boss, a Mr Ball, claiming credit for a poster Keymer's had done for the *Observer* which was, in fact, Ray's work. Without abusing the man, he made it quite clear that he could not accept him as a boss and walked out. Luckily, he was immediately able to join Benson's, another agency nearby, because it was a part of Keymer's. His British manager wrote from Calcutta expressing his full support.

Ray remained upset about the incident for days. Discussing it with his first biographer Marie Seton some years later, he said, 'I had always thought the English in England were better people than the English who come to India.' Probably out of sensitivity for the embarrassment it might cause his friend Norman, he did not even mention the matter to him, but he did tell Norman's

mother about it because she asked; she had noticed a persistent scowl on his face.

Satyajit and Bijoya did a lot of walking in London during their five months there. He was determined to go to as many exhibitions, concerts, plays and, most of all, movies as he could. The two Rays stuck to the city and visited nowhere outside it, not even Oxford and Cambridge, favourite haunts of educated Indians. And he made relatively few friends among the English. Apart from Norman Clare and his immediate family, there was really only Lindsay Anderson, then on the staff of the film magazine *Sequence*, with whom he had earlier exchanged letters from Calcutta concerning an article Satyajit wrote for *Sequence*, 'Renoir in Calcutta'. He and Lindsay saw some films together, including at the occasional film society viewing session lasting ten or twelve hours (where Ray saw Dovzhenko's *Earth*).

Anderson and Ray were friends, but never intimate. 'I always knew Satyajit to be intelligent and sympathetic and I suppose that's fairly rare,' said Anderson in the 1980s. 'I think I knew instinctively there were areas we wouldn't share, but you didn't worry about them.' Although Anderson encouraged Ray from London by letter during the long struggle to make *Pather Panchali* after 1950, Ray never volunteered his thoughts on making the novel into a film while he was staying in London. Anderson was not surprised by this. 'Satyajit is a guarded person; it all goes together with the kind of artist he is after all. He's not someone who would ever make himself easily accessible.'

The chief sticking point between them, then and later, was John Ford's work. Both of them certainly admired it, but where Anderson's admiration bordered on 'deification' (to use Ray's word), Ray's stopped well short of this. He disliked Ford's 'sentimentality', his 'excessive proneness to nostalgia' and 'his readiness to yield to commercial pressures'. But, he said, 'Lindsay was absolutely up in arms and wouldn't come down. Even in letters we fought, we argued about it; he over-praised certain things in *Sequence* and I had my own view about it.' To which Anderson

said, 'I responded to Ford probably more deeply than he did, because I would probably respond to the emotional quality in Ford more than he would. But it's not something one can be heavy about.'

Of the hundred or so films that Ray saw while he was in London, the revelations were unquestionably Vittorio de Sica's *Bicycle Thieves*, closely followed by Renoir's *The Rules of the Game*. *Bicycle Thieves* 'gored' him, Ray said. 'I came out of the theatre my mind fully made up. I would become a film-maker', he remarked in 1982 in his lecture 'My life, my work' (though, characteristically, he did not let on about this decision even to Clare). 'The prospect of giving up a safe job didn't daunt me any more. I would make my film exactly as De Sica had made his: working with non-professional actors, using modest resources, and shooting on actual locations. The village which Bibhutibhusan [Banerji] had so lovingly described would be a living backdrop to the film, just as the outskirts of Rome were for De Sica's film.'

In an excited letter to Chandragupta in Calcutta, Ray inadvertently revealed his future guiding principle as a film-maker, rejecting Hollywood films as his model:

The entire conventional approach (as exemplified by even the best American and British films) is wrong. Because the conventional approach tells you that the best way to tell a story is to leave out all except those elements which are directly related to the story, while the master's work clearly indicates that if your theme is strong and simple, then you can include a hundred little apparently irrelevant details which, instead of obscuring the theme, only help to intensify it by contrast, and in addition create the illusion of actuality better.

In a review of *Bicycle Thieves* he wrote for the Calcutta Film Society's bulletin, in which he largely dismissed the Italian films

he had seen in London (including Roberto Rossellini's *Rome, Open City*), Ray seemed virtually to describe *Pather Panchali*:

Zavattini's [De Sica's script writer] greatest assets are an acute understanding of human beings and an ability to devise the 'chain' type of story that fits perfectly into the 90-minute span of the average commercial cinema. Simplicity of plot allows for intensive treatment, while a whole series of interesting and believable situations and characters sustain interest...

Bicycle Thieves is a triumphant rediscovery of the fundamentals of cinema, and De Sica has openly acknowledged his debt to Chaplin. The simple universality of its theme, the effectiveness of its treatment, and the low cost of its production make it the ideal film for the Indian film-maker to study. The present blind worship of technique emphasises the poverty of genuine inspiration among our directors. For a popular medium, the best kind of inspiration should derive from life and have its roots in it. No amount of technical polish can make up for artificiality of theme and dishonesty of treatment. The Indian film-maker must turn to life, to reality. De Sica, and *not* De Mille, should be his ideal.

Ray and his wife left London in September 1950, heading for the galleries and concert halls of the Continent before sailing for home about a month later. They visited Lucerne, attended the music festival at Salzburg and the Biennale in Venice and spent a week in Paris where their money ran very low. In Salzburg they were determined to hear Furtwängler conduct the Vienna Philharmonic in Mozart's *The Magic Flute*, which Ray regarded as 'the most enchanting, the most impudent and the most sublime of Mozart's operas'. But the tickets were all sold. Cheated by an usher, who charged them three times the ticket price and then absconded, they stood for half an hour in an aisle until two German youths gave up their seats to them, saying in English, 'You must be from India.' Perhaps their generosity was an



Ray reading a music score, London, 1950

unacknowledged tribute to Tagore's unique and overwhelming impact in Germany in the 1920s.

From Venice, Ray dropped another line to Chandragupta (who had now finished shooting *The River* with Renoir): 'Venice is a fantastic place – very reminiscent of Benares in some ways, and equally photogenic.' His comment had a curious prescience about it. Seven years later, he would come back to Venice for a different reason: to collect, most unexpectedly to him, the Golden Lion award at the Venice Film Festival for the second part of the Apu Trilogy, *Aparajito*, which opens, immortally, on the ghats of Benares.

On board ship returning to India in October 1950, he at long last started to draft his script for *Pather Panchali*.