

Epilogue

A Century of Ray

In 1991, Ray's seventieth birthday, actor-cum-film director Richard Attenborough sent me this eloquent appreciation of him for publication in *Satyajit Ray at 70*:

In each generation of film-makers there seems to emerge one *auteur* who not only stands head and shoulders above his contemporaries but who advances the medium in such a decisive manner that his work becomes an inspiration for all time.

One such rare genius – and I use the word advisedly – is Satyajit Ray.

Because I had long admired *Pather Panchali* as one of the most exquisite pieces of cinema in existence, I had no hesitation when, in 1977, he asked me to play in his next film, accepting without reservation. But surely, he said, I wanted to read the script before making such a commitment?

For the first time and only time in my acting career I did not. I was extremely content to place myself in the hands of this master and do whatever he wanted me to do, wherever he chose to work.

He chose Calcutta and the film – his first in Hindi – was *The Chess Players*. I played General Outram, a British army officer who embodied just about every colonial characteristic I personally have always opposed with every breath in my body.

Manikda, as he is called, met me at the airport. I was carrying my entire costume with me, and started shooting the day after my arrival. The studios had no air-conditioning and I have never been so hot in my life but Ray had unbounded energy, putting his imprimatur on every single facet of the production. To a producer/director like myself who relies so much on the varied experience of his film-making team, it was a total revelation. Ray's mastery, his sure touch, encompassed every possible technical function. He had written the script, designed and dressed the sets. Later he would edit the film and compose the music. Meanwhile, he was operating the camera and, of course, directing.

The result, with that film and all his others, is a piece of cinema which, without concessions, is truly a creation of Satyajit Ray. Working for him was both an enormous pleasure and an education. I count it one of the major milestones of my working life.

Circumstances have so far dictated that *The Chess Players* remains my last major film as an actor. Should no script, no other director ever seduce me into playing before the camera again, I can think of no better swansong.

More than a generation later, on the birth centenary of Ray, does the outside world concur with Attenborough's insider view of Ray? Martin Scorsese said of *The Chess Players* in 2009: 'Very few directors have been brave enough to show history in the making. This is the way it must really feel to live through a moment of historic change. It feels distant and tragic at the same time.' V. S. Naipaul, as we know, compared *The Chess Players* with the work of Shakespeare. Is Ray now widely regarded as a genius? – a word that Ray himself used for only Charles Chaplin and John Ford in his collection *Our Films Their Films*.

What do we mean by 'genius'? Homer, Leonardo da Vinci, Shakespeare, Mozart, Tagore and Tolstoy; Galileo, Newton, Darwin, Curie, Einstein and Ramanujan. What do these world-famous figures in the arts and sciences have in common? – apart from the fact that their key achievements predate our own time by a century or more. Most of us would probably answer something like this: all twelve possessed something we call genius, which in every instance permanently changed the way that humanity perceived the world. But pressed to be more precise, we find it remarkably hard to define genius.

Each genius is highly individual and unique, of course, and yet genius as a concept shares a compelling, inevitable quality – for the general public and professionals alike. Leonardo's drawings, Shakespeare's plays and Mozart's music continue to move people in languages and cultures far removed from their native Italy, England and Austria. Darwin's ideas are still required reading among biologists; they continue to generate fresh thinking and experiments around the world. So do Einstein's theories and Ramanujan's theorems among physicists and mathematicians. Contemporary 'geniuses' may come and go, but the idea of genius will not let go of us. Genius is the name we give to a quality of work that transcends fashion, fame and reputation: the opposite of a period piece. Somehow, genius abolishes both the time and the place of its origin.

The word genius has its roots in Roman antiquity; in Latin, *genius* described the tutelary (guardian) spirit of a person, place, institution and so on, which linked these to the forces of fate and the rhythms of time. Like the Greek *daimon*, the Roman *genius* followed a man from cradle to grave, as expressed in the poet Horace's classic lines from the first century BC defining *genius* as: 'the companion which rules the star of our birth, the god of human nature, mortal for each individual, varying in countenance, white and black'. Only *genius* knows, says Horace, why two brothers can differ entirely in personality and lifestyle. But such classical *genius* had no necessary relationship with ability or exceptional creativity.

Not until the eighteenth-century Enlightenment in Europe did genius acquire its distinctly different, chief modern meaning: a work or an individual of exceptional intellectual or creative powers, whether inborn or acquired (or both). Homer, despite two millennia of veneration as a divinely inspired poet, did not become a 'genius' until the eighteenth century. This later usage derives from the Latin *ingenium* (not from *genius*), meaning 'natural disposition', 'innate ability', or 'talent'. It was already in wide currency in 1711, when Joseph Addison published an article on 'Genius' in his newly established journal, *The Spectator*. 'There is no character more frequently given to a writer, than that of being a genius,' wrote Addison. 'I have heard many a little sonneteer called a fine genius. There is not a heroic scribbler in the nation, that has

not his admirers who think him a great genius; and as for your smatterers in tragedy, there is scarce a man among them who is not cried up by one or other for a prodigious genius.'

In the middle of the eighteenth century, the great Samuel Johnson attempted a definition in his periodical, *The Rambler*, which is recognisably modern in its emphasis on genius as being something achievable through dedication. According to Johnson,

...[S]ince a genius, whatever it be, is like fire in the flint, only to be produced by collision with a proper subject, it is the business of every man to try whether his faculties may not happily cooperate with his desires, and since they whose proficiency he admires, knew their own force only by the event, he needs but engage in the same undertaking, with equal spirit, and may reasonably hope for equal success.

Possibly Satyajit Ray felt some affinity with Dr Johnson, given his description of his own indefatigable, distinguished photo-biographer Nemaï Ghosh as 'a sort of Boswell working with a camera rather than a pen,' in his brief comment prefacing *Satyajit Ray at 70*. In any case, Ray's own 'collision with a proper subject' was, of course, his encounter with the novel *Pather Panchali*, which he had deeply admired since drawing illustrations for its abridged edition in 1944. Of 'they whose proficiency he admires,' the most important for Ray was the self-taught Jean Renoir, who visited Bengal in 1949 in search of locations and actors for *The River*, and encouraged the total novice Ray to tackle a film of *Pather Panchali*. 'I think that subconsciously I have been paying tribute to Renoir throughout my film-making career,' Ray told an interviewer much later. His 'fire in the flint' was finally sparked by seeing Vittorio de Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* (*Ladri di Biciclette*) in London in 1950. In his review of *Bicycle Thieves* for the Calcutta Film Society's bulletin in 1951, Ray wrote: '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.' He 'must turn to life, to reality. De Sica, and *not* DeMille, should be his ideal.'

One aspect of genius is universal: this honorific takes decades to become generally awarded after the death of an artist or scientist. In the arts, Johann Sebastian Bach's music was neglected as old-fashioned and churchy after his death in 1750, except by a few composers such as Mozart, until the Bach revival took off in 1829, prompted by a centenary performance of the *St Matthew Passion*. In the sciences, Albert Einstein was underrated by many physicists after his death in 1955, and became fully accepted as a genius only after astronomical observations confirmed his theory of general relativity in the later twentieth century. Bridging the arts and sciences, the polymath Thomas Young – who made ground-breaking discoveries in Egyptology, linguistics, physics and physiology some two centuries ago, as described in my biography of Young, ironically entitled *The Last Man Who Knew Everything* – is even today not fully recognised as a genius.

We are probably still too close in time to Ray's life and work to judge his true standing. Moreover, his candidacy for genius is exceptionally complex. Consider the following obstacles to full international appreciation of his artistic achievements.

In the first place, Ray's films reflect the sophisticated and subtle fusion of East and West in his upbringing. 'I never had the feeling of grappling with an alien culture when reading European literature, or looking at European painting, or listening to western music, whether classical or popular,' he told me in 1982 (as mentioned in the Introduction). This inevitably means that some aspects of Ray films are unfamiliar, offputting and even incomprehensible to audiences in both India and the West (not to mention audiences in other parts of the world), as detailed throughout this book. For example, recall Ray's pivotal pun on NASA, the space agency, as *nesa*, the Bengali word for 'addiction', in his script for *The Stranger*.

Secondly, the films depict, chiefly, the culture of Bengal. Unlike in colonial times, during the lifetime of Ray's great predecessor Tagore, Bengal has held little economic, political or social importance for most of the world over many decades. International film-goers must surely have wondered why they should bother with films about Bengal.

Thirdly, the films' dialogue is almost exclusively spoken in Bengali, which is unintelligible to most audiences, even in India (where the national language is of course Hindi). It is no accident that *The Chess Players* made a special impact on Attenborough, Scorsese and Naipaul. Unlike any other Ray feature film, this story deals directly with the British in India and is partly told in English, courtesy of Ray's incomparable fluency in both English and Bengali.

Lastly, Ray was extraordinarily multi-talented as an artist. As emphasised by Attenborough, Ray wrote the script, designed the sets and costumes, operated the camera, edited the footage and composed the music of most of his films, as well as directed the action – as shown in Nemai Ghosh's vivid photographs and Ray's vital handwritten scripts, musical scores and drawings published in my large-format book, *Satyajit Ray: A Vision of Cinema*, in 2005. In addition, he was of course an extensively published illustrator and writer, for both children and adults, through both magazines and books, before and after he took up film-making. Such 'polymathy' – surely unparalleled among film directors from any culture – suffers from a natural tendency to provoke scepticism among professionals, perhaps especially in the increasingly specialised second half of the twentieth century.

Despite the above, as Ray's biographer I would hazard a guess that *Pather Panchali* – set in a Bengali village a century ago, *The Music Room* – set in zamindari Bengal, *Charulata* – set in Victorian Calcutta, *The Chess Players* – set in nawabi Lucknow, and *The Stranger* – set in contemporary Bengal, will continue to have worldwide appeal in the years to come, because they are works of genius. In Bengal, *The Adventures of Goopy and Bagha* will always be relished, too, especially for Ray's inimitable songs, sung at his Calcutta funeral in 1992.

Over seven years of researching and writing this book, wherever Ray had gone in the seven decades of his life I tried to follow him in my mind, so to say. During this journey, I encountered many highly intelligent and creative people who keenly admired Ray's films, such as Attenborough, Naipaul and Scorsese, and Lindsay Anderson, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Arthur C. Clarke and Akira Kurosawa, including several winners of the Nobel prize. Then, after publishing the biography in 1989, I wrote books and essays about a wide variety of undoubted geniuses in the arts and sciences, including

biographies of Tagore and Einstein, and tried to understand the individual origins of their immortal achievements.

Ray, however, remains the only genius I came to know in person. A truly singular and multi-faceted personality, Manikda was not only a jewel of Bengal, and the Koh-i-Noor of Independent India, but also one of the greatest artists of the twentieth century. Another of his admirers, Gérard Depardieu – who helped to produce Ray's penultimate film, *Branches of the Tree* – compared Ray's films with Mozart's music, as mentioned earlier. Mozart unquestionably inspired the intensely musical Manik from his teenage years during the 1930s up to his final year, when he made a radio broadcast for the bicentenary of Mozart's death in 1991, 'What Mozart means to me'. The ensemble performance of the characters in *Charulata* he said was inspired by his love of the ensemble singing in Mozart's operas. At this time in the 1960s, as we know, he compared Chaplin's *The Gold Rush* to the 'distilled simplicity', 'purity of style' and 'impeccable craftsmanship' of Mozart's *The Magic Flute*, which he called 'the most enchanting, the most impudent and the most sublime of Mozart's operas'. Each of these qualities is evident in Ray's finest films. Maybe the undoubted genius of Mozart is the most appropriate comparison for Satyajit Ray a century after his birth, despite the thoroughly Bengali ethos of both himself and most of his films: the Mozart of cinema.