

Ray's Boswell

Nemai Ghosh (1934-2020) photographed Satyajit Ray at work and scenes from his films from 1968 to 1992.

ANYONE DRAWN TO SATYAJIT RAY AND HIS films owes a debt of gratitude to Nemai Ghosh (1934-2020), who photographed Ray at work and scenes from his films from 1968 right to the end of Ray's life in 1992.

In Ray's own words written in 1991, "For close on 25 years, Nemai Ghosh has been assiduously photographing me in action and repose—a sort of Boswell working with a camera rather than a pen. In so far as these pictures rise above mere records and assume a value as examples of the photographer's art, they are likely to be of interest to a discerning viewer."

The master photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson—

who was fascinated by Ray's films, especially "The Music Room" (*Jalsaghar*)—certainly recognised this. Cartier-Bresson called Ghosh the "photo-biographer" of Ray, and stated with perfect truth in his foreword to *Satyajit Ray at 70*, a collection of Ghosh's photographs and worldwide tributes celebrating Ray's seventieth birthday: "He allows us to be intimate with film-making, and to feel with great fidelity the drive, the alertness and the profundity of this giant of cinema in all his majestic stature."

So do I, as the biographer of Ray in the 1980s. Years after Ray's death in 1992, it was a unique privilege for me to work with Nemai on a large-format, copiously illus-



SATYAKI GHOSH

SATYAJIT RAY with Nemai Ghosh.

'THE CHESS

PLAYERS' (Shatranj ke Khilari). Ray, with camera and his unit members, in front of the Bara Imambara (Great Mosque) in Lucknow, 1977. Standing from left to right: Purnendu Bose, Soumendu Roy, Dilip Banerjee, Anil Ghosh. The Bara Imambara is shown on screen in silhouette, but unfortunately most of the film had to be shot in the studio in Calcutta because of too many anachronistic elements in the streets of modern Lucknow.



NEMAI GHOSH/COURTESY OF SON SATYAKI GHOSH



**'THE GOLDEN
FORTRESS'** (Sonar
Kella). Ray,
surrounded by his unit
members, prepares to
shoot a scene with
Kamu Mukherjee
(Mandar Bose) and
Sailen Mukherjee (Dr
Hemanga Hajra)
walking together up
the path to Nahargarh
Fort, Rajasthan, 1974.
Standing to the right
of Ray is his vital
cinematographer
Soumendu Roy. The
umbrella is to protect
the camera from
direct sunlight.

NEMAI GHOSH/COURTESY OF SON SATYAKI GHOSH

trated book using the finest from his tens of thousands of images, along with script extracts and vivid drawings by Ray himself. Entitled *Satyajit Ray: A Vision of Cinema*, the book comes closer to the mind and heart of a great film-maker's 'inner eye' than perhaps any other book on the cinema.

Ray trusted Ghosh, who worked for the love of Ray's films, not for money; indeed, his obsession with Ray

swallowed up the last rupee of his savings. So he was allowed to become a fly on the wall during all stages of the process of film-making. As Nemaï himself writes of Ray in his preface to *A Vision of Cinema*: "Afterwards, seeing the pictures, he would frequently ask: 'When did you take it?' Whatever he was doing—whether writing, designing, acting, directing, operating the camera, editing, composing and recording the music, or simply meditating in the

middle of noise and crowds like some sage—Manikda [Ray] was preoccupied. In his eyes, I felt I could see the whole film. I tried to catch that impression."

For me, Nemaï—who was awarded the Padma Shri in 2010—represented the best of Bengal, with his uncommon combination of talent, dedication and modesty, captured in the final words of his preface: "From the lanes of Kalighat Road in Calcutta to the Rue de Rivoli in

Paris—and the appreciation of a giant like Cartier-Bresson—was a big leap for a simple man from a middle-class Bengali family. As the moon is illuminated by the light of the sun, very many people have come into the light because of Ray. It was my good luck that one day my stars shone on me too. Whatever inspiration and education I have received in my life are like pebbles I have collected from the shores of the sea called Satyajit Ray." □



NEMAI GHOSH/COURTESY OF SON SATYAKI GHOSH

'THE ELEPHANT GOD' (Jai Baba Felunath). Ray, with his unit members, lines up a trolley shot of Soumitra Chattopadhyay (Felu) talking with Biplab Chatterjee (Bikash) in Varanasi (Benares), 1978. From left to right: Ramesh Sen (holding screenplay), Soumendu Roy, unknown person, Dilip Banerjee, Purnendu Bose (in hat), Ray, unknown person, Ananta Das, Anil Ghosh.



NEMAI GHOSH/COURTESY OF SON SATYAKI GHOSH

'THE ELEPHANT GOD' (Joi Baba Felunath). Ray paints the film's Bengali title on the Darbhanga Ghat in Varanasi (Benares), 1978. The detective film's opening shot involves, literally, a gunshot: its bang causes a flock of pigeons to scatter from the ghat, revealing the title.



NEMAI GHOSH/COURTESY OF SON SATYAKI GHOSH

'SUKUMAR RAY'. During the lunch hour in the recording studio in Calcutta, 1987.



NEMAI GHOSH/COURTESY OF SON SATYAKI GHOSH

'BRANCHES OF THE TREE' (Sakha Prasakha). Ray directs Ajit Banerjee (Ananda Mohan) in Calcutta, 1990.



NEMAI GHOSH/COURTESY OF SON SATYAKI GHOSH

'DISTANT THUNDER' (Ashani Sanket). Ray, watched by Soumendu Roy (standing), lines up a shot of Sandhya Roy (Chutki) in Dangapara, 1972.



NEMAI GHOSH/COURTESY OF SON SATYAKI GHOSH

'THE CHESS PLAYERS' (Shatranj ke Khilari). Ray takes a shot of a passing palanquin and Farooq Sheikh (Aqil)—back to camera—supposedly near the house of Nawab Mir Roshan Ali, in a lane known as Shahchara Mohalla in Lucknow, 1977. As always on location, a crowd has gathered to watch the work.



NEMAIGHOSH/COURTESY OF SON SATYAKI GHOSH

'THE CHESS PLAYERS' (Shatranj ke Khilari). Ray designs Wajid Ali Shah's crown at home, 1977. He based the design on extensive historical research. This included the sardonic comment (quoted in the film) of the British governor-general, Lord Dalhousie, concerning Wajid Ali Shah and the Great Exhibition in London in 1851: 'The wretch at Lucknow who has sent his crown to the Exhibition would have done his people and us a good service if he had sent his head in it—and he would never have missed it. That is a cherry which will drop into our mouths some day.'