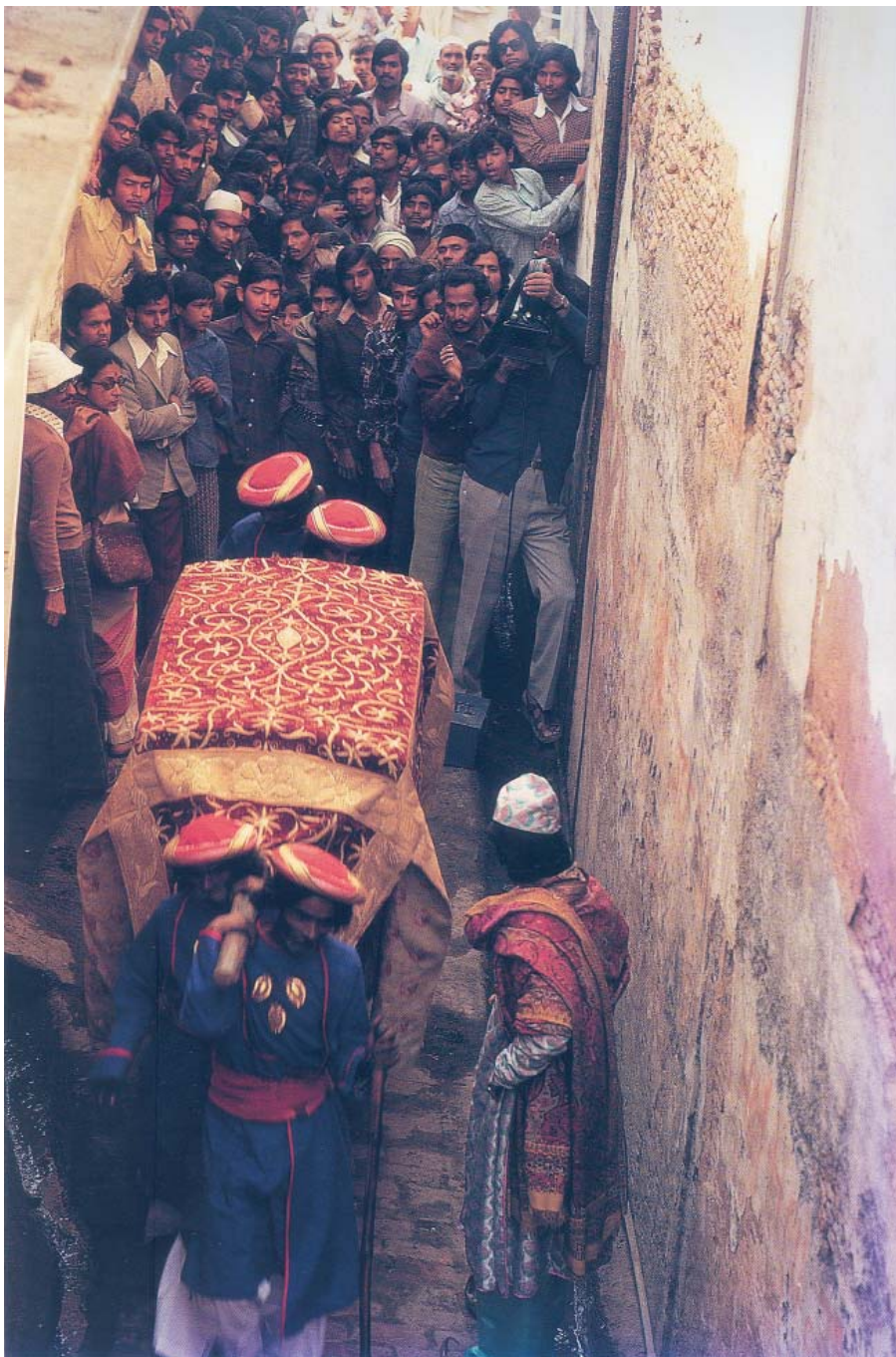


# SATYAJIT RAY'S THE CHESS PLAYERS

Andrew Robinson recalls conversations with the famous director about his work, and in particular the recently re-released Urdu film, *The Chess Players*, made in the 1970s, which explores events surrounding the British annexation of Oudh in 1856.



IT'S A VERY, VERY COMPLEX mixed kind of thing, the entire British heritage in India', the great Bengali film-maker Satyajit Ray (1921-92) told me when I interviewed him at length for a biography in the 1980s:

I think many of us owe a great deal to it. I'm thankful for the fact that at least I'm familiar with both cultures and it gives me a very much stronger footing as a film-maker, but I'm also aware of all the dirty things that were being done. I really don't know how I feel about it.

The opportunity to probe some of these deep equivocations in himself drew Ray, in 1974, to tackle a film – *The Chess Players* (*Shatranj ke Khilari*) – that differs in certain important respects from all his other thirty or more feature films (beginning with his most famous work, the Apu Trilogy of the late 1950s). For a start, *The Chess Players* was easily Ray's most expensive film, employing stars of the Bombay cinema (notably Amjad Khan, Shabana Azmi and Amitabh Bachchan as a narrator) and even of Western cinema (Richard Attenborough), large Mughal-style sets and exotic location shooting (Lucknow and Rajasthan). In addition, it was Ray's first and only feature to venture into a culture – that of Lucknow – and a language – Urdu – other than those of his native Bengal; to write and direct a screenplay not in Bengali was something Ray had firmly declared he would never attempt. (Though bilingual in English and

Ray filming *The Chess Players* on location in Lucknow, 1977.



The actors Sanjeev Kumar (left) and Saeed Jaffrey play two nobles of Lucknow who are addicted to chess, a game invented in India.

Bengali, he knew little Urdu.) It was also his only film in which Islamic culture played a major role. Most important of all, the film was a historical drama, set during the East India Company's annexation of Oudh in 1856, the year before the outbreak of the Indian Mutiny. Although the influence of the British is felt in most of Ray's films in subtle ways, and he made several films set in the nineteenth century, *The Chess Players* is the only one where the Raj and its officials occupy centre stage.

Given its world premiere at the London Film Festival in 1977, *The Chess Players* was the first adult film about the Raj. Today, after *Gandhi*, *Heat and Dust*, *The Jewel in the Crown*, *A Passage to India* and many other Raj-related films, Ray's work remains by far the most sophisticated portrayal of this particular clash of cultures. No other director – British, Indian or otherwise – is likely to better it. As V.S. Naipaul remarked of the film, 'It is like a Shakespeare scene. Only 300 words are spoken but goodness! – terrific things happen.' The corollary is that many, maybe even the majority of viewers, who like to keep their colonialism pure and simple – in contrast to Ray's complex mixture – find the film lacking in passion and conviction. The *New York Times* film critic complained in 1978: 'Ray's not outraged. Sometimes he's amused; most often he's meditative, and unless you respond to this mood the movie is so overly polite that you may

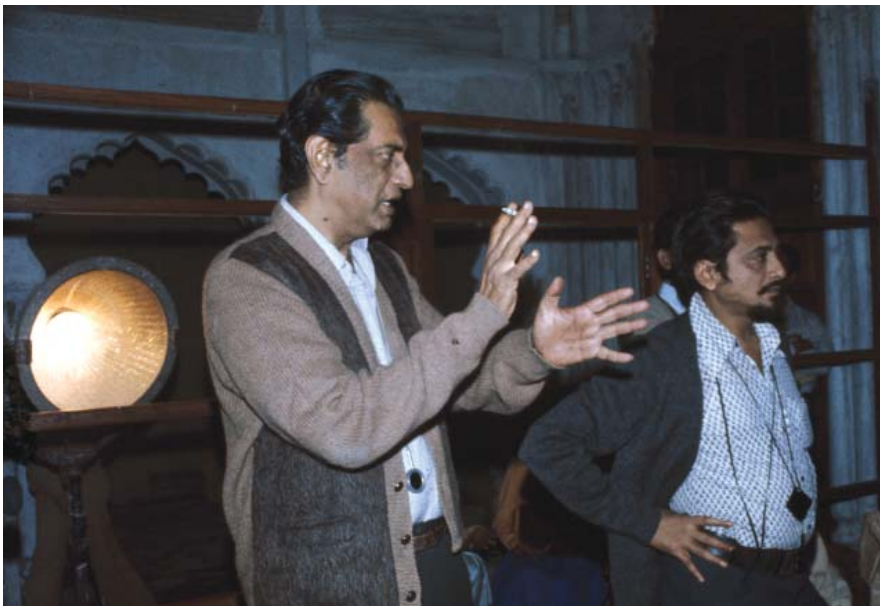
want to shout a rude word.' Historians of the period, on the other hand, have been almost universal in their praise of the film – no doubt a reflection of the immensely detailed and fastidious research that went into its production.

Ray's love of chess, of Lucknow as a setting and of its high culture, especially its music and its dance, and of the 1920s short story '*Shatranj ke Khilari*' by the well-known Hindi writer Prem Chand, on which the film is based, were his reasons for taking up the challenge. Chess had been an addiction with him in the 1940s and the first part of the 1950s; it faded only with the onset of a

greater passion, that of film-making, when he sold his collection of books on chess as part of his drive to raise funds for his first film *Pather Panchali* (1955). His visits to Lucknow as a boy in the late 1920s had left an indelible impression. He stayed there with an uncle who was a famous composer of Bengali songs. The uncle's house hummed with music of every kind, and his guests displayed polished manners to match; they included the greatest north Indian classical musician of modern times, Ustad Allauddin Khan (the father of the virtuoso Ali Akbar Khan and the guru of Ravi Shankar). The young Ray listened to Allauddin playing the piano and violin, and imbibed the atmosphere of courtly refinement that was so characteristic of Lucknow. He was also taken to see all the sights that had made the city known as the 'Paris of the East' and the 'Babylon of India' a century before: the ornate mosque Bara Imambara with its notorious Bhulbhuliya maze, the Dilkusha garden, and the decorative palaces of the kings and nawabs of Oudh. Nearby the young Ray saw the shell of the British Residency with the marks of

**The tomb of Safdar Jang, an 18th-century Nawab of Oudh. It was built in Delhi in 1753-74 by Nawab Shuja ud Daula, during the decline of Mughal power.**





Satyajit Ray on set. He took responsibility for all aspects of his films, from writing the script to composing the music.

Mutiny cannonballs still visible on its walls and a marble plaque commemorating the spot where Sir Henry Lawrence had fallen in 1857. Even today these places have a peculiar elegiac aura.

In the 1970s, more than a century after the eclipse of the nawabi power at Lucknow, the city still occupied a special place in the life of India. During the latter part of the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth, Lucknow and Oudh, the rich state of which it was capital, were the repository of Mughal culture after the erosion of Mughal power in Delhi. The East India Company recognized this and made the rulers of Oudh kings in 1814, while steadily undermining their sovereignty and revenues from 1765 onwards. The kings, and the city they embellished with palaces and mosques, gradually became bywords for decadent refinement in every department of life, whether it was dress, banquets, the hookah, pigeon-breeding, music and poetry, or love-making.

The best guide to this culture is a wonderful Urdu book by Abdul Halim Sharar originally published in the 1920s that fortuitously for Ray appeared in an English translation published in London just as he was beginning his research: *Lucknow: The Last Phase of an Oriental Culture* (1975). It is, in the words of its two British and Indian translators, 'a primary source of great value, a unique document, both alive and authentic in every detail, of an important Indian culture at its zenith'. Ray later acknowledged that one of the most

pleasing responses he had to *The Chess Players* was a letter from one of Sharar's translators, Fakhir Hussain, who observed that every detail in Ray's film was correct.

Born in 1860, Sharar spent the first nine years of his life in Lucknow and the next ten in Calcutta at the court of the exiled King of Oudh, Wajid Ali Shah, whose forced abdication in 1856 is the central event of *The Chess Players*. Most of the rest of Sharar's life was spent in Lucknow, and in due course he became a pioneer of the modern Urdu novel, a historian 'of refreshingly wide horizons', and an essayist 'equipped with a profound knowledge of Arabic, Urdu and Persian literatures and Islamic theology', to quote Hussain. He was also, like most thinking Indians of his time, deeply affected by the West, partly as a result of his visit to England in 1895. Western influence makes his book fascinatingly schizophrenic: loving, minutely doc-

umented detail is accompanied by indictments of Lucknow's moral laxity worthy of the most self-confident Victorian imperialist, sometimes appearing within a few pages of each other. Sharar's life dramatized vividly the conflict and the creative possibilities at the heart of India's response to the West.

These are at their most stark in relation to the King himself, whose character, wrote Sharar, 'appears to be one of the most dubious in all the records of history' and yet who was also 'extremely devout, abstinent and a strict observer of Muslim religious law'. Sharar was disgusted by Wajid Ali Shah's love-affairs and amorous escapades in his youth with servants, courtesans and other women – 'he even had no hesitation in showing shamefully low taste and in using obscene language' – but he delighted in the King's mastery of classical music, both as a connoisseur and as a composer. 'I have heard from reliable court singers,' wrote Sharar, 'who were his companions, that even when asleep the King's big toes used to move rhythmically.' Still, Sharar could not avoid condemning Wajid Ali for prostituting his musical talents by adding to an existing style of 'light, simple and attractive tunes which could be appreciated by everyone' – *thumris*, as they are known, several of which find their way into Ray's film.

Ray ran into his own antipathy to



A still showing Wajid Ali Shah (Amjad Khan) about to abdicate his throne to General Outram (Richard Attenborough).



A glimpse into the 'complex mixed' British-Indian relationship in a scene of a cock fight enjoyed by an 18th-century Nawab of Oudh and European officers, painted by a Lucknow artist, 1830.

Resident, General Outram (Richard Attenborough), who is obliged by the East India Company, somewhat against his conscience, to treat the King as a pawn in an imperial chess game. Equally important are two chess-playing nawabs who give the film its English title, minor nobles at the King's court: Mirza Sajjad Ali (Sanjeev Kumar) and Meer Roshan Ali (Saeed Jaffrey). So obsessed are they with saving their chess kings from each other that they fail to save their real King from being captured by the British. Instead of taking up arms to fight the annexation, the two nawabs run away from the city, abandoning their wives, in order to continue their games undisturbed by public affairs. The nawabs' story is intercut with the story of Wajid Ali Shah and General Outram. At the end, the two stories – the political struggle between enemies and the chess duel between friends – seem to merge into one.

To pull off this tricky conceit presented Ray with formidable difficulties. First there was the audience's widespread ignorance of the relationship between Britain and Oudh in the century leading up to the annexation. Secondly came the need to make the debauched King at least partly sympathetic. Thirdly, there was the fact that chess is not inherently dramatic on screen. Finally, an overall tone had to be found that was in harmony with the pleasure-loving decadence of Lucknow, without seeming to condone it.

'People just didn't know anything about the history of Lucknow and its nawabs,' Ray told me. 'I was trying to think of a way to do it, and I felt it

the King very early on in his research for *The Chess Players* (which at one point took him to the India Office Library in London). Several times he felt like giving up the film altogether and wrote to say so in a number of letters to an Urdu-speaking collaborator, Shama Zaidi. On one occasion she offered to translate Wajid Ali's autobiography, in which the King describes his sex life from the age of eight, and Ray told her not to because it would make him dislike Wajid Ali even more than he already did! A decade later, he explained to me:

I think there were two aspects to Wajid Ali Shah's character, one which you could admire and one which you couldn't. At one point I just could not

feel any sympathy for this stupid character. And unless I feel some sympathy I cannot make a film. But then finally, after long months of study, of the nawabs, of Lucknow, and of everything, I saw the King as an artist, a composer who made some contributions to the form of singing that developed in Lucknow. The fact that he was a great patron of music – that was one redeeming feature about this King.

However, *The Chess Players* does not focus exclusively on Wajid Ali Shah (played by Amjad Khan) and his relationship with the British

**The River Gomti running through Lucknow in an engraving for a London publication of 1837.**





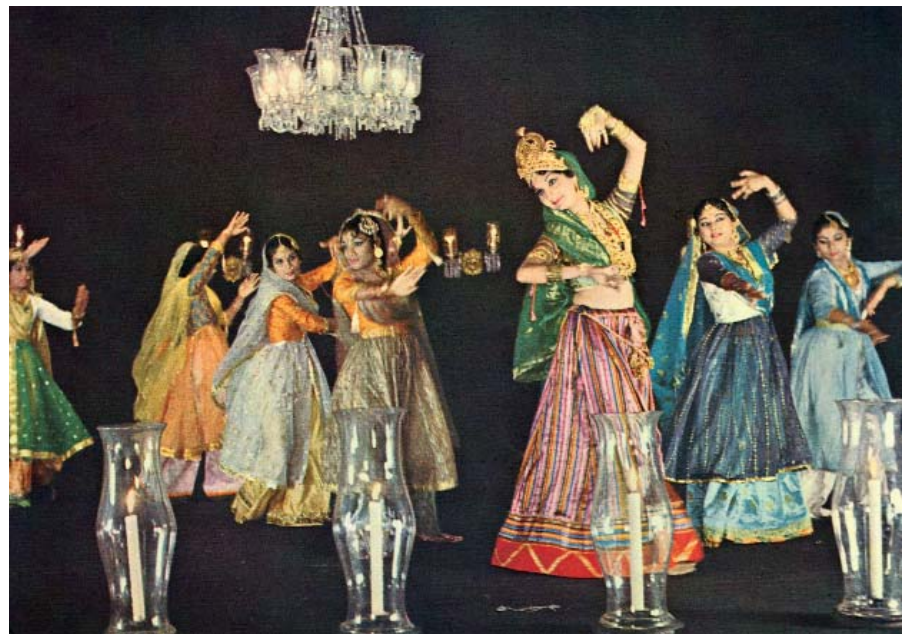
Ray had a deep personal ambivalence towards the historical Wajid Ali Shah, expressed in his characterisation of the King (left: in a still) in *The Chess Players*. Below: Ray's training as a painter is evident in many stills from the film.

had to take a documentary approach.' A ten-minute prologue about the rulers of Oudh and the East India Company using historical paintings and documents, modern cartoons and dramatized vignettes describing life in Lucknow under Wajid Ali Shah was Ray's response to the first difficulty. His discovery of the letters of Lord Dalhousie, the arrogant Governor-General, and therefore Outram's superior, suggested both the sardonic tone of the prologue and its use of animation.

The wretch at Lucknow who has sent his crown to the [1851] 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 ...

declares a fruity English voice, quoting a Dalhousie letter. 'That is a cherry which will drop into our mouths one day.' This statement is followed by a shot of the crown sitting on Wajid Ali's head, and an animation of a hand plucking crowned cherries in quick succession: the states annexed by the East India Company in the 1840s and 50s – leaving only the cherry of Oudh.

The second difficulty was resolved by emphasizing Wajid Ali Shah's musicality (rather than his sexuality). We see him beating a drum at the festival of Muharram, watching an entrancing Kathak dance performance, and performing as the god Krishna in an opera he had composed himself – which incidentally implies his liberal attitude to Hinduism. 'Nothing but poetry and



music should bring tears to a man's eyes,' he tells his prime minister on seeing the man weep after an interview with Outram demanding the King's abdication. Later, at the moment when Wajid Ali decides to give up his throne without a fight, he delivers himself of the *thumri* that entered common currency in India – rather as Richard III's cry at the Battle of Bosworth Field has done among English-speakers:

*Jab chhorh chaley Lakhnau nagari,  
Kaho haal adam par kya guzari ...*

which means roughly: 'When we left our beloved Lucknow, See what befell us ...' On the printed page in English it may lack impact, but when sung by Anjad Khan in a hesitant voice husky with emotion, it is moving.

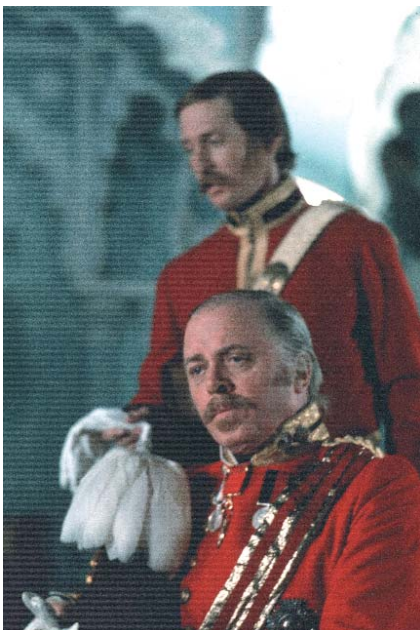
As for the third difficulty – how to make chess dramatic ('If it had been *gambling*, there'd be no problem', Ray told Saeed Jaffrey in a letter) – the solution was the one adopted in other Ray films about obsession, such as *The Music Room* (1958) and *The Goddess* (1960). In each case, the film stresses the human element without ever losing sight of the object of obsession. The effect is that to appreciate *The Chess Players* one need have no knowledge of chess.

But without doubt Ray's former passion for the game greatly assisted him in dramatizing it cinematically. He finds a hundred deft ways to express on screen Mirza and Meer's utter absorption in their private world, enriching it so naturally and imperceptibly that the final impact defies analysis. All his best films are like this – and the tone of *The Chess Player* emerges from this use of telling detail enabling it to suggest the entire Indo-Muslim culture of Lucknow, rather as Jean Renoir suggests the decadence of French society between the wars in *The Rules of the Game* (1939). Ray had grasped the importance of constructing a film in this fashion while still in his twenties. On a short visit to London in 1950 he watched almost a hundred films including such classics as Renoir's

film, Vittorio de Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* (1948) and some of John Ford's Westerns. As he wrote at the time to his future art director in Calcutta in a sort of unconscious artistic credo:

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.

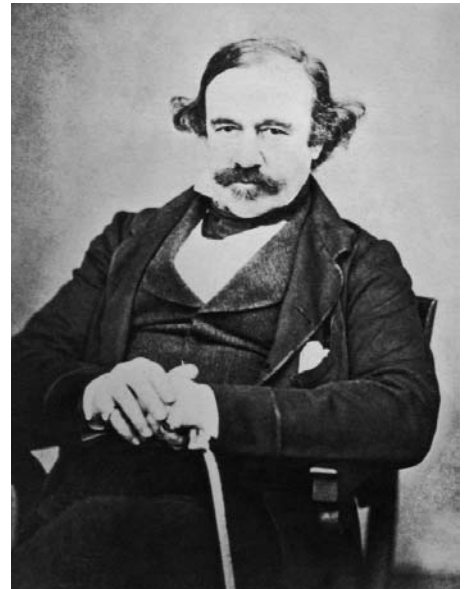
Ray's theme in *The Chess Players* is strong and simple – that the non-involvement of India's ruling classes assisted a small number of British in their takeover of India – but the way he expresses this is oblique and complex. For example, it is not at first apparent what Mirza's indifference to his wife's dissatisfaction with his obsession with chess may have to do with Outram's intention to annex Oudh; but by the end of the film the link is clear, when in their village hideaway Mirza's cuckolded friend Meer says to him with comic pathos: 'We can't even cope with our wives, so how can we cope with the Company's army?' This is the moment where Ray intends the two inter-



Sir James Outram (1803-63), was already a key figure in asserting British rule when he became Resident of Oudh in 1854 (right). After thorough historical research, Ray made a detailed sketch (below) of Outram's study at the British Residency in preparation for the film, in which he cast Richard Attenborough as Outram (bottom left).

woven stories to become one, the moment of truth where all the pieces in the puzzle fall magically into place.

For some of us, such as Naipaul, the magic works. Seeing *The Chess Players* at its première in 1977 changed my life, by making me want to know Ray's films deeply, which in turn led me to study his influences, ranging from Akira Kurosawa and



Tagore to Henri Cartier-Bresson and Mozart, and to a friendship with Ray himself. But overall, when the film was first released, neither East nor West seemed quite satisfied with it. Both Indians and Westerners wanted Ray to have painted his canvas in bolder colours – like Richard Attenborough's openly anti-colonial film *Gandhi*. Yet as Ray once said of movies in general: 'Villains bore me.' Defending *The Chess Players* against the accusation that it did not condemn historical evils, he remarked:

Easy targets don't interest me very much. The condemnation is there, ultimately, but the process of arriving at it is different. I was portraying two negative forces, feudalism and colonialism. You had to condemn both Wajid and Dalhousie. This was

the challenge. I wanted to make this condemnation interesting by bringing in certain plus points of both the sides. You have to read this film between the lines.

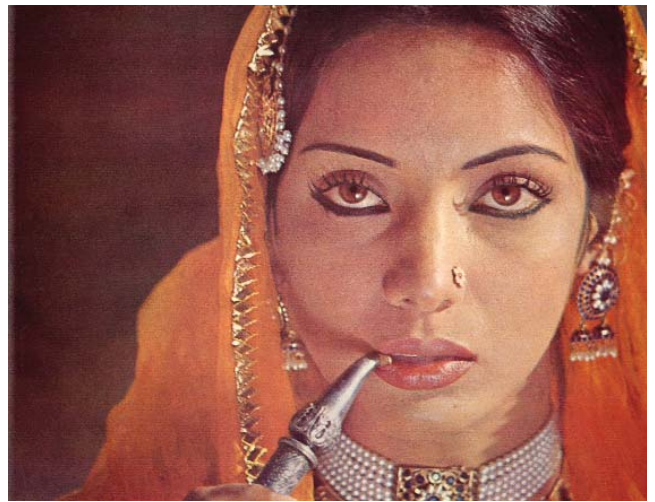
I saw the story as a fairly light-hearted one which would nevertheless comment on certain aspects of nawabi decadence as well as make a timeless comment on non-involvement.

Some of this feeling derives from the original writer Prem Chand, some of it from the historical attitude of the British in India (so precisely evoked, for instance, by the 'bridge party' in E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India*, where the English collector Turton pleasantly does the rounds of his Indian guests, nearly

all of whom 'he knew something to the discredit of'); mostly though, it comes from Ray's own cultivated ambivalence to the colonial experience. He was a pastmaster of the oblique comment, who liked to keep his audience pleasurably alert, rather than resting comfortably in their prejudices and stereotypes. *The Chess Players* delights in nuance and refined emotion, as the culture it depicts once did. An example is the moment when Meer cheats at chess while Mirza is out of the room arguing with his wife. Instead of catching Meer move the piece *in flagrante*, the camera spies his hand through a gap

**Right: Shabana Azmi as Khurshid, wife of the nawab Mirza Sajjad Ali, in a still used for one of the promotional posters for the *Chess Players*.**

**Below: Sikhs in Lucknow, photographed by Felice Beato in 1858, at the site of a massacre of 2,000 sepoys by regiments under Sir Colin Campbell's command during the Indian Mutiny the previous year.**



in the curtains: Mirza may not have caught him at it (though he has long since guessed that Meer cheats), but the all-seeing eye has. The sins and frailties of Lucknow, however carefully concealed behind etiquette, will eventually catch up with each citizen, including their King. Not that the British, represented by Outram and Dalhousie, are much better; it is just that they have the self-confidence, or rather the hubris, to cheat openly, rather than in secret.

Most of Ray's films, as he frankly observed on a number of occasions, could be fully appreciated only by someone with insight into both cultures. Yet in 1982 he warned me that

... the cultural gap between East and West is too wide for a handful of films

to reduce it. It can happen only when critics back it up with study on other levels as well. But where is the time, with so many films from other countries to contend with? And where is the compulsion?

*The Chess Players* certainly gains in meaning if one studies the history and forms of artistic expression of the Mughals and their successors, as well as the attitude to those successors epitomized by General Outram in the film when he describes Wajid Ali Shah as a 'frivolous, effeminate, irresponsible, worthless king'. If V. S. Naipaul, himself a great writer of the post-colonial world, is right in comparing Ray with Shakespeare, we can safely predict that people will still be watching *The Chess Players* and

discovering new things in it for very many years to come.

#### FOR FURTHER READING

Rosie Llewellyn-Jones, ed., *Lucknow: City of Illusion* (Prestel, 2006); Frances W. Pritchett, 'The Chess Players: From Premchand to Satyajit Ray', *Journal of South Asian Literature*, summer 1986; Satyajit Ray, *The Chess Players and Other Screenplays* (Faber and Faber, 1989); Andrew Robinson, *Satyajit Ray: The Inner Eye* (2nd edn, I. B. Tauris, 2004); Andrew Robinson (with Nemai Ghosh), *Satyajit Ray: A Vision of Cinema* (I. B. Tauris, 2005); Abdul Halim Sharar, *Lucknow: The Last Phase of an Oriental Culture* (Elek Books, 1975, edited and translated by E. S. Harcourt and Fakhir Hussain).

Andrew Robinson is author of *Satyajit Ray: The Inner Eye* and a visiting fellow of Wolfson College, Cambridge. Artificial Eye released *The Chess Players* on DVD in June.

**Win a DVD of Satyajit Ray's *The Chess Players*.**

We have five copies of the DVD of the film to give away to the first correct answers to the following question. Winners will be drawn on July 27th 2007:

**What was the name of the short story on which Ray based this film?**

Send your answer on a postcard to *Chess Players Competition*, History Today, 20 Old Compton Street, London W1D 4TW.

The DVD of *The Chess Players*, newly released by Artificial Eye, is available from all good retailers including Moviemail: see [www.moviemail-online.co.uk](http://www.moviemail-online.co.uk) tel: 0870 264 9000