My Adventures with Satyajit Ray

THE MAKING OF *SHATRANJ KE KHILARI*

Suresh Jindal

With an Introduction by
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Introduction

'Suresh, every film is like an adventure!'[1]—Satyajit Ray
(while researching *Shatranj Ke Khilari* in Lucknow)

Shatranj Ke Khilari (*The Chess Players*), completed in 1977, was the first adult film about the British Raj in India. Today, after *Gandhi, Heat and Dust, The Jewel in the Crown, A Passage to India, Lagaan* and many other films, Satyajit Ray's film 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, 'It is like a Shakespeare scene. Only 300 words are spoken but goodness!—terrific things happen.'[2]

1. See p. 50.

2. Interview with V.S. Naipaul in 1987, quoted in Andrew Robinson, *Satyajit Ray: The Inner Eye*, 2nd edn, London: I.B. Tauris, 2004, p. 246.

Ray had known Premchand's short story 'Shatranj Ke Khilari' for more than thirty years before he attempted to make a screenplay out of it, after meeting the young producer Suresh Jindal in 1974. Although it had first appeared in print in Hindi in the mid-1920s, Ray read it in English translation in the early 1940s as an art student at Rabindranath Tagore's university in Bengal and was immediately drawn to it for several reasons.

Lucknow, the setting of the story, is one of the most resonant cities in India. Satyajit took holidays there in the late 1920s and 1930s from the age of about eight, staying at first in the house of an uncle, later with other relatives. The uncle, a barrister called Atulprasad Sen, was the most famous Bengali composer of songs after Tagore. His 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 Ali Akbar Khan and the guru of Ravi Shankar). The young Ray listened to him playing the piano and violin, and took in the atmosphere of courtly refinement that was so characteristic of Lucknow. He was also taken to see all the sights that had made Lucknow known as the 'Paris of the East' and the 'Babylon of India' a century before: the great mosque Bara Imambara with its notorious Bhulbhulaiya Maze, the Dilkusha Garden and the remains of the palaces of the Kings of Awadh (Oudh). Nearby he

saw the shell of the British Residency, with the marks of cannonballs still visible on its walls and a marble plaque commemorating the spot where Sir Henry Lawrence had fallen during the Indian Mutiny/Uprising of 1857. Even today these places have a peculiar elegiac aura. The brief allusions to the city and that period in its history in Premchand's story conjured up a host of images and sensations in the twenty-year-old Ray's mind.

By then he was also keenly interested in chess. Over the next ten years or so this became an addiction—the main bond (along with Western classical music) between him and his first English friend, Norman Clare, an RAF serviceman with time on his hands in Calcutta in 1944-46. After this friend was demobbed, Ray found himself without a partner and took to playing solitaire chess. Over the next few years he became engrossed in it and bought books on chess, which he would soon decide to sell to raise money to shoot the pilot footage for his first film, *Pather Panchali*. His passion for chess disappeared only with the onset of a greater passion: film-making.

That came around 1951, after his return to Calcutta from his first visit to Britain. Nearly a quarter of a century passed before Ray tackled the story he had admired as a student. His reluctance was principally due to his doubts about writing a screenplay and working with actors in a language—Urdu, the court language of Lucknow (which is very similar to Hindi, the language of Premchand's

story)—that was not his own. So rich, subtle and lifelike is Ray's usual film dialogue—as Naipaul appreciated from just the portions of *The Chess Players* in English—so nuanced his direction of actors that he feared to work in a language other than Bengali or perhaps English. It was his affection for the story, his discovery of able Urdu collaborators and his awareness of a pool of talented Urdu-speaking actors in Bombay (rather than his usual Calcutta) which eventually gave him confidence. For the first time—excepting his science-fiction project, *The Alien*, and his documentaries—Ray wrote a screenplay in English, which was subsequently translated into Urdu. During production, he spoke English to his producer Jindal, the actors and his Urdu collaborators. Although his Hindi was serviceable, Ray characteristically avoided speaking in Hindi. 'He doesn't like to do anything unless he's really good at it,' Shama Zaidi, his chief collaborator in the writing of the screenplay, remarked.

Her role in the film began early on, about two years before Ray completed the first draft of the screenplay in June 1976. Ray's art director Bansi Chandragupta introduced Zaidi to Ray in 1974. He was just beginning to get to grips with his research for the film—which makes it one of the longest pre-production periods of any Ray film (during which he made another film, *Jana Aranya* [*The Middle Man*]). It is not hard to see why: not only had Ray taken on the re-creation of an entire culture that

was not his own, he was also having to confront his own ambivalence towards the British Raj and, in particular, the contradictions of King Wajid Ali Shah, one of the most bizarre monarchs in a land of eccentric rulers.

Since Ray has regularly been condemned for failing to make his own attitude to the Indian and British sides clear in *Shatranj Ke Khilari*—notably in a long attack on the film for accepting the British view of Wajid Ali Shah as being 'effete and effeminate',[3] published in the *Illustrated Weekly of India*, to which Ray responded at length—it is worth detailing the principal sources he consulted in his research in India and, later, in the India Office Library in London. Some of them pop up in his wonderfully detailed and revealing letters to Suresh Jindal that form the spine of *My Adventures with Satyajit Ray*, a compellingly readable, honest and touching memoir of a great artist in the throes of creation. 'Ray was a tireless and outstanding researcher,'[4] notes Jindal. 'Just accompanying him to his meetings with scholars, academicians, experts and specialists in music, art, architecture and military history was an amazing experience and taught me a great deal.'

Ray listed his sources in his reply to the attack as follows, adding his own comments on their significance,

3. Rajbans Khanna, 'Ray's Wajid Ali Shah', the *Illustrated Weekly of India*, Bombay, 22 October 1978, p. 49.

4. See p. 47.

which are reproduced here along with my own remarks in square brackets:

1. *Blue Book on Oude.*[5] This is the official British dossier on the Annexation. It contains, among other things, a verbatim account of Outram's last interview with Wajid, and describes Wajid's taking off his turban and handing it to Outram as a parting gesture.
2. Abdul Halim Sharar's *Guzeshta Lucknow* (translated into English by E.S. Harcourt and Fakhir Hussain as *Lucknow: The Last Phase of an Oriental Culture*). Sharar was born three years after Wajid's deposition [in 1856]. His father worked in the Secretariat of Wajid's court and joined Wajid [in exile in Calcutta] in 1862. Sharar went and joined his father seven years later. Introducing the book, the translators say: 'The work has long been recognised by Indo-Islamic scholars as a primary source of great value, a unique document both alive and authentic in every detail.' Sharar provided most of the socio-cultural details, as well as a fairly extended portrait of Wajid, both in his Lucknow and

5. Satyajit Ray, 'My Wajid Ali Shah is not "Effete and Effeminate"!', the *Illustrated Weekly of India*, Bombay, 31 December 1978, p. 50.

his Calcutta periods. [Luckily for Ray this wonderful book appeared in English just in time to be of use to him.]

3. The Indian histories of Mill and Beveridge, both critical of the Annexation.
4. Two histories of the Mutiny (by Ball and by Kaye).
5. *The Letters of Lord Dalhousie*. One of these letters provided the information that Outram grumbled about the new treaty and apprehended that Wajid would refuse to sign it. Dalhousie ascribes this attitude to indigestion [an idea that Ray has Outram specifically reject when talking to Dr Fayrer in the film].
6. *The Reminiscences of Sir Alexander Fayrer*. Fayrer was the Resident Surgeon, Honorary Assistant Resident and Postmaster of Lucknow at the time of the takeover.
7. Two biographies of Outram (by Trotter and by Goldschmid).
8. The diaries and letters of Emily Eden, Fanny Eden, Bishop Heber and Fanny Parkes.
9. *The Indian Mutiny Diary* by Howard Russell. Russell came to India as the correspondent of the *Times*. He was on the spot when the British troops ransacked the Kaiserbagh Palace. He

gives the only detailed description of the interior of the palace that I have come across.

10. The young Wajid's personal diary *Mahal Khana Shahi*. This turned out to be an unending account of his amours. [Some think it spurious, but Shama Zaidi did not.]
11. The text of Wajid Ali Shah's *Rahas* [the play he wrote about Krishna that he briefly performs at the beginning of the film].
12. Mrs Meer Hasan Ali's *On the Mussulmans of India* (1832). This was found useful for its details of life in the zenana.
13. *Umrao Jan Ada* (translated into English as *A Courtesan of Lucknow*). This gives a fascinating and authentic picture of Lucknow in Wajid's time.
14. All English and Bengali newspapers and journals of the period preserved in the National Library [in Calcutta].
15. I was also in close touch throughout with Professor Kaukabh of Aligarh University. Professor Kaukabh happens to be a great-grandson of Wajid Ali Shah and is considered to be one of the best authorities in India on Wajid.

In trying to assimilate this array of historical and cultural information with Premchand's story to make a screenplay,

Ray faced certain formidable difficulties. First came the widespread ignorance of the facts of the relationship between Britain and Awadh in the century leading up to the Annexation—in India as much as elsewhere—to which the film's ten-minute prologue seemed the only solution. Second, there was the fact that chess is not inherently dramatic on screen. Third was the need to portray the king sympathetically. Finally, an overall tone had to be found that was in harmony with the pleasure-loving decadence of Lucknow, without seeming to condone it.

The third of these difficulties almost persuaded Ray to abandon the film. He felt a strong, Outram-like aversion for Wajid Ali Shah, the more he knew about his debauches. Jindal, Zaidi and the actor Saeed Jaffrey at one time received letters from him declaring his doubts about whether he could portray the king successfully. When Zaidi wrote to Ray offering to translate Wajid's diary (in which he very explicitly describes his sex life from the age of eight) and his letters from Calcutta to his wife in Lucknow, Ray replied, Shama recalled with amusement, 'Don't tell me all this because then I'll dislike him even more.'[6]

It was Wajid's genuine musical gifts that reconciled Ray to the rest of the king's character. As depicted in

6. Andrew Robinson, *Satyajit Ray: The Inner Eye*, 2nd edn, London: I.B. Tauris, 2004, p. 242.

the film's screenplay, the king was a ruler capable of admonishing his tearful prime minister (whom he had first come to know at the house of a courtesan) by saying: 'Nothing but poetry and music should bring tears to a man's eyes.' One is reminded perhaps of another Ray protagonist—the fossilized nobleman-aesthete in *Jalsaghar* (*The Music Room*), who lives only for music. As Ray said, 'The fact that the king was a great patron of music was one redeeming feature about him. But that came after long months of study, of the nawabs, of Lucknow and everything.'[7]

This became the key that unlocked the character of Outram, too. Among the copious extracts from the sources Ray consulted that are carefully noted down in his bulky shooting notebooks for *Shatranj Ke Khilari*, one comes across this character sketch of Outram with quotes from Goldschmid's biography:

1. Refused to benefit from conquest of Sind [in which campaign Outram had been in command in 1843].
2. Disliked pettifogging ceremony.
3. 'his manner natural and gracious; his speech is marked by a slight hesitation when choosing a word, but it is singularly correct and forcible; and his smile is very genial and sympathetic.'

7. Andrew Robinson, *Satyajit Ray: The Inner Eye*, 2nd edn, London: I.B. Tauris, 2004, p. 242–3.

4. 'His quaint humour'; a good anecdotist.
5. 'he greatly appreciated music of a touching character. Sacred music, always his preference.'

From this description, and knowing the universal dislike of Indian music by the British, one can easily imagine Outram failing signally to comprehend Wajid Ali Shah's—'our fat King's'—gifts as a composer, whilst seeing only too plainly his faults as a ruler. Indian 'impracticality' and Indian love of the inessential—as Outram sees it—baffle and irritate him as they have baffled and irritated the West from the beginning of its encounter with India. But Outram also finds Wajid Ali Shah intriguing. The scene in which he interrogates his Urdu-speaking aide-de-camp, Captain Weston, about the king's doings demonstrates Ray's insight into the nature of cultural friction with exquisite skill, suggesting clearly (but never explicitly) the intimate links between nationalism, racialism and lack of imagination.

In Outram's utilitarian superior Lord Dalhousie, the Governor-General in Calcutta, the hauteur is palpable. The confident, mocking tone of Dalhousie's letters suggested to Ray not only the ironic tone of the film but also, quite directly, the sequence of cartoons in the prologue of the film explaining how the British steadily deprived the rulers of Lucknow of money, land and power while preserving their formal status. Dalhousie

was responsible for the annexation of several Indian states before Awadh. In one of his letters—quoted in the film—he refers to Wajid Ali Shah sardonically as 'the wretch in Lucknow'[8] and to Awadh as 'a cherry which will drop into our mouths some day'. Ray immediately decided to depict this literally in the film by showing a cartoon English sahib knocking the crowns off cherries and popping them into his mouth. Although the cartoons are brasher than one would like—one of the few slightly false notes in the film—they are an imaginative and amusing expression of the lack of imagination with which the East India Company generally treated the Indians it ruled: like pawns to be manipulated in a game of chess.

Ray counterpoints this lack with the very different failings of the two chess players, so wrapped up in their games that they barely understand the political game being played with their futures. It took him months of pondering to satisfy himself that such a counterpoint would work on screen. The obstacle, as he told Jindal in an almost despairing letter in April 1976, is that 'the moment you got down to the business of showing the [chess] game, silence and inaction would descend upon the screen—with what consequences you may well imagine'.[9] To Jaffrey he wrote in May: 'If it had been

8. James Dalhousie, *Private Letters of the Marquess of Dalhousie*, edited by J.G.A. Baird, Edinburgh: William Blackwood, 1910, p. 169.

9. See p. 55.

gambling, there would have been no problem. But the beauty of the story lies in the parallel that Premchand draws between the game and the moves of the crafty Raj leading to the "capture" of the king.'[10]

His solution calls to mind two of Ray's earlier films about obsession: *Jalsaghar* (*The Music Room*) and *Devi* (*The Goddess*). In each case, he stresses the human element, without ever losing sight of the object of obsession. Just as it is not essential to be familiar with Indian classical singing or Kali worship (though it is a big advantage with *Devi*) when watching these films, one need have no knowledge of chess to appreciate *Shatranj Ke Khilari*.

However, Ray was no doubt greatly assisted by his former passion for the game in building on Premchand's basic conceit. Deftly, he found a hundred ways on screen to express Meer's and Mirza's utter absorption in their private world, enriching his theme so naturally and imperceptibly that its final impact defies analysis. All of his best films have been like this: *Pather Panchali*, *The Postmaster*, *Charulata*, *Aranyer Din Ratri* (*Days and Nights in the Forest*), *Asani Sanket* (*Distant Thunder*), to name some of them. He had grasped the importance of this way of constructing a film as far back as 1950 after watching Vittorio de Sica's *The Bicycle Thief* and a hundred

10. Andrew Robinson, *Satyajit Ray: The Inner Eye*, 2nd edn, London: I.B. Tauris, 2004, p. 245.

other films in London, when he wrote to his friend Bansi Chandragupta in Calcutta (then assisting Eugene Lourié in Jean Renoir's *The River*), as follows:

> 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.[11]

Ray's theme in *Shatranj Ke Khilari* 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 the theme is oblique and complex. It is not at first apparent, for example, what Mirza's ignorance of his wife's dissatisfaction with him may have to do with Outram's intention to annex Awadh; but by the end the link is clear, when Mirza's cuckolded friend

11. Marie Seton, *Satyajit Ray: Portrait of a Director*, 2nd edn, London: Dobson, 1978, p. 165.

Meer remarks to him with comic pathos in their village hideaway: 'We can't even cope with our wives, so how we can cope with the Company's army?' This is the moment in the film where Ray intends the two interwoven stories to become one, the moment of truth where all the pieces in the puzzle fall magically into place. Rather than the shattering revelation of the ending of *Charulata*—where Bhupati suddenly perceives his complete failure to understand his wife—the ending of *Shatranj Ke Khilari* recalls Ashim's deflation by Aparna at the end of *Aranyer Din Ratri*. Though painful, it is also funny, made bearable for Meer and Mirza by their continuing affection for each other.

Neither of these films has much story as such. Yet, the entire Indo-Muslim culture of Lucknow is suggested in *Shatranj Ke Khilari*, rather as Jean Renoir suggests French bourgeois society between the wars in *La Règle du Jeu*. Music and dance figure prominently, since it is important for us to grasp their highly regarded position in Wajid Ali Shah's world. His decision finally to renounce his throne without a fight is communicated to his courtiers not through mere words but through a musical couplet: a thumri of the kind made famous by Wajid, in fact his most famous thumri in India today (of which Ray knew a variation as a boy in Calcutta):

Jab chhorh chaley Lakhnau nagari
Kaho haal adam par kya guzeri...

Which may be roughly translated as:

When we left Lucknow,
See what befell us…

On the printed page in English translation it may lack impact, but when sung by Amjad Khan in a hesitant voice, husky with emotion, it is moving.

In the later stages of making and releasing *Shatranj Ke Khilari*—so frankly recounted by Jindal, including his near-withdrawal from the film after a painful dispute with Ray—Ray must sometimes have felt the thumri could apply to him too:

When I left Bengal,
See what befell me…

After Herculean efforts to film the East India Company troops arriving in Lucknow—in the midsummer heat of Jaipur, because only there could the necessary Indian army horses be made available—Ray managed to get the film finished by September 1977. But when it was shown to prospective Indian distributors, five of them withdrew their support, apparently dissatisfied with the classical nature of the film's songs and dances and its use of high-flown Urdu: they had obviously been anticipating more razzmatazz. 'Mr Ray has made the film for a foreign

audience'[12] was the comment Ray passed on to Jaffrey rather gloomily in a letter at the end of October. But he knew that the film had also received an excellent response at a screening in Bombay. So good, rumour has it that it made some of the big guns in the Bombay film industry conspire to prevent the film from getting a proper release in India. The language of *Shatranj Ke Khilari* being Hindi/Urdu, rather than Ray's usual Bengali, and the presence of Bombay stars (Amjad Khan and Sanjeev Kumar in particular) may have provoked fears of their own song-and-dance products being undermined. In India, the film 'was off to a rough start in terms of release and general acceptance',[13] writes Jindal, remembering his own frustrations and despondency at this time.

Most Indians probably expected a more full-blooded treatment of the Raj in the manner of Richard Attenborough's (later) *Gandhi*; Ray's restraint and irony towards both sides did not please them. The hostile critic in the *Illustrated Weekly* complained that the film gave no sense of the way that discontent over the 1856 Annexation helped to bring about the 1857 Uprising. Rajbans Khanna wrote: 'Study the records of this period and you realise how glaring is Satyajit's failure in giving us a picture of a placid and uneventful Lucknow in which his characters move about like lifeless dummies in an

12. Andrew Robinson, *Satyajit Ray: The Inner Eye*, 2nd edn, London: I.B. Tauris, 2004, p. 250.

13. See p. 135.

empty shadowplay.'[14]

Abroad, the film had a warm reception, though not by any means as warm as for much of Ray's earlier work. Probably the most perceptive comment came from Tim Radford in the *Guardian*: 'Satyajit Ray seems to be able to achieve more and more with less and less.'[15] Most Western critics, however, found the film slow, and many found it mannered; also, like most Indians, too bloodless for their taste. Vincent Canby in the *New York Times* was perhaps typical in writing that, '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.'[16]

Neither East nor West seemed quite satisfied with *Shatranj Ke Khilari*. Both wanted Ray to have painted his canvas in bolder colours. Yet, as he pointed out at the time,

> the condemnation *is* there, ultimately, but the process of arriving at it is different. I was portraying two negative forces, feudalism and

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14. Rajbans Khanna, 'Ray's Wajid Ali Shah', the *Illustrated Weekly of India*, Bombay, 22 October 1978, p. 53.

15. Tim Radford, 'A Kingdom in Pawn', *Guardian*, London, 18 January 1979.

16. Vincent Canby, 'Ray Satirizes Indian Nobility', the *New York Times*, New York, 17 May 1978.

> 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 sides. You have to read this film between the lines.[17]

Most of Ray's films—as he quietly but frankly observed on a number of occasions—can be fully appreciated only by someone with insight into Indian *and* Western culture. 'I'm thankful for the fact that ... I'm familiar with both cultures and it gives me a very much stronger footing as a film-maker,' Ray told me in 1982 when I was researching his biography.[18] *Shatranj Ke Khilari* undoubtedly gains in meaning if one studies the history and forms of artistic expression of the Mughals and their successors in Lucknow, as well as the attitude to those successors epitomized by General Outram when he lambasts Wajid as 'a frivolous, irresponsible, worthless king'. If Naipaul, a Nobel laureate and one of the great writers of our time, is right in comparing Ray with Shakespeare, one may safely predict that people will still be watching this unique film and discovering new things in it, for very many years to come.

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17. Andrew Robinson, *Satyajit Ray: The Inner Eye*, 2nd edn, London: I.B. Tauris, 2004, p. 251.

18. Andrew Robinson, *Satyajit Ray: The Inner Eye*, 2nd edn, London: I.B. Tauris, 2004, p. 240.