



A CENTURY OF RAY

A truly singular and multi-faceted personality, Satyajit Ray (1921-1992) 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. A tribute in the maestro's centenary year.

IN 1987, WHILE RESEARCHING MY BIOGRAPHY *Satyajit Ray: The Inner Eye*, I received a letter from the American film director John Huston. In 1954, on a visit to India in search of film locations, in Calcutta Huston saw some silent rough cut of Ray's first film, *Pather Panchali*—including Apu and Durga's first sight of a steam train—shown to him by the unknown novice Bengali director. Huston told me: "I recognised the footage as the work of a great film-maker. I liked Ray enormously on first encounter. Everything he did and said supported my feelings on viewing the film." Huston recommended the film to New York's Museum of Modern Art, which staged the world premiere of *Pather Panchali* in 1955—and thereby launched Ray's film-making career.

Earlier this year, while preparing the third edition of my biography to commemorate Ray's birth centenary in 2021, I received another striking message from a leading American film director, Martin Scorsese, who has been watching Ray's films since the early 1960s before he became a film-maker. Scorsese wrote: "When I saw *Pather Panchali* for the first time, it opened my eyes to the lives of the people who had historically been placed in the background of Western movies. That alone was meaningful. But it never would have had the impact that

SATYAJIT RAY with his kheror khata, a red-bound notebook he used for storyboarding, for 'Shatranj ke Khilari' (1977) in a mustard field near Lucknow.

it did without Ray's extraordinary artistry. Whenever I take a fresh look at *The Music Room* or *Charulata* or any number of his other films, which I do often, I see another value, another dimension of feeling. His body of work has become increasingly precious to me over time. The films of Satyajit Ray are truly treasures of cinema, and every-one with an interest in film needs to see them."

Having received the first published copy of my new edition in September, I gave a talk on Ray before a public screening of *Pather Panchali* in London—my first visit to a cinema since the beginning of the pandemic—and was reminded of the truth of what Huston and Scorsese had written. Each time I watch the finest of Ray's films, they reveal new facets.

Consider the very end of the film, when the hitherto passive boy Apu takes the first major decision of his life. He finds a cobwebbed necklace hidden in a coconut shell on a high shelf of his half-ruined home. In the novel *Pather Panchali* by Bibhutibhusan Bandopadhyay, Apu is described as "lost in thought". In the film—to the accompaniment of urgent drumming on the soundtrack—we see Apu quickly pick up the dusty necklace from the floor, glance towards the door to see if either of his parents or any of the visiting neighbours or village elders has seen it, run out of the house through a gap in a wall, and with barely a pause, hurl the incriminating evidence into a nearby pond. As the necklace plops into the water, briefly disturbing the pondweed like an eye opening and closing, there is a reaction shot, a close-up of



COURTESY: SANDIP RAY

THE ICONIC SCENE in 'Pather Panchali' where Apu and Durga run to see a steam-powered train through a field of kash flowers. The motif of the train, as a link between the contrasting worlds of the village and the city and as a metaphor for movement, travel and change, links the three films of the Apu Trilogy.

Apu's face with an inscrutable expression, which lasts a few moments. Then the film moves on to its inexorable conclusion: Apu and family's departure from their village forever. When I once asked Ray how he would describe Apu's state of mind at this moment, he replied: "It's very complicated. He certainly doesn't want anyone else to know." But is he hiding the knowledge from himself too, I persisted. "Yes. Because obviously he knows that his sister Durga had actually stolen the necklace. He probably thinks it's a shame that she did it. But then ... I cannot describe the state of mind really—it's much too complicated. Essentially cinematic."

"I have a feeling that the really crucial moments in a film should be wordless," Ray said on another occasion, while discussing the wordless ending of *Charulata*, which he regarded as probably his finest film. If one thinks of *Pather Panchali*, this dictum is true. When a scene could have been played out conventionally through dialogue, Ray preferred to find a telling countenance, gesture, movement or sound to express the emotions more dramatically. The first awakening of Apu by Durga; the sweet-seller's procession reflected upside-down in a village pond; old Indir's rejection by Apu's silent mother Sarbajaya; the children's first sight of the steam train; the solitary corpse of Indir in the forest discovered by Apu and Durga; the monsoon downpour in which Durga dances; the breakdown of Sarbajaya and her husband Harihar after Durga's death; Apu's disposal of the stolen necklace—they are all made the more memorable for being wordless. What makes *Pather Panchali* a great film is, finally, that it speaks to us—whether we are Indians, Europeans, Americans, Japanese or whoever—not primarily through its plot, dialogue or ideas, but through

its apparently inevitable current of ineffable images. No wonder the film director Akira Kurosawa commented: "Not to have seen the cinema of Ray means existing in the world without seeing the sun or the moon."

Richard Attenborough, actor and film director, was another Ray aficionado. In 1991, Ray's seventieth birthday, Attenborough—by then celebrated for directing *Gandhi* in 1982—sent me an eloquent appreciation of Ray. Here it is, taken from a collection of tributes, *Satyajit Ray at 70*, illustrated with classic photographs of Ray by Nemai Ghosh admired by the immortal photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson:

"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 centenary of



THE HINDU ARCHIVES

STILL FROM 'PATHER PANCHALI'. Apu (Subir Banerjee) watching his mother Sarbajaya throw Durga out of the house after a mortifying accusation of theft by a neighbour. In the film Apu flinches, an effect Ray achieved by standing the boy on a stool and getting his art director to strike the stool with a hammer at the crucial moment.

Ray, does the outside world concur with Attenborough's insider view of Ray? Is he now widely regarded as a 'genius'—a word that Ray himself used for only Charles Chaplin and John Ford in his collection of articles *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 B.C. 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". 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 not a heroic scribbler in the nation, that has not his admirers who think him a great genius," wrote an ironic Addison.



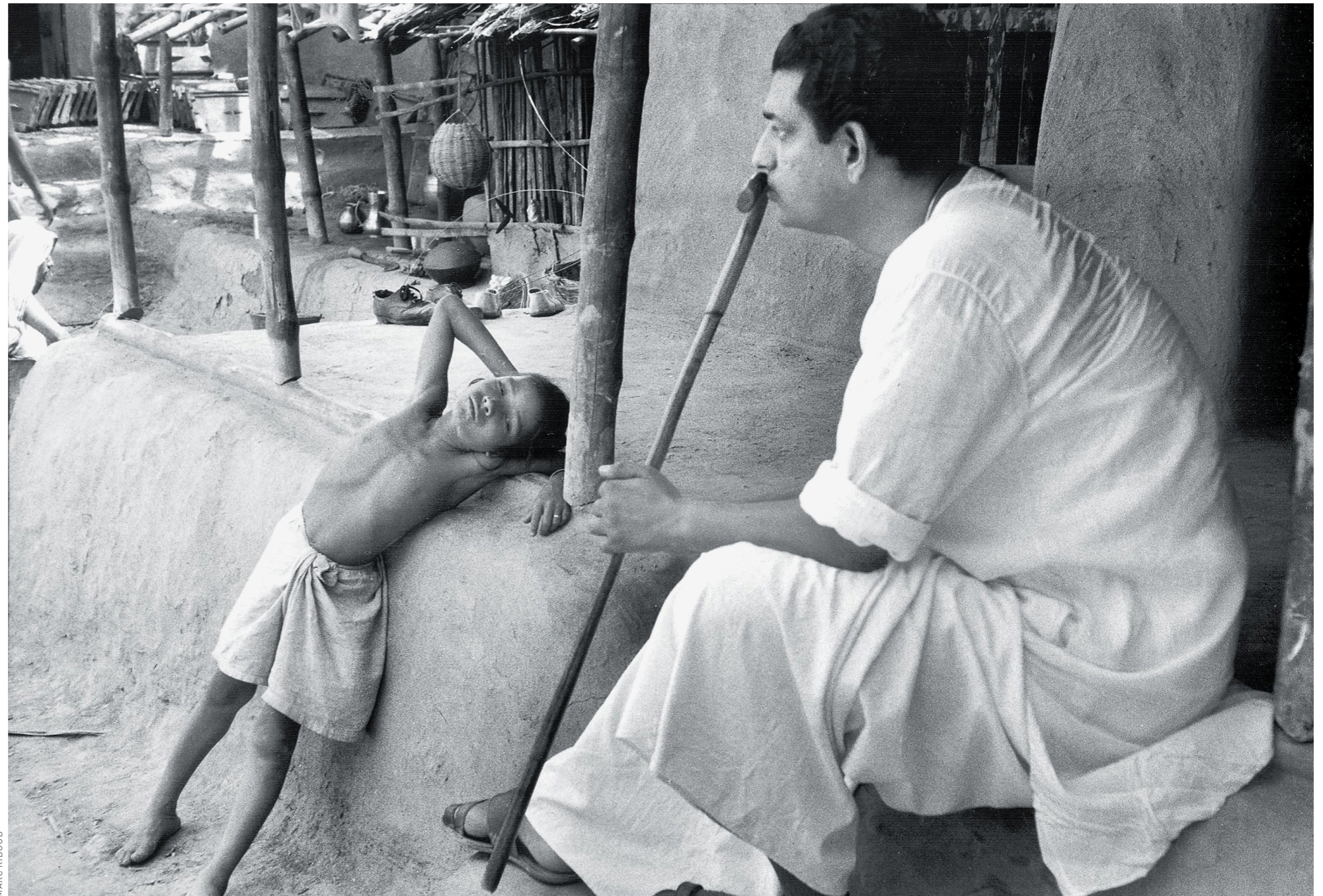
COURTESY: SANDIP RAY

WITH THE JAPANESE FILM-MAKER Akira Kurosawa. "Not to have seen the cinema of Ray means existing in the world without seeing the sun or the moon," Kurosawa famously said.

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



MARC RIBOUD

'photo-biographer' Nemai Ghosh as "a sort of Boswell working with a camera rather than a pen" in his brief preface to *Satyajit Ray at 70*. In any case, Ray's own "collision with a proper subject" was his encounter with the novel *Pather Panchali* by Bibhutibhusan Bandopadhyay, 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*, encountered the total novice Ray and encouraged him to

RAY ON LOCATION for the Bengal village scenes in 'Aparajito' (1956) in a village close to Boral, where 'Pather Panchali' was shot. He carries a stick because he was recovering from a leg injury he had suffered while shooting the early part of the movie in Benares, where he had slipped and fallen on steps leading down to the river.

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." After years of dedicated struggle, *Pather Panchali* finally emerged in 1955 and soon launched Ray's career both in Bengal and internationally.



COURTESY: HARPERCOLLINS



THE HINDU PHOTO ARCHIVES

WITH RICHARD ATTENBOROUGH, who played General Outram in 'Shatranj ke Khilari'. "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," he said of Ray in 1991.

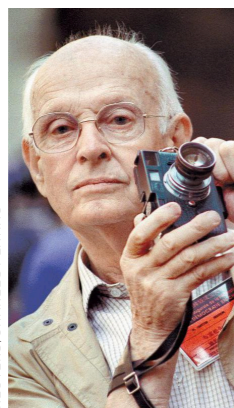
One aspect of genius is universal: this honorific takes decades to become generally awarded after the death of an artist or scientist. In the arts, Johann Sebastian Bach's music was neglected as old-fashioned and churchy after his death in 1750, except by a few composers such as Mozart, until the Bach revival took off in 1829, prompted by a centenary performance of Bach's *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 Indian and international appreciation of his artistic achievements.

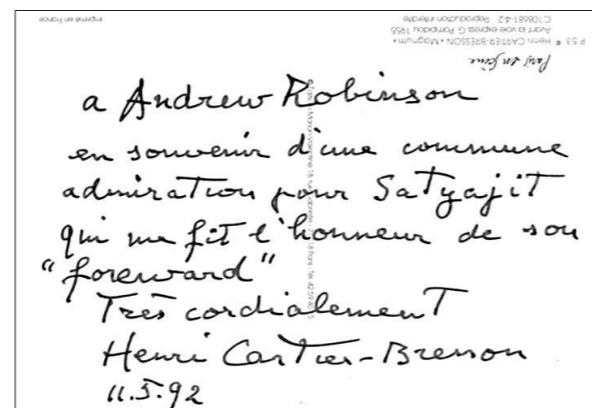
In the first place, Ray's films reflect the sophisticated and subtle fusion of East and West in his upbringing. "I never

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. This inevitably means that some aspects of Ray films are unfamiliar, off-putting and even incomprehensible to audiences in both India and the West (not to mention audiences in other parts of the world), as detailed throughout my biography. For example, Ray makes a pivotal pun on NASA, the U.S. space agency, as *nesa*, the Bengali word for 'addiction', in his script for *The Stranger* (*Agantuk*).

Secondly, the films depict, chiefly, the culture of Bengal. Unlike in colonial times, during the lifetime of Ray's great predecessor Rabindranath Tagore, Bengal



REUTERS/CHARLES PLATIAU



COURTESY: ANDREW ROBINSON

THIS CARD, which Andrew Robinson received from the legendary photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson (left) just after Ray's death, says: "In memory of a shared admiration for Satyajit who did me the honour of his foreword."

STILL FROM 'JALSAGHAR'. Ray's treatment betrays a wistful regret for a fading aristocracy as well as a strong sense of the inevitable finality of its doom.

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. It is no accident that *The Chess Players* made a special impact on Attenborough and the Nobel laureate V.S. Naipaul, who compared this film to a Shakespeare play in an interview with me in 1987. Unlike any other Ray feature film, *The Chess Players* 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 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: well known in India for his Feluda detective stories. Such 'polymathy'—surely unparalleled among film directors from any culture—suffers from a natural tendency to provoke scepticism among professionals (as with Thomas Young), perhaps especially in the increasingly specialised second half of the twentieth century.

Despite the above, as Ray's biographer I would haz-

ard 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 comic musical, *The Adventures of Goopy and Bagha* (*Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne*), will always be relished, too, especially for Ray's inimitable songs, sung at his Calcutta funeral in 1992.

MOZART OF CINEMA

Over seven years of researching and writing my biography of Ray, wherever he 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, including Nobel laureates, who keenly admired Ray's films, such as Attenborough, Naipaul and Scorsese, and Lindsay Anderson, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Arthur C. Clarke, Akira Kurosawa, R.K. Narayan and Amartya Sen. Kurosawa told me: "Mr Ray is a wonderful and respectful man. I feel that he is a 'giant' of the movie industry." 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, actor Gérard Depardieu—who helped to produce Ray's penultimate film, *Branches of the Tree* (*Sakha Prasakha*)—compared Ray's films with Mozart's music. 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*, Ray said, was inspired by his love of the ensemble singing in Mozart's operas. At this time, in 1964, 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, beginning with Apu, Durga and the vivid villagers in *Pather Panchali*. 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. □

Andrew Robinson is the author of *Satyajit Ray: The Inner Eye*, published in a third edition by Bloomsbury Publishing in autumn 2021, and *Genius: A Very Short Introduction*, published by Oxford University Press in 2011.