



**SATYAJIT RAY: THE LANGUAGE OF FILM**

# **The Chess Players** **(Shatranj Ke Khilari)**

*+ pre-recorded intro by Shabana Azmi*

## **Satyajit Ray and Saeed Jaffrey on 'The Chess Players'**

In Bengal, with locations in Lucknow and a final session in the Calcutta studios to come, Ray himself has completed the first stage of shooting on *The Chess Players*, his first Hindi-speaking film: 'Yes, I suppose making my first Hindi film is a significant step. It will certainly reach a very much wider audience, no question, though it will equally certainly not reach the Sholay audience. I've been avoiding this step for such a long time, partly because of the fact that I don't know Hindi well enough to be able to write dialogue, and I always write my own screenplay. I mean, you can do a screenplay, but...

'I did this one in English and then, since I didn't trust the usual Bombay dialogue writers, it was translated by two comparatively unknown people: Shama Zaidi, who also did the costumes, and Javed Siddiqui, who is my assistant on the film, a new assistant since I needed a Hindi-speaking one. Then, after the dialogue was translated, we went over every single line, considering alternatives. By that time I had learned a bit of Hindi – I did have a smattering already, everybody does, but I was worried about nuances, selecting from among several alternative expressions, which I can always do in Bengali very easily. Even during shooting, with the actors, there were little modifications, dropping words, substituting words. Normally this doesn't happen with my films, these days anyway, because the dialogue is written with certain actors and certain actions in mind, so that we work with a finished product and almost no changes are necessary at the time of shooting.'

Based on a Hindi story written by Munshi Premchand some 50 years ago, and set in 1857 during the last days of the Mogul Empire, *The Chess Players* looks (to judge from some exquisite colour slides I saw of the first two weeks on set) like being one of Ray's most lavishly beautiful films, and (to judge from the purrs of contentment from all concerned) one of his happiest productions. It also seems to have evolved under the benevolent influence of what Cocteau would have called a sign.

Nearly 20 years ago, when he was in India mulling over a project to film *The Man Who Would Be King* with Clark Gable, Humphrey Bogart and Cantinflas, John Huston was instrumental in getting Ray's career off the ground by recommending *Pather Panchali* – which he saw in a silent, incomplete rough-cut – for its world premiere at the Museum of Modern Art. When Huston finally made *The Man Who Would Be King* in 1975, the Cantinflas role as the ebullient Gurkha Billy Fish was played by Saeed Jaffrey, an Indian actor whose major disappointment then was his failure to win the role of Anacleto in *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, and his major ambition, to make his first Indian film under Satyajit Ray's direction. Now he is playing one of the leads in *The Chess Players*, his first Indian film.

Jaffrey enthusiastically brackets Huston and Ray as perfect actors' directors: 'What I call gardener directors, who have selected the flowers, know exactly how much light and sun and water the flowers need, and then let them grow. And if the flower has the conscientiousness not to betray the trust of the gardener, then they let you alone to grow in a natural sort of way. All a director like John or Satyajit has to do is just sort of look at you, and you know exactly what he wants.

'Satyajit I found to be more than I'd imagined him to be. He's a man of such wide sympathies, such a gentle, shy person with so many levels – artist, musician, scholar and all the rest – that it's almost frightening. If Huston is a great master of the sweep, the great man of the West with touches of Hemingway and Captain Ahab and little bits of Tagore thrown in. In his latter years there is a kind of mystical quality about him. Ray is very much a man of nuance. Everything he does is toned by a musician's ear.'

Premchand's story is about two Indian noblemen, the Mir and the Mirza (played by Saeed Jaffrey and Sanjeev Kumar), who are so monomaniacally devoted to chess that, after seeking refuge from an irritated wife at one home and an importunate royal recruiting officer at the other, they happily continue their tournament, picnic style, in a ruined mosque on the river-bank. Well aware that the East India Company is in the process of taking the country over by force, but putting off till *mañana* the decision to do anything about it, the two noblemen meanwhile come to mortal blows over their game...

Focusing almost exclusively on the two fanatical chess players, the story is really just an elegant little comic anecdote which might perhaps be interpreted, given Premchand's opening paragraph about the general state of decadence ('It was the time of Wajid Ali Shah. Lucknow was plunged in pleasures'), as a cautionary parable about the reasons why India came under British rule.

Ray: 'Well, that is only partially true about the decadence. Premchand obviously hadn't done all the research we have been able to do; and lots of new facts have come out since the story was written. I have of course elaborated the story, and without giving away any secrets I can tell you that I have established the characters of the two wives, who were very shadowy in the original. The Mir is a cuckold though he doesn't know it, except at the very end; his wife has a lover, which is why she doesn't want him playing chess at home. The Mirza's wife doesn't get irritated just because she has a headache and he won't pay any attention. She interrupts the game because she wants him to make love to her, but he fails because his mind is on chess and says, "I'll prove it to you tomorrow that I love you. Tomorrow I'll finish early."

'The story begins with these characters, then goes into a reel-long exposition of the relationship between the British and the Oudh over the previous hundred years. It develops almost a documentary character, using documents, re-enacted sequences, cartoons, animation, but I think it's important because so few people know the history of this period. It was a relationship based on a kind of friendship on the surface, but the British were fighting their wars, the Oudh happened to be the richest province, and there were constant loans, some of which were never repaid, that sort of thing.

'The King, Wajid Ali Shah, was not born to rule; it was by accident that he ascended the throne. He was by temperament a poet and a musician, who wrote operas and founded the first Hindi theatre, and he made the culture of

Lucknow famous for its elegance. In the early stages he tried to be a good king, reforming this and that, holding daily parades, maintaining the army and so on. Then the Resident suggested that there was no need to do all this: we have our own troops guarding your frontiers, so you be happy, you do what you like doing best. Later the King came to realise what the British were planning, giving him three days to decide whether to sign a treaty of abdication, while the East India Company had decided that, whether he signs or not, we take over. He knew he was a bad ruler, but he was not meant to rule and that was his attitude: "I wish I had never sat on the throne."

'After ten minutes of this, we come back to the chess players, who never meet the King or the Resident, General Outram, or anybody. They *know* about the possibility of takeover, but they don't want to fight; what they're really worried about is whether they'll be able to go on playing chess under British rule. Their entire story, except for the very last scene, which suddenly becomes very moving, I think, is comic. The story of the takeover is quite dramatic, has a different feel, different texture, and they run parallel. There's a thematic link, and the theme emerges eventually as one of non-involvement. But that emerges at the very end. One probably begins to wonder earlier what's going on... this is one story, this is another, but gradually, gradually, I think.'

Jaffrey: 'Our chess games are, on another level, the chess game played between the Resident and the last, so-called profligate King. Actually, Wajid Ali Shah was one of the most colourful characters in Indian history, and there is an ambivalence in the way Satyajit sees the 'decadence' of his reign. In a way Wajid Ali Shah is like Satyajit. I mean, Satyajit doesn't have 32 concubines and so forth. But this man was a sort of embodiment of Krishna, the great lover. He was a man of love, and the people loved him. He used to write poetry, which will be featured in the film. He used to compose songs, which were sung by everybody, by the man in the street. Now, to Outram's slightly, if you will pardon the expression, Scottish puritan upbringing, all this was profligacy (although, again, Outram is not presented as a villain: the beauty of Satyajit is that there are no villains, unless it's society). But this was in fact the flowering of the culture. Because you know Muslim culture lapsed after Aurungzebe, the last great Mogul king, who was a puritan and a tremendous bigot, banned music and any signs of colourful activity, while he himself used to translate the Koran and things like that. But this time, 1856, was the flowering of poetry, the great Urdu poets were born in that age, the great music was written, the Kathak court dances were encouraged, not only encouraged, Wajid Ali Shah was so knowledgeable that he used to teach some of the gurus. All this opulence, this beauty, is there in the film.'

***Sight and Sound, Spring 1977***

THE CHESS PLAYERS (SHATRANJ KE KHILARI)

Director: Satyajit Ray  
Production Company: Devki Chitra Productions  
Producer: Suresh Jindal  
Production Executive: Anil Chowdhury  
Production Manager: Bhanu Ghosh  
Location Manager: J.N. Srivastava  
Production Assistants: Bolai Addy, Trailokya Das  
Special Assistant: Javed Siddiqi  
Assistant Directors: Ramesh Sen, Santi Kumar Chatterji, Sandip Ray  
Screenplay: Satyajit Ray  
Dialogue: Satyajit Ray, Shama Zaidi, Javed Siddiqi  
Based on the story by: Munshi Premchand  
Director of Photography: Soumendu Roy  
Stills Photography: Nemaï Ghosh, Sandip Ray, Sumantra Ghoshal, Pablo Bartholomew  
Graphic Design: Zehra Tyabji  
Associate Graphic Design: Joseph St. Anne  
Animator: Ram Mohan  
Editor: Dulal Dutta  
Assistant Editor: Kashinath Bose  
Art Director: Bansi Chandragupta  
Associate Art Director: Asok Bose  
Backdrops: Kabi Dasgupta  
Costume Designer: Shama Zaidi  
Costume Associates: Rabab Jaffri, Sitara Jaffri, Saba Zaidi  
Wardrobe: Haru Das  
Make-up: Ananta Das  
Assistant Make-up: Pradip Bag  
Music: Satyajit Ray  
Songs Sung by: Reba Muhuri, Birju Maharaj, Calcutta Youth Choir  
Music Recording: Samir Majumdar  
Dance Composition/Choreography: Birju Maharaj  
Sound: Narinder Singh, Samir Majumdar  
Sound Re-recording: Mangesh Desai

Cast

Sanjeev Kumar (Mirza Sajid Ali)  
Saeed Jaffrey (Meer Roshan Ali)  
Amjad Khan (Wajid Ali Shah, Nawab of Oudh)  
Richard Attenborough (General Outram)  
Shabana Azmi (Khurshid)  
Farida Jalal (Nafeesa)  
Veena (Aule Begum, Wajid’s mother)  
David Abraham (Munshi Nandlal)  
Victor Banerjee (Ali Naqi Khan, Prime Minister of Oudh)  
Farooque Shaikh (Aqil)  
Tom Alter (Captain Weston)  
Leela Mishra (Hiria)  
Barry John (Dr Joseph Fayrer)  
Samarth Narain (Kalloo)  
Budho Advani (Imtaiz Hussain)  
Kamu Mukherjee (betting man)  
Amitabh Bachchan (narrator)  
Uttamram Nagar, Khairatilal Lahori, Pradip Shankar, Ashfaq Mirza, Amrit Bhushan Gujral, Ramesh Khosla, Shaik Farid, Madan Sudan, Saswati Sen, Gitanjali, Kathak Ballet Troupe (dancers)

India 1977  
120 mins

Print courtesy of the Academy Film Archive.

Restored by the Satyajit Ray Preservation Project at the Academy Film Archive with funding from the Film Foundation.

To clarify, Teen Kanya / Monihara, The Expedition, The Chess Players, Sikkim, and Two, all screening in the Satyajit Ray season in August, are advertised as restorations from the Academy Film Archive but they are not brand new restorations and are now showing slight signs of wear and tear. We apologise for any disappointment caused.

SATYAJIT RAY  
THE LANGUAGE OF FILM

**The Chess Players (Shatranj Ke Khilari)**  
Tue 23 Aug 18:10 (+ pre-recorded intro by Shabana Azmi); Sun 28 Aug 14:40  
**Satyajit Ray Documentaries**  
**Programme 2**  
Wed 24 Aug 18:20  
**The Home and the World (Ghare Baire)**  
Wed 24 Aug 20:20  
**The Hero (Nayak)**  
Thu 25 Aug 20:40  
**Charulata (The Lonely Wife)**  
Sat 27 Aug 12:00; Wed 31 Aug 20:45  
**Days and Nights in the Forest (Aranyer Din Ratri)**  
Sat 27 Aug 14:40  
**Distant Thunder (Ashani Sanket) + Deliverance (Sadgati)**  
Sat 27 Aug 17:30; Mon 29 Aug 14:40  
**Enemy of the People (Ganashatru)**  
Sun 28 Aug 12:10; Tue 30 Aug 18:15  
(+ intro by Ashvin Devasundaram)

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