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‘THE FRUITS OF INDEPENDENCE’:

SATYAJIT RAY, INDIAN NATIONHOOD AND THE SPECTRE OF EMPIRE

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Satyajit Ray, anti-colonialism, Bengali liberalism, fiction and ideology, politics and film

Abstract

Challenging the longstanding consensus that Satyajit Ray’s work is largely free of ideological concerns and notable only for its humanistic richness, this paper shows with reference to representations of British colonialism and Indian nationhood that Ray’s films and stories are marked deeply and consistently by a distinctively Bengali variety of liberalism. Drawn from an ongoing biographical project, it commences with an overview of the nationalist milieu in which Ray grew up and emphasizes the preoccupation with colonialism and nationalism that marked his earliest, unfilmed scripts. It then shows with case-studies of *Kanchanjangha* (1962), *Charulata* (1964), ‘First Class Kamra’ (‘First-Class Compartment’, 1981), *Pratidwandi* (The Adversary, 1970), *Shatranj ke Khilari* (The Chess Players, 1977), *Agantuk* (The Stranger, 1991) and *Robertsoner Ruby* (Robertson’s Ruby, 1992) how Ray’s mature work continued to combine a strongly anti-colonial viewpoint with a shifting perspective on Indian nationhood and an unequivocal commitment to cultural

cosmopolitanism. Analyzing how Ray articulated his ideological positions through the quintessentially liberal device of complexly staged debates that were apparently free but in fact closed by the scenarist/director on ideologically specific notes, the paper concludes that Ray's reputation as an all-forgiving, 'everybody-has-his-reasons' humanist is based on simplistic or even tendentious readings of his work.

Apart from longstanding complaints from the Indian Left about his 'lack of commitment' and more recent studies showing that his early films reflected and complemented the nation-building project of India's first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru, Satyajit Ray's work continues to be regarded as free of ideological or political concerns.¹ It is rarely appreciated that Ray's unrelenting focus on individuals was not a manifestation of some ill-defined 'humanism' or apolitical individualism but an expression of his liberal ideology. This very Indian and Bengali variety of liberalism – the genealogy of which goes back to Rammohan Roy, traverses the complex history of the Brahmo Samaj and continues at least up to the 1960s – had little to do with such traditional Western liberal concerns as free trade and concentrated on fundamental questions of freedom and responsibility.² For Ray, the ideal society was one where morally and socially responsible individuals could act, think and create unconstrained by political pressures or the irrational imperatives of religious and cultural traditions. The high prominence in Ray's films and stories of mavericks and characters who refuse to fit in stemmed

from his liberal conviction that ‘the seeds of social good stem from individual and even eccentric initiative’.³

Although he kept aloof from conventional party politics of all kinds, Ray once declared: ‘I too am an activist – as an artist. That’s *my way*’.⁴ Ray’s entire oeuvre, this essay argues, is marked by this immanent – and liberal – activism. Ray’s ideology cannot be separated from his narratives – it is fused organically into their apparently ‘humanistic’ texture and seemingly linear diegesis. Whilst a complete analysis of this aspect of Ray’s art must be left for the future, this essay seeks to make a modest start by analyzing Ray’s representations of British colonialism and the idea of Indian nationhood, issues to which he returned repeatedly in his films and stories. Drawn from an ongoing biographical project, the paper commences with an overview of the liberal nationalist family milieu in which Ray grew up and then explores the attempts of the young Ray, outwardly uninvolved in the nationalist upsurge of the era, to address the subjects of colonialism and nationalism in his earliest scripts: ‘Bilamson’, ‘Fossil’ and *Ghare Baire*, all written in the 1940s. I then show with case-studies of *Kanchanjangha* (1962), *Charulata* (1964), ‘First Class Kamra’ (‘First-Class Compartment’, 1981), *Pratidwandi* (The Adversary, 1970), *Shatranj ke Khilari* (The Chess Players, 1977), *Agantuk* (The Stranger, 1991) and *Robertsoner Ruby* (Robertson’s Ruby, 1992) how Ray’s mature work combined a strongly anti-colonial viewpoint with cultural cosmopolitanism and a shifting perspective on Indian nationhood.⁵

The Ray Family and the Indian Nation

Although never at the forefront of nationalist activity and always deeply interested in Western arts and culture, the Ray family, from the days of the

early-twentieth-century *swadeshi* movement to the age of Gandhi and Nehru, was sympathetic to the nationalist mainstream. Satyajit Ray's grandfather Upendrakishore Ray (1863-1915) was politically moderate and loyal to the British Empire. Like other moderates of the early twentieth century, however, he participated in protests against Viceroy Lord Curzon's arbitrary partition of the Bengal Presidency in 1905.⁶ Satyajit's father Sukumar Ray (1887-1923) was outwardly apolitical but he poked fun at colonialism in his early plays, composed at least one song calling for national resurgence and despite complaining about the poor quality of Indian goods in another song composed around the same time, participated loyally in the boycott of imported goods during the *swadeshi* years.⁷ *Sandesh*, the children's magazine founded by Upendrakishore Ray in 1913 and to which all his children and relatives contributed, can be seen as the Ray family's most significant contribution to 'constructive *swadeshi*'. In spite of the imperial loyalty expressed in its early issues – the second number opened with a frontispiece depicting King-Emperor George V and an article (unsigned but probably by Upendrakishore himself) in praise of 'Our Emperor' – the magazine represented a fully indigenous initiative to provide Bengali children with the kind of 'healthy' entertainment and subtle edification that would help them grow into ideal citizens.⁸

Later, in the 1920s, the Ray family ambience became even more overtly nationalistic. Although Rabindranath Tagore did not support Gandhi's call to every Indian to spin cotton at home, many of the Rays took it up enthusiastically. Satyajit Ray recalled that when he was living with his widowed mother at his uncle's house, everybody in the household made cotton thread, and he had been particularly adept at it.⁹ Ray was not to show much

overt interest in political nationalism during his adolescence and early working years and his biographers have remarked on his relative silence on India's independence.¹⁰ That silence did not, however, imply any approval of colonial rule. Ray, who worked in a British-owned advertising agency in the 1940s, got on well with his British bosses but felt it 'anti-national to trumpet the virtues of foreign-made soap, oil and toothpaste'.¹¹ Although he rose to be art director of the agency quite rapidly, he had to share the post with an Englishman, who, he noted with a mixture of amusement and resentment, was a 'shockingly bad artist' but still had a salary that was 'three times as much' as his own.¹² Above all, however, Ray's anti-colonial spirit was expressed in the filmscripts he was writing over the same period.

Before *Pather Panchali*: The Feudal-Colonial Nexus

Ray's first serious script, it is well-known, was based on Rabindranath Tagore's *Ghare Baire* and drafted in 1946.¹³ The film was to be directed by Harisadhan Dasgupta (1923-1996), who had recently returned to Calcutta with some Hollywood experience.¹⁴ Quite a lot of preparatory work was done for the film but the project collapsed when Ray refused to accept changes suggested by the producer.¹⁵ Shortly after this fiasco and before his fateful encounter with Jean Renoir (who would come to Calcutta in 1950 to film *The River*), Ray also wrote scripts of Manik Bandyopadhyay's 'Bilamson' ('Williamson') and Subodh Ghosh's 'Fossil', two starkly anti-colonial stories by communist writers.¹⁶ As Sharmistha Gooptu has shown, Ray's thematic choices broadly paralleled trends in mainstream Bengali cinema and in the 1940s, the Bengali film industry, threatened with marginalization by Hindi films from the Bombay studios, evolved specifically Bengali sub-genres, one of

which was the anti-colonial melodrama. Ray's projects, had they been accomplished, would have pioneered this genre, which came to be represented by films like Hemen Gupta's *Bhuli Nai* (Unforgotten, 1948) or the same director's *Byallish* ('Forty-Two, 1951) set against the backdrop of the Quit India movement.¹⁷

Ghare Baire, with its emphasis on the Hindu communal character of the *swadeshi* movement of 1905-7, was a topical subject for the 1940s, a time when Indian politics had divided sharply along communal lines.¹⁸ Tagore's novel showed how, Nikhilesh, a liberal landowner, opposed the boycott of foreign goods being called for by his friend Sandip because it was inimical to the interests of his poor and largely Muslim tenants but was destroyed by the forces of fanatical nationalism. Ray balanced this critique of nationalism, however, with 'Bilamson' and 'Fossil', both of which portrayed the collusion of British colonialism and Indian feudalism.¹⁹ 'Bilamson', first published in 1943, recounts how the weak-willed Bengali landowner Mahidhar lets his estate be taken over by an Englishman named Stephen F Williamson.²⁰ Williamson shows no compunction in destroying lives and communities in order to build roads and factories and the first person to resist him is the local boy Dhurjati, who organises Mahidhar's tenants against Williamson. Refusing to leave, Williamson goes on a rampage against the villagers and Dhurjati is killed. Mahidhar tries to evict Williamson but the story ends with Williamson plying him with drink and lecturing him on the sacred duty to stick it out for their shared ideals. An allegory representing the establishment and perpetuation of British colonialism in India, the story implies that colonialism endured because, ultimately, the Indian feudal classes colluded with the British.

‘It was’, as Ray outlined the subject later, ‘about an English manager of a zamindar’s estate and described how a spirited youth takes a stand against the manager’s exploitation of poor peasants’. Ray’s one-line summary suggests that his treatment may have included more intense and direct confrontations between Dhurjati and Williamson than in the original story. This surmise is supported by the fact that when Ray read out his script to a potential producer, the latter suggested that at the end of the film, the idealistic young hero should cry ‘Quit India!’ as he confronted the cowering British manager. Ray considered it a crass suggestion but whatever its merits, the fact that it *could* be made indicates that Dhurjati must have survived to the end in Ray’s treatment, which, therefore, may have been more overtly nationalistic than the original.²¹

Subodh Ghosh’s short story ‘Fossil’ (1940), set in the tiny princely state of Anjagarh, is also a parable about the colonial-feudal nexus.²² The king of Anjagarh and his court are benighted and cruel but the new law agent, a Bengali polo-playing idealist called Mukherjee, has grand visions for transforming the state. He develops the mining industry and the king’s treasury overflows with money. Prosperity, however, brings new challenges. The members of the *kurmi* tribe are no longer inclined to be serfs and want to be paid for their services. The mining syndicate, run by British businessmen, accedes to their demands (the mines could not be operated without *kurmi* labour) but the king is appalled by the tribals’ insolence. Eventually, a big mining disaster kills numerous *kurmis* and in a separate incident, the king’s own forces fire on a *kurmi* band for cutting down forest trees without permission, killing nearly two dozen people.

Fearing criticism and press attention, the king and the syndicate join hands to cover up the incidents. Mukherjee turns ashen when he learns of their plan, and the story ends with him watching the corpse of the *kurmi* leader and of those who died in the forest shooting being lowered into the pit where so many *kurmi* labourers had already died in the accident. He imagines a distant future when palaeontologists, examining fossilized bones recovered from that pit – ‘whitish, without any bloodstains’ – would decide that these poor, subhuman creatures must have been buried by some sudden natural catastrophe.²³ The notion that the decadent representatives of feudal India sustained colonialism was central to contemporary communist doctrine and propaganda.²⁴ That Ray, a lifelong liberal, was inspired by it is interesting in itself but it is particularly intriguing that he returned to it, as we shall see later, in a major work of his later years, *Shatranj ke Khilari*.

***Pather Panchali* and Beyond**

None of this interest in colonialism and nationalism, of course, was immediately perceptible in Ray’s celebrated first film, *Pather Panchali* (1955). As we saw earlier, however, critics have seen it, together with the other films of the Apu trilogy, as reflecting and complementing the optimistic Nehruvian vision of a new, progressive India even though the films were set in the 1930s and 40s and despite the ‘complete absence’ in the films of the ‘dams, irrigation projects, and machinery’ that characterized the high hopes of Nehru’s India and which featured prominently in such films as Mehboob Khan’s *Mother India*.²⁵ Nehru was a steadfast supporter of the young film-maker and Ray, on his part, admired Nehru so deeply that he even contemplated making a short film which would help the prime minister raise national morale during the

1962 war with China. This mutual admiration had little to do with such typically Nehruvian projects as state socialism or industrialization, stemming more from the cosmopolitan liberalism that Ray saw in Nehru and the artistic sensibility that he detected in the prime minister's writings.²⁶ As C A Bayly has argued, socialism was not all there was to Nehru's politics: 'Nehru had a delicate understanding of the need for social and religious liberality in his vast and disparate society. It was his liberal, rather than his socialist, political judgement which characterised the Pandit's rule'. And it was this liberal Nehru whom Ray admired.²⁷

Although the documentary on the China war was never made, Ray's affiliation with the Nehruvian ethos was expressed powerfully in *Kanchanjangha* (1962), his first film based on his own story and also his first in colour.²⁸ It told the tale, more or less in real time, of a few hours in the life of a Bengali upper-class family on holiday in Darjeeling, counterposing the old-world values of the elderly magnate Indranath, who cherishes his British title of Rai Bahadur and adores the 'erstwhile rulers', with those of Ashok, a young man from a vastly different social background. The latter is no revolutionary and initially hopes to find a job by cultivating the Rai Bahadur, who promptly subjects him to a discourse on the greatness of British rule. Indranath questions what 'the fruits of independence' will be, although he is glad he has lived to taste them, unlike one of his friends, who, he contemptuously remarks, had participated in the nationalist movement and died in jail. Ashok is so irritated by Indranath's declamations about British greatness that when he finally agrees to give him a job, he turns it down, declaring that he would find one through his 'own effort'.

Although he later claims that it was the unusual ambience of Darjeeling that had infused an uncharacteristic courage into his soul, Ashok's words suggest something more complicated. 'To find a job so easily ... to hell with it!', he exclaims. 'What will be, will be. Let me struggle. No charity! So what if he's the chairman of five companies, so what if he is a Rai Bahadur!' Jobless young males would recur insistently in Ray's films of the 1970s and many of the director's views on the nation would be articulated through or around them. Ashok, however, has none of the detachment of *Pratidwandi's* Siddhartha or the cynicism that Somenath comes to acquire in *Jana Aranya*. Despite the economic difficulties of life in India, the Nehruvian dream, as Ashok all but explicitly declares, still survived for his generation. 'Struggle' would lead to success not simply for Ashok the individual but, it is implied, for his class and his nation, proving Indranath's generation wrong.²⁹

Ben Nyce has rightly observed that *Kanchanjangha* is 'a political statement about post-independence India' but he does not analyze the interesting way in which the statement is articulated.³⁰ The clash of nationalist faith and colonial toadyism is presented as a debate between two generations and two social classes, albeit not entirely as a face to face exchange. Instead of listing the 'fruits of independence', Ashok speaks up for freedom itself, whilst acknowledging the responsibility that came with freedom ('struggle'). Indranath, however, does not get an opportunity to reply – the debate is closed by Ashok's response. This structure was typical of Ray. All his characters, even the least likable, were given ample space and a largely uninhibited voice – this respect for his characters, of course, was largely responsible for Ray's reputation as a 'humanist' who, like Jean Renoir, believed that everyone had his reasons. What the champions of the

'humanistic' Ray tend to overlook, however, is that all reasons weren't necessarily equal in Ray's universe. Certain types of characters and their views, even though freely articulated, were invariably contested within the narrative and refuted directly or by implication. Debates were never left open but closed on specific notes, endorsing one side or another by giving it the last word. Ray's narratives, in short, are all-embracing but they are never all-forgiving.

A Nation in Making?

In 1964, Ray made *Charulata*, which he would always regard as his most perfect film. Based on the novella 'Nashtaneer' by Rabindranath Tagore, the film has been written about extensively.³¹ Its political content, however, has not been appreciated adequately. Set in 1879-80, two years after Queen Victoria was proclaimed as the Empress of India at a grand durbar in Delhi, the film contains a remarkable recreation and critique of nineteenth-century 'moderate' nationalism.³² Much of this is achieved through Ray's radically expanded characterization of Bhupati, the wealthy Bengali intellectual who is so obsessed with his political newspaper that he neglects his young and gifted wife Charu, who falls in love with Bhupati's cousin Amal. In Tagore's original, Bhupati is a bit of a lightweight – there are hardly any references to his politics in the story and the story is mostly about his romantic travails. Ray's Bhupati, however, is a fully fleshed-out liberal – and Liberal: he is a fervent supporter of Gladstone). He hates the label 'idle rich' and seeks to use his wealth to bring about political reform and national improvement.³³ He has no time for literature and declares to Amal that from a national point of view, a new tax represents a greater tragedy than *Romeo and Juliet*. Bhupati is

always ready to criticize the government (which shocks Amal) but he is as loyal to British rule as the great Bengali teacher, politician and journalist Surendranath Banerjea (1848-1925), whose speeches Bhupati adores and on whose paper *The Bengalee* Ray modelled Bhupati's newspaper *The Sentinel*.³⁴ 'To be outspoken', Bhupati tells Amal, 'is not necessarily to be disloyal' but when Amal plays 'God save the Queen' on the piano, he wryly comments that saving the Queen was all very well, but how would the Bengali people be saved? The answer, for Bhupati's generation, is not by ending the Raj but by its continuation in a less despotic and more genuinely British form.³⁵

Bhupati's political mentors are 'Burke, Macaulay, Gladstone' and even though he has never been to Europe, he worships 'France, Germany, Greece, Italy – the land of Mazzini and Garibaldi'. This belief in the providential nature of European rule had also been held by Rammohan Roy (1772-1833), whom Bhupati hails as the 'first and greatest liberal of the nineteenth century' and 'the father of our political consciousness' at a party to celebrate the victory of Gladstone and the Liberals in the British general election of 1880.³⁶ British rule, Rammohan had thought, would benefit Indians by introducing capitalism and bringing about 'improvement in literary, social and political affairs'; for him as well as for his admirers, the quest for Indian nationhood was ultimately a quest for modernity.³⁷ Their nationalism had few real connections with the Indian masses and was largely restricted to the small community of English-educated Indians.³⁸

Ray's engagement with late Victorian nationalism in *Charulata*, Suranjan Ganguly has argued, might have been related to 'Nehru's death the year the film was made. For Ray's generation it marked the end of a dream shaped by a nineteenth-century cultural ethos'.³⁹ But Nehru, of course, was

also a powerful critic of nineteenth-century nationalism. Although he admired the moderates for their ‘advanced social outlook’, he described them as ‘a mere handful on the top with no touch with the masses’ and thinking only ‘in terms of the new upper middle class which they partly represented and which wanted room for expansion’.⁴⁰ This is almost exactly the critique of moderate nationalism that is implicit in *Charulata*. The film even hints at the eventual rise of more radical varieties of nationalism with its references to Bankimchandra Chatterji (1838-1894), the novelist whose complex influence on Indian nationalism has been explored in depth by Tapan Raychaudhuri, Partha Chatterjee, Sudipta Kaviraj and others.⁴¹

In Ray’s film, Bankim is not just Charu’s favourite novelist, but also the author of *Anandamath*, the novel about an eighteenth-century rebellion that contains the famous hymn *Bande Mataram* (Hail, Mother), the song that would become the battle-cry of the early-twentieth-century *swadeshi* movement and, subsequently, of militants, terrorists and Hindu nationalists.⁴² The first words that Amal says to Charu in the film are: ‘Have you read *Anandamath*?’ Later, when Bhupati tries to entice him into marriage by saying that the prospective father-in-law had offered to send him to Britain, he, after rhapsodizing on ‘the land of Shakespeare’, recites a few lines from *Bande Mataram* and declines the offer.⁴³ No critic, to my knowledge, has noticed that these allusions to *Anandamath*, completely absent from Tagore’s story, are blatantly anachronistic for a film set so firmly in 1879-80. Bankim’s novel was serialized in his magazine *Bangadarsan* from March 1881 to June 1882 and published as a book in December 1882.⁴⁴ Given the care with which Ray had researched the film’s historical background, this is unlikely to have been a simple error. Instead, I would argue, *Anandamath* was brought in

intentionally to indicate that radical alternatives to Bhupati's loyalist nationalism were gestating in Bengali culture.

The association of *Anandamath* with Amal, moreover, is interesting. Tagore as well as Ray deride his literary efforts so thoroughly that it is hard to take him seriously. And yet, Amal genuinely adores Bankimchandra's writings and feels a deep bond with Bengal. Although he opts for marriage, a paid-for trip to Britain and the career of a barrister at the end of the film, he has already revealed his awareness of the racial discrimination that he would experience in England. A Bengali in *Bilet* (England), he says in the course of a game of alliteration with Charu, would be treated as a *black native* and come *back to Bengal baap-baap boley* (with tail between his legs). The Indian viewer would also be aware that whilst many barristers lived lives of prosperous conformity, a whole generation of Indian nationalists, including Gandhi and Nehru, had also trained as barristers in Britain. So, Amal's future remains entirely open and we cannot decide whether or not his passion for Bankim and his chanting of *Bande Mataram* presages a later, serious involvement with some nationalist creed far more radical than Bhupati's.

Counterposed to these two men, of course, is Charu who has no political interest and whose love for literature has no English referent. When she tries to write, she first tries to imitate Amal's florid style, just as her husband models his political activities on British exemplars. Unlike Bhupati, however, Charu is far from satisfied with the results and turns ultimately to write about the people and places she has herself known. The people Charu envisions in a reverie – presented as a montage of pastoral scenes of rural Bengal – just before she sits down to write her piece would never be seen at a party hosted by Bhupati. Her piece entitled 'My Village' is accepted by an elite

journal that published the work of new writers so rarely that Amal had decided not to send any of his essays to it. ‘The source of Charu’s creativity’, Suranjan Ganguly has remarked, ‘becomes the point of convergence where thought, memory, and emotion all come together’. This convergence does not simply pull her ever more deeply into her own self. It also enables her to reach into the heart of the nation, represented by her village and its very ordinary residents.⁴⁵ In short, Charu resolves what Partha Chatterjee has claimed was the greatest tension ‘in *all* nationalist thought’ – the tension between ‘the modern’ and ‘the national’ – by using the modern vernacular print culture to connect with and represent *her* people, the unmodern masses of rural India. Although Charu’s literary success is used as a lens to reveal the flaws in Amal’s approach to literature as well as Bhupati’s idea of nationalism, the critique does not proceed by debate, as in *Kanchanjangha*, but by narrative intertwining and analogy. The structure of the narrative compels viewers to contrast Charu’s originality with the ‘derivative discourse’ of Bhupati and Amal.

Before the emergence of Gandhian mass nationalism, Partha Chatterjee has argued, the only real alternative to the deracinated modernism of the moderates was ‘religious-communal’ nationalism.⁴⁶ Ray’s representation does not acknowledge this. Apart from a few images of a *charak* festival, Charu’s reverie ignores the explicitly religious and it is surely noteworthy that Tagore’s title for her piece, ‘Kalitala’ (The Kali Temple), is changed by Ray to ‘Amar Gram’ (‘My Village’) in the film. Similarly, when Amal quotes from Bankimchandra’s *Bande Mataram*, all religious and idolatrous references are quietly omitted – just the three words *sujalang*, *suphalang*, *sashyashyamalang* (‘rich in waters, rich in fruit ... verdant with the harvest

fair’) are used to indicate his attachment to Bengal.⁴⁷ Ray’s Nehruvian sensibility, in other words, is perceptible not only in his critique of Bhupati’s Eurocentric nationalism but in the ‘secularization’ of the battle-cry of its future opponents. A similar expurgation, as we know, preceded the approval of *Bande Mataram* as a national song by the Indian National Congress in 1937. On the advice of Rabindranath Tagore, a committee that included Jawaharlal Nehru decided that only the first two stanzas of the song would be acceptable to Muslims and other monotheists.⁴⁸

So far, so Nehruvian – but *Charulata* also moves beyond the progressivism and developmentalism espoused by the Nehru generation. The sylvan images of her village that flit through Charu’s mind do not suggest an economically battered colony in desperate need of Nehruvian ‘development’, nor the infinite poverty which, for Bhupati’s generation, could only be remedied by industrialization and the cultivation of European modernity. The nation Charu connects with is not one that, to use Surendranath Banerjea’s phrase, is ‘in making’ – it already exists in all its eternal plenitude. Here Ray is even more Tagorean than Tagore himself was in ‘Nashtaneer’. As Dipesh Chakrabarty has shown, Tagore never ignored the actual deprivation and squalor that was to be found in the Bengali village. Nevertheless, he also believed that something transcendental lay beyond the objective and historical condition of those villages: if one had the eyes to see and the sensitivity to experience it, one could ‘pierce the veil of the real’ and perceive the eternal soul of *sonar Bangla* (golden Bengal). The images that glide through Charu’s mind and into her essay in Ray’s film are not just one individual’s memories: they are visions of the eternal and eternally nurturing nation lying beyond ordinary perception.⁴⁹

A Nation in Disarray

It has often been noted that Ray's Nehruvian faith in progress, reason and the nation crumbled over the second half of his career. These were the years when the political liberalism, relatively honest administration and national optimism of the Nehru years came to be replaced by pervasive corruption in government, economic stagnation, industrial unrest, violent political clashes in Bengal between the Naxalites (as the Maoists of that period were known) and their political adversaries from the left as well as the right, a huge influx of refugees from the erstwhile East Pakistan in 1971 and a general lowering of the quality of life all over the nation that could not be obscured by Indira Gandhi's increasingly strident socialist rhetoric. In the words of Sunil Khilnani, 'intellectuals outside the government slumped into despair or catatonia' during this period: 'The sense of a "crisis" was everywhere: India's original project seemed to have fallen into corruption and degeneration'.⁵⁰ It was against this bleak backdrop that Ray entered into a remarkable new phase of his career, charting, from the end of the 1960s, 'the moral and spiritual collapse of the new urban India ... and the death of a whole cultural ethos' in films like *Aranyer Din-Ratri* (Days and Nights in the Forest, 1969), *Pratidwandi* (The Adversary, 1970), *Seemabaddha* (Company Limited, 1971) and *Jana Aranya* (The Middleman, 1975).⁵¹ The dark themes, unpleasant characters and sardonic humour of this series nonplussed admirers of the old, serene Ray. 'How does one explain the change in Satyajit?', wondered the leftist poet Samar Sen after seeing *Jana Aranya*, whilst other voices lamented Ray's failure to commit himself to revolutionary socialism, which, for them, represented the only rational solution for the Indian malaise.⁵²

Some forty years later, these films remain little-known in comparison to Ray's earlier works and scholars are just beginning to grapple seriously with them.⁵³ All four are key texts for any study of Ray's evolving views on the Indian nation but *Pratidwandi* is the most immediately relevant to the present essay. Based on a novel by Sunil Gangopadhyay, the film charts the experiences of Siddhartha, a young, introspective and unemployed graduate. Its most striking sequences are of job interviews. One of them, coming early in the film, is at a Government of India office, where three officials grill Siddhartha entirely in English. One interviewer, speaking in a clipped Oxbridge accent, asks: 'Who was the prime minister of England at the time of independence?' 'Whose independence, sir?', responds Siddhartha. That slight stress on the 'whose' encapsulates the whole sense of disillusionment with the Indian nation that Ray would express in the 1970s. (Can one imagine Ashok of *Kanchanjangha* speaking in such a way?) But what really upsets the interviewers is Siddhartha's claim that the war in Vietnam, not the moon-landing, is the most significant event of the last decade. The latter, the young man explains, was 'a remarkable achievement' but far from unpredictable. The Vietnam war, however, had revealed an 'extraordinary power of resistance' that nobody had expected from the Vietnamese people. 'This isn't a matter of technology – it's just plain human courage and it takes your breath away'.

The chair of the interview panel now asks *the* obvious question: 'Are you a communist?' Siddhartha's reply that one did not need to be a communist to admire Vietnamese resistance is obviously not adequate and he is asked to leave.⁵⁴ The viewer, however, is convinced in the next scene that Siddhartha is not a communist. Sitting despondently at a tea shop after the

interview, Siddhartha is accosted by an old political friend who reminds him of his activism during his college-days and asks him to come and work for ‘the party’ again. Entirely uninterested, Siddhartha turns his face away and the acquaintance’s soothing baritone voice is drowned out by Siddhartha’s angry thoughts.⁵⁵ The third ideological option available to him – mainstream Indian nationalism – is excluded immediately after this encounter. Slinking into one of the fashionable ‘English’ cinemas of central Calcutta, Siddhartha is confronted with a government newsreel showing images of a smiling Indira Gandhi and proclaiming the greatness of the 1970-71 budget and simply closes his eyes and settles down for a snooze.⁵⁶ But politics cannot be excluded so easily. As was often the case in Calcutta then, a bomb, planted by Maoists or their adversaries, goes off within the cinema and along with everybody else, the drowsy Siddhartha rushes out on to the street. In the melee, his watch falls from his wrist and stops. He takes it to a repair shop and is told that the balance wheel is broken.

The broken watch sums up the lack of fit between Siddhartha, his nation, his age and his city.⁵⁷ Apart from his obvious disillusionment with the different brands of politics, he is also shocked by the ease with which his old friends have succumbed to various degrees of immorality and how his own sister is ready to sell out to whatever capitalist opportunities are available. Virtually nothing about present-day India or Calcutta appeals to him and when he sees a group of American hippies marvelling over a cow and imagining India to be some spiritual haven, he can scarcely hide his disbelief. Pushed into a corner by his own personality and his society, Siddhartha ultimately breaks free by doing something so self-destructive that he has to leave Calcutta and the woman he has just fallen in love with. An ambiguous

ending, combining a Hindu funeral chant with the call of a mysterious bird that Siddhartha had heard in childhood and has been looking for throughout the film, suggests that he may well have recovered his soul but only by sacrificing his worldly prospects and personal happiness. In this India, 'struggle' had no meaning and the fruits of independence, it seemed, were as sour as Indranath had feared they would be.

Spectres of the Raj

Despite his deepening doubts about the Indian nation, Ray's anti-colonial attitude never weakened significantly.⁵⁸ This is often more evident in his stories. In a 1987 science-fiction tale, for instance, the protagonist Professor Shonku has just developed a computerized device that can communicate with spirits. The first spirit he summons is of Siraj-ud-Daula, the last independent Nawab of Bengal, and the only question the spirit is asked concerns the Black Hole incident. Did Siraj really order the inevitable death of so many British people by imprisoning them in a tiny room? The spirit of Siraj replies unequivocally that he hadn't known anything about the incident and the British had concocted the story simply to discredit him. 'Spirits do not lie', writes a relieved Shonku in his diary, 'and it was a great vindication'.⁵⁹

The Raj is often presented in Ray's stories through ghosts but the story I want to discuss in detail, 'First Class Kamra' (First Class Compartment), is only seemingly a ghost story.⁶⁰ A rich man called Ranjan Kundu, travelling by train from Raipur in Central India to his hometown Calcutta in 1970, is delighted that by some miracle, he has got a spacious, British-era first-class compartment. A fervent Anglophile like the Rai Bahadur of *Kanchanjanga*, Kundu resents the disappearance of these old luxuries in independent India

and we hear much about his views on the decline of India since the departure of the British. Calcutta was now a mess – the telephones didn't work, the public transport was unbearably crowded and life had become nasty and brutish. Returning after a visit to London, Kundu had exclaimed, 'the British know how to live, know the value of a well-regulated lifestyle, know what civic sense means'.⁶¹ No wonder, then, that Kundu is delighted to get his Raj-era compartment and to add to his pleasure, he can travel in lordly solitude because his friend, Pulakesh Sarkar, who was supposed to accompany him, cannot ultimately come. In sheer joy, he simply strolls around the compartment for a few minutes and then, having finished a rather Bengali supper of *luchi* and vegetables (whilst sighing for the chicken curry, rice and custard pudding that used to be served by the railway caterers in British days), he curls up with a book and drifts off to sleep.

Waking up when the train stops at a station, Kundu is startled to find another passenger in the compartment. Bathed in the dim glow of the blue reading lamp, a white man sat in the berth facing him, drinking whisky. The moment he notices Kundu, he barks: 'You there! Get out and leave me alone! I refuse to travel with a nigger'. Kundu had never fully believed stories of British mistreatment of Indians during the Raj and he finds it incredible that he was being called a nigger by an Englishman on Indian soil in 1970. But maybe, he thinks, it was only because the man was drunk, and calmly points out to him that India had been independent for twenty-five years and Englishmen were now expected to address Indians politely.⁶² Exploding in laughter, his co-passenger asks when India became free. Upon hearing the date, he whips out a revolver and, introducing himself as Major Davenport, rages: 'You're not just a nigger, you're insane. Do you know what year this is?

1932. That loincloth-clad leader of yours is trying to cause trouble, but no matter how much you lot dream of independence, it will never become reality'.⁶³

Cowering in a corner, Kundu muses that if only his hot-tempered, patriotic friend Pulakesh had been with him, he would surely have taught this crazy Englishman a lesson, gun or no gun. He also recalls a story he had heard long ago of an army man, also named Major Davenport, who, in the days of the Raj, had actually been killed by a 'native' whom he had tried to evict from his compartment. But Kundu lacks that kind of courage and finds himself promising Davenport that he will get out at the next station. Davenport drinks on, occasionally muttering 'dirty nigger, dirty nigger', but Kundu, exhausted by the encounter and inured to the abuse, dozes off. When he wakes, it's daytime and the compartment is empty. Kundu breathes a deep sigh of relief, assuming that his tormentor had been a ghost – maybe of that same Davenport who had been killed years ago, perhaps in that very same compartment.

Returning to Calcutta, Kundu keeps mum about his terrifying experience but his friends gradually notice that he had lost much of his fondness for the British Raj. Ten years go by and finally, one evening Kundu tells his patriotic friend Pulakesh about the incident. The latter reveals with a chuckle that the whole thing had been a practical joke conceived to liberate Kundu from his delusions about the British. Upon seeing the old first-class compartment and also recalling the story of Major Davenport, Pulakesh had immediately thought of the trick and claiming to be unable to travel with his friend, had got into the adjoining compartment. The moustache had been a bit of cotton wool from his first-aid box, the whisky was borrowed from a

fellow-passenger and the gun was a toy belonging to that passenger's child. The rest, he says, was done by the dim blue light and Kundu's imagination.⁶⁴ Once again, the narrator is as apparently neutral as the narrator of *Kanchanjangha*. Kundu's reasons for missing the Raj are far from irrational and listed without the slightest sarcasm. The nationalist side, represented by Pulakesh Sarkar, wins the debate not by listing the 'fruits of independence' but by physically staging a particular aspect of life during the Raj. The practical joke demonstrates that one does not need to evaluate the achievements of independent India to oppose the Raj: all the clean cities or firm governance in the world cannot make up for the absence of freedom and dignity.

Beyond Mainstream Nationalism

Despite such statements on colonialism, Ray, during this period, could not regain his old Nehruvian faith in the nation. Nor, however, could he find a better alternative until his very last film *Agantuk* (The Stranger, 1991).⁶⁵ The film was based on one of Ray's own stories for children, albeit greatly expanded and embellished.⁶⁶ A mysterious man suddenly visits a middle-class Bengali family, claiming to be an uncle who had disappeared long ago. Having travelled the world and made a reputation as an anthropologist, he has now returned home for a brief halt before moving on again. Unsure about his identity and motivations, his relatives treat him with suspicion and after an unpleasant confrontation with a family friend, the uncle goes away to Santiniketan, where he is followed by his embarrassed relatives. They find him, not in Tagore's university, nor in the middle-class neighbourhoods around the university, but in a nearby village, consorting with Santal tribals and drinking their home-brewed liquor, *hanriya*. Instead of expatiating on

the simplicity or the primitive charm of the tribals, he lectures his niece and her husband on their patriotism. The ultimate distinction of the Santals, for him, is that they fought the British long before anybody else in India. The allusion, of course, is to the great 'Santal Rebellion' of 1855-56 against oppressive and corrupt Hindu (usually Bengali) moneylenders and traders but also, subsidiarily, the British government.⁶⁷

Although the Santal insurrection was far from exclusively anti-British and pervaded, moreover, by millenarian and supernatural elements that Ray would have disdained in his early years, the anthropologist uncle is convinced that it was India's first war of independence. Although supposedly 'uncivilized', the santals' patriotism was worth far more to him than the modernist nationalism of urban Indians. As Prathama Banerjee has demonstrated, the Santals have traditionally been used by the Bengali middle classes as 'primitive' foils against whom they have constructed their self-image as 'advanced', an image that was in part born of their own subjugation by the even more 'advanced' British.⁶⁸ In his final film, Ray sought to dismantle this 'politics of time', portraying the 'primitives', who had gained the least from the creation of the modern Indian state, as the earliest and most genuine patriots, whilst 'civilized' Calcuttans were presented as shallow, smug and narrow-minded.⁶⁹ Interestingly, the Santals were not portrayed in *Agantuk* with any of the eroticized exoticism so characteristic of modernist primitivism and which, indeed, had been prominent in Ray's own earlier film *Aranyer Din-Ratri*.

There was a whole new tendency in Ray's final film to question the value of 'civilization', 'science' and 'progress' that revealed how far the director had outgrown his early Nehruvian tendencies. Had he, however, moved

beyond Rabindranath Tagore, to whom he was supposedly linked by profound intellectual, ideological and emotional bonds?⁷⁰ The very theme of the film – the meaning and value of civilization – echoes Tagore’s famous address on the occasion of his eightieth birthday, ‘Sabhhyatar Sankat’ (Crisis in Civilization) but the Tagoreanism of *Agantuk* is not the conventional Tagoreanism of the Bengali middle classes.⁷¹ The climactic scenes of the film occur *near* Santiniketan but not in it, and its protagonists are the Santals, not the refined Bengalis who come to study at Tagore’s university or the aging Calcuttans who come to spend their retirement near it. At the end of his career, the denizens of the poverty-stricken villages of tribal India seemed to Ray to be better representatives of Tagorean values than the comfortable bourgeoisie of Calcutta, or, for that matter, the power-brokers of Delhi.

But on the fundamental point of Indian independence, Ray remained unmoved and he became increasingly bitter in his final years about the contemporary West’s pornographic interest in Indian poverty. This bitterness was probably reinforced by allegations by film-star Nargis Dutt and others in the 1980s that Ray had built his international career by peddling images of Indian poverty. Ray’s response to this controversy involved making as stark a film on Indian poverty and social oppression as *Sadgati* (Deliverance, 1981) and simultaneously opposing Western, neo-colonial attempts to exploit those same subjects.⁷² It is well-known, for instance, that Ray opposed the film *City of Joy* (1992), which, directed by Roland Joffé and based on a Dominique Lapierre novel, depicted the brutalization of the poor in Calcutta.⁷³ Such Western attempts to ‘sell’ Indian poverty were at the heart of *Robertsoner Ruby* (Robertson’s Ruby), Ray’s final story about detective Prodosh Chandra Mitra (known to all as Feluda), which was published posthumously in 1992.

Feluda, his cousin Tapes (Topshe) and the mystery writer Lalmohan Ganguly, are on their way to Birbhum for a vacation and run into two British friends who have come to visit India. One, Peter Robertson, has come to India to return an enormous ruby that an ancestor of his had looted from a nawab's palace during the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857. His friend, Tom Maxwell, is a photographer descended from an indigo-planter who, in the nineteenth century, had owned a factory near today's Santiniketan and whose brutality toward Indians was legendary at the time.

In the course of conversation, Feluda finds that whilst Robertson genuinely likes India, Maxwell is interested only in the country's poverty. 'Poverty', he declares, 'is more photogenic than prosperity'.⁷⁴ In Birbhum, he almost gets into trouble with some rough youths when, without seeking anybody's permission, he tries to take photographs of corpses being cremated. He is saved by Feluda but when a police inspector warns him to be more respectful of Indian customs, Maxwell furiously responds:

In these two days, I have seen how backward your country is. You haven't progressed an inch in these forty-five years. You still plough your fields with bullocks, human beings pull rickshaws in a city like Calcutta, entire families live on the pavements – you call these civilized? You may want to hide these things from the world but I am not going to play along. I shall expose the reality of independent India with my photographs.⁷⁵

Not cowed by Maxwell's rant, the inspector responds: 'Aren't you going to note the many areas in which our nation *has* progressed?' The list he goes on to provide is naïve, even banal. 'We are capable of building spacecraft', asserts the inspector. 'You must have noticed the profusion of consumer goods being

made in our country. Clothes, medicines, cosmetics, electronic equipment – India is producing it all. Why do you want to see only the poverty? Is there nothing deserving of criticism in *your* country?’⁷⁶

But Maxwell is not to be persuaded. ‘Don’t compare the two’, he fumes. ‘India’s independence is a hoax. I shall prove that with my camera. You need to be ruled today exactly in the ways our forefathers ruled you fifty years ago’. On a hot night, Maxwell tells the inspector, his great-great grandfather had woken up in a sweat, discovering that his punkah-puller had fallen asleep on the job. The servant was duly kicked to death and this, says the younger Maxwell, was the right way to treat Indians.⁷⁷ Further on in the story, Maxwell is beaten up and the ruby, which was in his keeping, is stolen – it was the inspector who turns out to have been responsible. It is also revealed that the servant killed by Maxwell’s ancestor had been the inspector’s own great-grandfather. Having uncovered it all, Feluda does not, however, pursue the case. In a significant departure from the strict moral norms that Ray always maintained in his detective stories, Feluda tells the inspector: ‘I would have done the same in your situation ... you are innocent’.⁷⁸

Whether in *Kanchanjangha* or in ‘First Class Kamra’, the debates did not turn on what free India had achieved or failed to achieve; they turned on the unconditional value of freedom. Ray’s stance in those works remind one of what the one-time revolutionary M N Roy had written in 1950: ‘Freedom is not an instrumental value. It is not a means to something; it is an end in itself’.⁷⁹ By the time of *Agantuk* and *Robertsoner Ruby*, however, Ray was trying to evolve a new rhetoric that would retain his old anti-colonialism but be more specifically rooted in the reality of independent India. That quest for a new rhetoric, however, led Ray to a defence of the achievements of the

Indian state in *Robertsoner Ruby*, which, apart from being banal, was far from compatible with the reconsideration of patriotism, modernity and nationalism in his last film.

‘Critical Openness’ and National Improvement

Ray’s consistently anti-colonial stance never interfered with his cultural cosmopolitanism or his readiness to criticize various aspects of indigenous life and culture. He never saw much worth emulating in Indian cinema, for instance, and often declared that he had learnt much more from the work of European and American filmmakers.⁸⁰ This was entirely in line with family tradition. Upendrakishore as well as Sukumar Ray had supported the *swadeshi* movement but rejected the idea that Indian artists should practise a *swadeshi* art that eschewed European naturalism. The rules of art, they argued, were universal and particular styles did not belong exclusively to particular nations or races. Sukumar Ray declared that ‘true artists created art to satisfy their inner artistic compulsion, not to produce “Indian art”, “Greek art”, etc’.⁸¹ Indians had every right to practise naturalistic, supposedly Western art – indeed, it was a national duty to learn from Western techniques when they were genuinely superior.⁸²

This cultural cosmopolitanism has often been misinterpreted as simple anglophilia. Ashis Nandy, for example, has declared that the Rays were ‘proud of their British connection’ and ‘played the civilizing role demanded of them by the modern institutions introduced by the Raj into the country’.⁸³ The cosmopolitanism of the Ray family, although capacious, was far more rooted in an Indian identity than Nandy appreciates.⁸⁴ As Upendrakishore had put it, he felt a ‘legitimate and affectionate pride in all that is noble in our national

life and tradition' but he was also filled with 'sincere regret for our shortcomings and eagerness to remove them'. It was his self-critical and self-improving impulse that drove Upendrakishore to 'advocate the study of European art as a means of improving the art of my country'.⁸⁵ Satyajit Ray would not have dissented from this view and this 'critical openness', as Amartya Sen has pointed out, was also characteristic of Rabindranath Tagore. They were opposed to the 'serious asymmetry of power' involved in colonial rule but were always eager to embrace useful or valuable aspects of Western culture.⁸⁶

Also, Satyajit Ray recognized that individuals differed. The unpleasant British characters in his stories were usually balanced by an example or two of their decent and humane compatriots. There was a Peter Robertson for most Tom Maxwells. This individualism could even lead Ray to portray a colonialist with some sympathy, as with the conscience-stricken figure of General James Outram in *Shatranj ke Khilari*. But despite the humanizing touches, Outram as well as Nawab Wajid Ali Shah, whose kingdom of Awadh Governor General Lord Dalhousie was intent on grabbing, *both* represented negative forces for Ray. In this respect, his views had not changed significantly over the years since 'Bilamson' and 'Fossil'. Despite Wajid and Outram being portrayed with sympathy in *Shatranj*, neither was considered to represent a progressive tendency. Nor were the two chess-playing noblemen who refused to get involved in the political tussle between Wajid and the Company. The only spark of patriotism was seen in the peasant boy Kalloo, who lamented that the British had been allowed to annex Awadh without a single shot being fired and who, as critic Ujjal Chakraborty has rightly pointed out, seems to hold 'the seed of the Great Indian Mutiny inside him'.⁸⁷

‘I was portraying two negative forces, feudalism and colonialism’, Ray explained when he was accused by critics of being soft on colonialism in *Shatranj*. ‘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’.⁸⁸ This remark illuminates not only the characterizations in one particular film but a key feature of Ray’s style, especially where ideological questions are involved. Ray populated his films and stories with rounded characters who were given the freedom to speak freely to the viewer or reader, but, as in *Kanchanjanga* or ‘First Class Kamra’, this liberty did not undermine the overall ideological stance of the work. Debates and conflicts abound in Ray’s corpus but those exchanges are not left open-ended. One side is always endorsed, albeit not necessarily to the accompaniment of fanfare, and when colonialism is in question, it is invariably the anti-colonial side. And the anti-colonial side, for Ray, is usually also the anti-feudal and, later in his career, the anti-bourgeois side. It is wholly inaccurate to argue, as so many commentators have done over the years, that Ray refused to ‘take sides either with characters or ideologies’. Some sixty years after *Pather Panchali*, it is time for critics to reassess Ray’s work without relying on such simplistic, inadequate and even tendentious formulations.⁸⁹

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NOTES

All translations from Bengali are mine, unless otherwise attributed.

¹ On the Nehruvian connection, see Suranjan Ganguly, *Satyajit Ray: In Search of the Modern*, 4; Kapur, *When was Modernism*, 204; Madhava Prasad, *Ideology of the Hindi Film*, 160-161; Rajadhyaksha, 'Satyajit Ray', 682; and Sengoopta, "The Universal Film for All of Us". For samples of older leftist laments about Ray's lack of commitment, see Basu and Dasgupta (Ed.), *Film Polemics*; and Ghosh and Roy (Ed.), *Satyajit Ray: Bhinna Chokhhey*. The recent monograph by Keya Ganguly, *Cinema, Emergence, and the Films of Satyajit Ray* analyzes the role of broadly ideological issues such as modernity, objectification or alienation in a selection of Ray's films without relating them to specific historical or biographical aspects.

² As Chris Bayly has recently pointed out, 'Indian liberals espoused sentiments of both negative and positive liberty. On the negative side, they demanded freedom from despotic and racist colonial rule. Within their own society, they strove, with varying degrees of commitment, for liberty from oppressive religious hierarchy and the corruptions of polygamy and idolatry. On the other hand, Indian liberals espoused a positive vision of liberty different from many of their Western contemporaries, in that they rapidly came to call for government intervention in society to promote economic development, justice, social equality and public health. They wanted to build a 'public' or, in today's terminology, a civil society. They wished to improve society by promoting education and the enlightenment of women, though not to the extent that this led to "licence"' (Bayly, *Recovering Liberties*). Ray's work has little to say on government intervention but all the other themes in Bayly's

outline are prominent in his films and writings. My thanks to Professor Bayly for allowing me to use this excerpt from his manuscript. See also Bayly, 'Liberalism at Large'.

³ Uday Singh Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire*, 4.

⁴ *Satyajit Ray: Interviews*, ed. Bert Cardullo, 141.

⁵ Although space constraints preclude discussion of some relevant films – such as the documentary *Rabindranath Tagore* (1961) or the feature *Ashani Sanket* (Distant Thunder, 1973) – the essay emphasizes the importance of Ray's literary works, relatively little-known outside Bengal, to any study of Ray's ideological standpoint. Ray wrote two short stories (in English) when he was a student in Santiniketan in the early 1940s and began to write regularly in Bengali only when he revived the family magazine *Sandesh* in 1961. He was to write numerous novellas and short stories, including two very popular series of detective and science-fiction tales. Apart from Ashis Nandy's well-known article, 'Satyajit Ray's Secret Guide', and a recent postcolonial analysis of Ray's detective stories (Mathur, 'Holmes's Indian Reincarnation'), there are few analytical studies of Ray's literary corpus. Robinson, *Satyajit Ray: The Inner Eye*; and Banerjee, *Satyajit Ray: Beyond the Frame* both restrict themselves to somewhat descriptive overviews, and Biswas, *Bangla Sahitye Satyajit Ray*; Gupta, *Satyajiter Sahitya* and *Satyajiter Galpa*, are even less ambitious. Saroj Bandyopadhyay, 'The Literary Works of Satyajit Ray' is marginally more useful.

⁶ Siddhartha Ghosh, 'Upendrakishore: Shilpi o Karigar', 88-91. On the political context, see Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal* and

for the role of moderate nationalists, Gordon, *Bengal: The Nationalist Movement*, 1-100.

⁷ See Majumdar, *Aar Konokhaney*, 51; Chakrabarti, *Chhelebelar Dinguili*, 118, 120; and Majumdar, *Upendrakishore*, 78.

⁸ Majumdar, *Aar Konokhaney*, 106. For the article on George V, see 'Amader Samrat'.

⁹ Ray, *Jakhhan Chhoto Chhilam*, 31; interview with Michel Ciment (1978), in Ciment, *Film World*, 286. The Gandhian call was also heeded in Ray's aunt Leela Majumdar's household. See Majumdar, *Pakdandi*, 145-46.

¹⁰ He told his British biographer Marie Seton of his happiness that independence 'came in our lifetime' but it was not a topic on which he was ever effusive. When his second British biographer Andrew Robinson asked him what he was doing on August 15, 1947, he found that he 'had absolutely no recollection'. See Seton, *Portrait of a Director*, 49; and Robinson, *Satyajit Ray: The Inner Eye*, 63.

¹¹ A L Mukhopadhyay, 'Action!', 232-33.

¹² Robinson, *Satyajit Ray: The Inner Eye*, 56.

¹³ Seton, *Portrait of a Director*, 51-53, and Robinson, *Satyajit Ray: The Inner Eye*, 66-67.

¹⁴ Dasgupta had served as an apprentice-observer with director Irving Pichel (1891-1954) and had come to know several important figures, including Jean Renoir. See Roy (ed.), *Chalachchitra, Manush o Harisadhan Dasgupta*, 150.

¹⁵ Ray, *My Years with Apu*, 19; Robinson, *Satyajit Ray: The Inner Eye*, 67; Harisadhan Dasgupta, 'Amar Bandhhu'; and Mukhopadhyay, 'Ghare Baire: Chhabi Tairir Nepathhya Kahini'. Ray did, of course, film *Ghare Baire* almost

four decades later, but not from his old script. Finding it ‘pitifully superficial and Hollywoodish’, he wrote a completely new screenplay. See Ray, ‘Education of a Film-Maker’, 86; Robinson, *Satyajit Ray: The Inner Eye*, 263-73; and Keya Ganguly, *Cinema, Emergence, and the Films of Satyajit Ray*, 32-62.

¹⁶ Ray’s well-known thematic diversity was evident, however, even during this early phase. Apart from the scripts mentioned in the text, he also wrote a screenplay for a spectacular, swashbuckling romance based on Saradindu Bandyopadhyay’s *Jhhinder Bandi* (The Prisoner of Jhhind, 1938), a novel inspired by Anthony Hope’s *Prisoner of Zenda* (1894) but with a wish-fulfilling conclusion replacing Hope’s tragic ending. See Saradindu Bandyopadhyay, *Jhhinder Bandi*, in *Saradindu-Omnibus*, 9: 1-111.

¹⁷ See Gooptu, *Bengali Cinema*, 134-36.

¹⁸ Tagore’s novel, first serialized in 1915, is available in *Rabindra Rachanabali*, 4: 469-593. For a selection of analytical studies on the novel, see P K Datta (ed.), *Rabindranath Tagore’s ‘The Home and the World’*. On the communal tenor of Bengali politics from the 1930s onward, see Joya Chatterji, *Bengal Divided*.

¹⁹ Ray’s biographers mention these projects very fleetingly. Seton (*Portrait*, 50-51) does not name ‘Fossil’ and Robinson (*Satyajit Ray: The Inner Eye*, 64) does not give the title of either story.

²⁰ For the story, see Bandyopadhyay, *Rachanasamagra*, 4: 263-69. Manik Bandyopadhyay (1908-1956) joined the Communist Party only in 1944 but he had long been interested in Marxism. For an overview of his life and work, see Nitai Basu, *Manik Bandyopadhyayer Samaj-Jijnasa*.

²¹ Ray, *My Years with Apu*, 20-21.

²² 'Fossil', first published in 1940 in the communist magazine *Arani*, is reprinted in Ghosh, *Galpa Sangraha*, 2: 24-36. On Ghosh's life and work, see Sudipkumar Chakrabarty, *Chhotogalper Subodh Ghosh*; and Sibsankar Pal, *Subodh Ghosher Chhotogalpe Manabik Mulyabodh*. Ray had been inspired to write his script when he heard that Bimal Roy, then one of Bengal's best-known film directors, had decided to film the story. Ray even went to meet Roy with his script but was kept waiting for so long that he left. Bimal Roy's film, titled *Anjagarh*, was produced by Calcutta's New Theatres studio and released in 1948 in Bengali and Hindi versions. See Bhattacharya, *Bimal Roy: A Man of Silence*, 44-45, 102.

²³ Ghosh, 'Fossil', 34-36.

²⁴ Pal, *Subodh Ghosher Chhotogalpe Manabik Mulyabodh*, 98-99.

²⁵ See Sartori, *Bengal in Global Concept History*, 1.

²⁶ On Ray's admiration for Nehru, see Ray, 'Silpi-Daradi Jawaharlal'; and Cardullo (ed.), *Satyajit Ray: Interviews*, 50. On the proposal to make a short film for the government, see Seton, *Panditji*, 324; *Portrait of a Director*, 236; and Som, *Satyajit Kathha*, 58-59.

²⁷ Cited with permission from the conclusion of Bayly's forthcoming work, *Recovering Liberties*.

²⁸ For an overview, see Robinson, *Satyajit Ray: The Inner Eye*, 136-43. For recent scholarly analyses, see Suman Ghosh, 'Ray's Musical Narratives: Studying the Screenplay of *Kanchenjunga*', in Biswas (ed.), *Apu and After*, 116-39; and Reena Dube, 'Work, Play and Linguistic Hybridity'.

²⁹ In Ray's slightly later film *Mahanagar* (The Big City, 1963), an ordinary middle-class woman's attempt to find work and meaning outside the home, ends in disaster but Ray tacks on an ending in which the heroine declares that no matter how bleak things looked at the moment, life in such a large city, with all its opportunities and resources, was bound to work out somehow. The original story by Narendranath Mitra had ended, as Ray himself told Marie Seton, on a totally pessimistic note. 'Ray, being an optimist, changed the ending so as to suggest there is hope', recorded Seton (*Portrait*, 235). That sense of socio-economic possibility in modern, urban India, as Suranjan Ganguly and Sunil Khilnani have argued, was quintessential to Indian nationalism and especially to Nehru's version of it. See S Ganguly, *Satyajit Ray: In Search of the Modern*, 113-14; Khilnani, *The Idea of India*, 107-149.

³⁰ Ben Nyce, *Satyajit Ray*, 76.

³¹ 'Nashtaneer', first published in 1901, is available in *Rabindra Rachanabali*, 11: 382-416. Amongst the many studies of *Charulata*, see Seton, *Portrait*, 153-60; Robinson, *Satyajit Ray: The Inner Eye*, 156-69; Chidananda Das Gupta, *Cinema of Satyajit Ray*, 80-84; and Keya Ganguly, *Cinema, Emergence, and the Films of Satyajit Ray*, 63-91. Suranjan Ganguly, *Satyajit Ray: In Search for the Modern*, 55-83, is alone in appreciating the importance of the political elements in the film. Regrettably, Gaurav Majumdar, *Migrant Form: Anti-Colonial Aesthetics in Joyce, Rushdie and Ray*, was not available to me at the time of writing this paper.

³² On the characteristics of 'moderate' nationalism, see Seth, 'Rewriting Histories of Nationalism'; and Argov, *Moderates and Extremists*. These studies concentrate on the early years of the Indian National Congress, which

was established in 1885; *Charulata* is set in a period when ‘Indian’ nationalism was even more regional and pursued mainly through provincial bodies like the Indian Association, which was founded by Surendranath Banerjea. See Seal, *Emergence of Indian Nationalism*, 194-244; Mehrotra, *Emergence of the Indian National Congress*, 146-229; and Gordon, *Bengal: The Nationalist Movement*, 15-37.

³³ The source of Bhupati’s wealth is never identified in the film or in Tagore’s novella. The absence of any references to landed property or business interests and the strongly liberal tenor of his politics suggest a social position distant from the old aristocracy as well as from the world of contemporary trade but one cannot infer much more from the information provided.

³⁴ Ray explained this in a 1970 interview – see Ray, *Nijer Aynaye Satyajit*, 22-23.

³⁵ As Surendranath Banerjea would proclaim in 1895, ‘England is our political guide and our moral preceptor in the exalted sphere of political duty’. India’s salvation lay in wholesale modernization, industrialization and liberalization on a British model. See Banerjea, *Speeches*, 5 (1896): 1-86, at 82-83, 85.

³⁶ Imperial affairs played a significant role in that election; the Disraeli administration’s misadventures in South Africa and Afghanistan greatly aided Gladstone’s victory. See Hoppen, *Mid-Victorian Generation*, 628-37.

³⁷ See Pantham, ‘Socio-Religious and Political Thought of Rammohun Roy’, 43-46; Bayly, ‘Rammohan Roy and the Advent of Constitutional Liberalism’; and Sartori, *Bengal in Global Concept History*, 77-89. Rammohan had also anticipated the fundamental grievance of the moderates against the Raj. In 1828, in a letter to an English friend, he had pointed out that India could well

turn into Britain's 'determined enemy' if the colonial state continued to institute 'unjust and oppressive measures' in blatant disregard of 'the feelings of its Indian subjects'. See Hay (Ed.), *Sources of Indian Tradition*, 33-34.

³⁸ See Seth, 'Rewriting Histories of Nationalism', 110.

³⁹ Ganguly, *Satyajit Ray: In Search of the Modern*, 59.

⁴⁰ Nehru, *Autobiography*, 24, 27.

⁴¹ See Raychaudhuri, *Europe Reconsidered*, 105-218; Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*, 54-84; and Kaviraj, *The Unhappy Consciousness*. Bankim's apparent antipathy to Muslims has long made him a problematic figure for secularists. See Kaviraj, *Unhappy Consciousness*, 137; and Sugata Bose, 'Nation as Mother'.

⁴² On the themes and contexts of the novel, see Julius Lipner's introduction to Chatterji, *Anandamath, or The Sacred Brotherhood*, 3-124; and Chittranjan Bandyopadhyay, *Ananda Math: Rachanar Prerana*, 3-58. On the complex and controversial history of the *Bande Mataram* song, see Bhattacharya, *Vande Mataram*.

⁴³ At the end of the film, however, Amal decides to take up the offer – an act that Charu perceives as the final betrayal.

⁴⁴ See Lipner, introduction to Chatterji, *Anandamath, or The Sacred Brotherhood*, 33. The first stanzas of *Bande Mataram* had been composed between 1872 and 1875 but not published. See Bhattacharya, *Vande Mataram*, 69-70.

⁴⁵ For an interesting but very different analysis of this montage, see Ravi S Vasudevan, 'Nationhood, Authenticity and Realism in Indian Cinema: The

Double-Take of Modernism in Ray', in Biswas (Ed.), *Apu and After*, 80-115, at 104-105.

⁴⁶ Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*, 80-81.

⁴⁷ Charu's essay, in Tagore's version, expressed Charu's childhood curiosity and terror concerning the secluded temple (*Rabindra Rachanabali*, 11: 395).

The translation of *Bande Mataram* here is by Julius Lipner (Chatterji, *Anandamath, or the Sacred Brotherhood*, 145).

⁴⁸ This decision was criticized not only by Mohammed Ali Jinnah, who considered the entire song to be anti-Muslim, but also by Tagore's close friend and fellow-monotheist Ramananda Chatterjee who felt that the song was not communal at all. See Bhattacharya, *Vande Mataram*, 29- 39.

⁴⁹ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 149-79.

⁵⁰ Khilnani, *Idea of India*, 55. See also Sudipta Kaviraj, 'Indira Gandhi and Indian Politics', in *Trajectories of the Indian State*, 171-211.

⁵¹ Ganguly, *Satyajit Ray: In Search of the Modern*, 113-14.

⁵² Sen, *Babu-Brittanta*, 225; Moinak Biswas, 'Modern Calcutta Cinema', in *Calcutta, The Living City*, ed. Sukanta Chaudhuri, 2: 302-315, at 311; and Samik Bandyopadhyay, 'Satyajit Ray: Aitihāsik, Anaitihāsik, I', 180.

⁵³ See Ganguly, *Satyajit Ray: In Search of the Modern*, 85-139; Vasudevan, 'Nationhood, Authenticity and Realism'; Supriya Chaudhuri, 'In the City'; and Swapan Chakravorty, 'Meaning in the Middle: Dialogue and Word in *Jana Aranya*', all in Biswas (Ed.), *Apu and After*, 80-115, 251-276 and 277-95 respectively.

⁵⁴ It is worth recalling here that Ray himself, although never a communist and deeply averse to political affiliations of any kind, spoke at a Calcutta public

rally organized by leftist parties to express solidarity with the Vietnamese people. See Som, *Satyajit Kathha*, 61.

⁵⁵ As we see in another scene, Siddhartha cannot identify with the Maoist rebels either. His own brother, who has joined them, seems completely incomprehensible to him.

⁵⁶ From the early post-independence years until 1994, all commercial cinemas were required to screen newsreels produced by the Government of India's Films Division before the feature presentation. See Roy, *Beyond Belief*, 32-65.

⁵⁷ In *Pratidwandi* as well as the two other 'Calcutta' films, watches symbolize temporal dissonance, existential incongruities and clashes between different world-views. In *Seemabaddha*, the corporate executive Shyamalendu lends his watch to his sister-in-law, who is visiting from a different city and acts as a voice of conscience within the film. When, in the film's last scene, she comprehends what Shyamalendu has done for the sake of a promotion, we see her taking off the watch and putting it down with an air of finality – his 'time' is no longer one that she wants to share. In *Jana Aranya*, Somenath, the initially naive protagonist marvels at the high-tech watch of the public relations consultant who will guide him into a dark and corrupt world. Later, Somenath pawns his own watch – a graduation gift from his sister-in-law – to hire a prostitute (in fact the sister of his best friend) for a potential client. Each of the turning points in Somenath's downward trajectory is conceptualized as a shift from one kind of time to another.

⁵⁸ The only exception I know of was a paean to the glories of colonial-era Calcutta and a lament for its present degeneration in a mystery featuring

Feluda. See Ray, *Gorosthaneey Shabdhan*, in *Feluda-Samagra*, 1: 587-644, at 588.

⁵⁹ Satyajit Ray, 'Shonkur Paralokcharcha' (1987), in *Shonku-Samagra*, 554-63, at 555. At the height of Bengali nationalism in the 1890s, Siraj was adopted as a great nationalist hero and although the Nawab had lost this status in Bengali Hindu discourse by the 1930s and 40s, the Battle of Plassey continued to be regarded as a great tragedy by nationalist leaders as different in outlook as Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhas Chandra Bose. See Chatterji, *Bengal Divided*, 180-185.

⁶⁰ For examples of ghosts from the British Raj in Ray's stories, see 'Nil Atanka' (1968), in Ray, *Galpa 101*, 99-107; 'Brown Saheber Bari' (1971), in *ibid.*, 125-33; 'Conway Castle-er Pretatma', *ibid.*, 330-40; 'Lakhnaur Duel' (1984), *ibid.*, 409-416; 'Norris Saheber Bungalow' (1987), *ibid.*, 566-72. For 'First Class Kamra', see *ibid.*, 310-317.

⁶¹ Ray, 'First Class Kamra', 310-11.

⁶² In *Londoney Feluda* (Feluda in London, 1989), there is a similar conversation between detective Feluda and a British character called Archibald Cripps. When Cripps refers to 'Indian niggers' and expatiates on their worthlessness, Feluda asks him to leave, even though Cripps possesses crucial information for the case. See Ray, *Londoney Feluda*, in Ray, *Feluda-Samagra*, 2: 567-96, at 588.

⁶³ Ray, 'First Class Kamra', 315.

⁶⁴ Ray, 'First Class Kamra', 317.

⁶⁵ The script of the film is available in Ray, *Agantuk: The Stranger*. Again, I regret not having access to Gaurav Majumdar, *Migrant Form*, at the time of writing.

⁶⁶ The film was based on Ray, 'Atithi' (The Guest, 1981), available in *Galpa 101*, 294-302. The story does not even hint at the film's preoccupation with the nature of civilization.

⁶⁷ Although targeted partly against Hindus, lower-caste Hindus and 'untouchables' were 'treated by the santals as their allies'. The overarching aim of the rebellion seems to have been to set up 'a raj of their own, a raj of the poor' (Kaviraj, *Santal Village Community*, 116, 128).

⁶⁸ Banerjee, *Politics of Time*.

⁶⁹ In his portrayal of the niece Anila, Ray suggested that middle-class women had somewhat greater potential to rise above these tendencies.

⁷⁰ Whilst this is not the place for reassessing the validity of the conventional wisdom about Tagore's influence on Ray, I would suggest that the standard view, whilst not wrong, exaggerates Ray's Tagoreanism. Ray's thematic and stylistic indebtedness to Bibhutibhusan Banerji (the author of *Pather Panchali* and *Aparajito*) in the early years of his career and his later explorations of the malaise of contemporary India both encourage one to question the standard view (e.g., Das Gupta, 'Ray and Tagore') of Ray's Tagorean perspective.

⁷¹ Available in *Rabindra Rachanabali*, 13: 739-745.

⁷² See D A Windsor, 'Nargis, Ray, Rushdie and the Real'; and Robinson, *Satyajit Ray: The Inner Eye*, 326-28.

⁷³ In the early 1990s, the West Bengal Government asked Ray to comment on the script for *City of Joy* and although he did not say anything in public, ‘it was an open secret in Calcutta that he disapproved of Joffé’s project’. See Mihir Bose, ‘The Curious Image of an Indian Icon’, *Daily Telegraph*, Weekend, March 28, 1992, clipping in British Film Institute Library (London), Micro-Jacket: Ray, Satyajit. Roland Joffé visited Ray and felt that Ray ‘did not want the film to be made’. See Roland Joffé, ‘Calcutta: The Quality of the Struggle’, in Joffé, Medoff and Eberts (eds), *City of Joy: The Illustrated Story of the Film*, 6-14. Joffé’s attitude toward India and Indians may help explain Ray’s hostility. Here is an example: ‘If a nation can be said to have a collective personality, then the passive-aggressive is a binding strand in the personality of the Indian subcontinent’ (*ibid.*, 12). Earlier, Ray had condemned Louis Malle’s films on India for their obsession with poverty and Malle’s ignorance about the country. See Ray’s letter to Marie Seton dated September 6, 1970, in British Film Institute Library (London), Special Collections, Marie Seton Collection, Section 2, Item 10.

⁷⁴ Ray, *Robertsoner Ruby* [Robertson’s Ruby, 1992], in Ray, *Feluda-Samagra*, 2: 655-97, at 661.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 677. Interestingly, some of these same points are also raised by the mysterious uncle in *Agantuk* but there, they are presented as part of a global critique of civilization itself by a learned and well-travelled Indian, not an attack on India by a Western visitor who knows little about the country.

⁷⁶ Ray, *Robertsoner Ruby*, 677.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 677-78.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 697.

⁷⁹ M N Roy, 'Cultural Requisites of Freedom', in Bose (ed.), *Modern Age and India*, 177-92, at 191.

⁸⁰ 'We didn't really learn from the Indian cinema', Ray remarked to Shyam Benegal. 'We learnt in fact what not to do rather than what to do'. See *Benegal on Ray*, 60, 108. Similar statements are to be found in numerous other interviews that Ray gave over his career; see Cardullo (ed.), *Satyajit Ray: Interviews*.

⁸¹ Sukumar Ray, 'Bharatiya Chitrasilpa' (1910), reprinted in *Bangla Shilpa Samalochonar Dhhara*, ed. Som and Acharya, 86-89, at 88-89.

⁸² See Mitter, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India*, 358-67; Guha-Thakurta, *The Making of a New 'Indian' Art*, 216-17.

⁸³ See Nandy, 'Satyajit Ray's Secret Guide', 243.

⁸⁴ Nandy got things even more preposterously wrong in his separate assertion that Satyajit Ray went to a 'quasi-Edwardian, élite public school' (Nandy, *An Ambiguous Journey*, 18). In fact, Ray was educated at Ballygunge Government High School, a day school for upper-middle-class Bengali boys. English was an important subject in the curriculum and some of the students came from Westernized families, but the overall ambience and clientele of the school was purely Bengali. See Ray, *Jakhhan Chhoto Chhilam*, 59-76; and Tapan Raychaudhuri, *Bangal-Nama*, 65-67.

⁸⁵ Quoted by Guha-Thakurta, *Making of a New 'Indian' Art*, 216-17.

⁸⁶ Sen, *The Argumentative Indian*, 119, 124.

⁸⁷ Ujjal Chakraborty, 'Those Who Work', in Biswas (ed.), *Apu and After*, 296-307, at 303. See also Dube, *Satyajit Ray's 'The Chess Players'*.

⁸⁸ Quoted by Andrew Robinson in his introduction to the screenplay of *Shatranj ke Khilari*, in Ray, *The Chess Players*, 3-12, at 12.

⁸⁹ The quote is from Bert Cardullo, 'Ethics and Aesthetics', 637, but the sentiments are widely shared by Ray's admirers and critics.

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