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SHATRANJ KE KHILARI

(The Chess Players) 1977

(Eastman Colour)

Produced by

Suresh Jindal

Story

Based on a short story by

Munshi Prem Chand

Script, Direction & Music

Satyajit Ray

Photography

Soumendu Roy

Art Direction

Bansi Chandragupta

Editing

Dulal Dutta

Lead players

Amjad Khan (Nawab

Wajid Ali Khan), Sanjeev

Kumar (Meer), Shabhana

Azmi (Meer's Wife), Saeed

Jaffrey (Mirza),

Richard Attenborough

(General Outram)

Set in 19th century British India, Satyajit Ray's first film in Urdu is also his first historical film. It is based on Munshi Prem Chand's short story of two 'nawabs' (Indian Muslim landlords), Mirza and Meer, chess addicts in pleasure-bent Lucknow. So obsessed are they with their daily contests in chess, that they neglect their wives and are oblivious of the fact that their musician-poet king, Wajid Ali Shah, is the newest target of the *East India Company*. (To enlarge the sphere of British influence and to increase financial profit, the East India Company in competition with the Dutch and the French, followed the policy of 'take over' of Indian monarchies that were ruled by weak kings. It was only after the 1857 War of Indian Independence that India came directly under the rule of the Crown).

As John Company's troops move in for this annexation, the chess addicts quarrel and shoot at each other.

Ray builds his historical scenario with action on three inter-connecting levels. A narrator, and some animated historic material, link together the central theme with the political chess game of the East India Company to obtain the abdication of Wajid Ali Shah, who is engrossed in his artistic pursuits.

*Andrew Sarris
Films in Focus*

EXEMPLARS OF A CHILDISH DECADENCE

Ray plays all his cards face up, and, hence, he neither cheats us or surprises us. His preparation is very slow, but his payoff is all the richer for his patience. By the end of the film we feel that we have entered the lives of two men who exist outside of history in the limbo of self-absorption. Sanjeev Kumar and Saeed Jaffrey are quite marvelous as the exemplars of a childish decadence. Ray's is a remarkably civilized way of contemplating national shame and humiliation. There are not many national cinemas capable of such candor and honesty and generosity. And somehow Ray has always needed an intimation of social upheaval to rescue his films from a very placid humanism. In this regard, *The Chess Players* emphasizes what is unique about the Indian experience under British colonialism rather than what is universal.

*David Ansen
Newsweek/1978*

HISTORY: A FAIT ACCOMPLI

There is a great deal of physical splendor in this dazzling color film and, considering its historical subject, surprisingly little anger. Ray has never had the temperament to portray villainy, and he allows even General Outram an intelligently divided soul. Perhaps *The Chess Players* is too even-handed, too schematic in its juxtaposition of the private and public games people play; Ray beguiles us, but his separate stories never coalesce with the impact or depth of such previous masterworks as *Days and Nights in the Forest*, *Devi* or *The Music Room*. Like the take-over of Oudh, history for Ray, is a *fait accompli*. What interests him is less the game than the players—the doleful eyes and crushed-velvet voice of a king losing his crown, and the pathos of his endangered aristocrats who must accept that even when playing the Indian-invented game of chess, they must learn to play by British rules.

*Robert Hatch
The Nation/1978*

AS THE 'LAST CHERRY' DROPS

Satyajit Ray's *The Chess Players* is a masque of a film, in which every gesture, every detail of dress or habitation, is intended to delight your eye; where voices are as sonorous as the music that surrounds the action and emotions are restrained. Ray does not take sides in any obvious way as the 'last cherry' drops into the mouth of the British Raj.

It all happened more than a century ago, the British have come and gone, and in any case it would be unlike Ray to score propaganda points in a cause as obvious as India's experience of British Imperialism. Nevertheless, the film pulls at one with a force that is not explained entirely by the attraction of its visual beauty; I think it derives also from the points that Ray does not deign to make explicit.

Such passion as the film displays is transposed to the chess cloth, where the friends flare up over irregularities of play and where once a shot is fired in anger—but by

mistake and wide of its target—on a question of personal honour. (It is pointed out, by the way, that chess was invented in India, and has now spread throughout the world, being popular especially in England, where, however, they have slightly changed the rules.) One senses that these soft men are indolent and sybaritic not by preference but by circumstance. And at the palace that seems evident. For 100 years Oudh has preserved its independence by pouring rupees into the coffers of the East India Company, allowing its most promising youths to be mustered into the colonial army and suffering bits of its territory to be nibbled away. A state that cannot defend its integrity against ludicrous odds may contrive to preserve the image of integrity with bribes, but that course does not sustain a national morale.

The Chess Players offers the viewer sustained aesthetic pleasure; it seems by association to emit the most gratifying perfumes. It has been designed to do just that because for several generations the aristocrats of Lucknow cultivated the graces of their civilization to the exclusion of its strengths. In the process, they become selfish, fatalistic and fat, but that was what the mills of Manchester required. I found Ray's latest a film of melancholy splendor.

*Wajid Ali Shah is forced to
surrender his crown to
British General Outram*



AND RAY'S GARDEN GROWS

Tom Milne
Sight & Sound/1977

Jaffrey, a superb vocal mimic (his devastating imitations, of everybody from Huston, Julie Harris and Ravi Shankar to Michael Caine imitating Sean Connery, unfortunately don't transfer to the printed page), 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. On *The Man Who Would Be King*, Huston really gave me only two directions. In the scene towards the end when Billy Fish has to warn Peachy and Dravot about the impending danger of godhood, there is a certain sadness there, and being by nature a lyrical person, I was inclined to lyricise it a little bit. 'Less of a Bengali poet, Saeed,' said John, 'and more of a Black Militant, that's what I want.' Then what you call the jack-in-the-box quality in Billy Fish, that came from John: 'Ferret. . .like a ferret, Saeed.'

"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."

RAY'S COMMENTS

As told to
Iqbal Masud,
Satyajit Ray Issue
Kakinada Film
Circle/1980

There wasn't a full length film in Prem Chand's story and I decided at the outset to interweave fact and fiction. I saw the story as a fairly light-hearted one which would nevertheless comment on certain aspects of Nawabi decadence as well as make a timeless comment on non-involvement. The historical event I saw as being on a serious level throughout, with considerable probing into both Wajid's and Outram's characters and motivations. I was attracted by the possibilities of turning both of them into rounded, complex characters—Wajid with all the traits of a decadent Nawab redeemed at least partially by his gifts as a poet and musician, striving to retain his dignity in the face of annihilation and turning ultimately into a tragic figure. Outram I saw as a dual personality, suffering moral qualms in the seclusion of his study, betraying not a trace of it in his capacity as the loyal servant of the Company.

I see a resemblance between Wajid and the nobleman in *Jalsaghar* in their pathetic failure to discern the nature of the forces which are hastening their demise.

The annexation was illegal and yet Dalhousie pursued

it with calm ruthlessness. The policy itself deserved nothing but condemnation. In fact it was roundly condemned by both British and Indian historians.

One could perhaps have done more with the historical event but only at the risk of upsetting the delicate balance between fact and fiction. Outram does mention at one point that the decision to annex was taken partly to provide relief to the common people who were suffering under Wajid's misrule.

I can think of no film which has been wholly faithful to its literary source. Changes are often made for formal reasons, if for nothing else. In *Shatranj* one kind of change involved the introduction of new characters. Two of the most important are Munshi Nandlal and the peasant boy, Kalloo. I felt it was important to introduce a Hindu character to establish the friendly relations that existed between the two religious groups in Lucknow in Wajid's time. In terms of plot, Nandlal serves the crucial function of teaching Mir and Mirza the rudiments of British chess which assume such significance at the end of the film. Kalloo emerged in the following way: Prem Chand has Mir and Mirza playing chess in a dilapidated mosque

Wajid Ali Shah, the last independent ruler of Oudh, Northern India, before his deposition by the British



towards the end of the story. I tried to picture the scene and found myself thinking of all the dirt and rubble the friends would have to contend with (not to speak of bats and rats, cockroaches and scorpions), before they could settle down to a quiet game. So I decided to drop the mosque and replace it with a new locale—a placid rural setting in contrast to the claustrophobic Nawabi interiors. Some more pondering and I realised that the noblemen would feel utterly at a loss without someone to take the place of a servant, someone to run errands for them, prepare their 'hookahs', bring them food and so forth. Thus emerged Kalloo, who not only serves Mir and Mirza but also serves as the only representative in the film of the common man and the only person who displays patriotic feeling.

Prem Chand's story ends by Mir and Mira destroying each other while the Company's troops leave Lucknow with Wajid as prisoner. This is an effective juxtaposition but it takes wide liberty with history. Wajid left Lucknow of his own accord and well after the annexation. The idea of the two friends killing each other was abandoned because I felt it might be taken to symbolise the end of decadence. In fact, Nawabi and all that goes with it did not end with the British takeover. The U.P. noblemen kept up their ways till well into the present century. Hence the decision to show Mir and Mirza continuing with their game. That they decide to play according to British rules can be seen as a symbol of the acceptance of British domination by Indians.

The opening scene is a prologue. I wanted to establish the mood of the narrative in a setting not yet described. The essence of chess is two people playing, saying nothing, utterly oblivious to the environment. This is what I tried to convey. The chess set was a Burmese one nearly 100 years old, loaned by Bal Mundkar of Bombay, a collector of antique chess sets. In the Kathak scene both the details and the colour scheme conform to engravings of that period. The scene is a very close replica of the miniatures of that period. Even the cat comes from a drawing by an artist of Wajid's court.

There are hints of lawlessness and of the misery of the people in the film. If I had dwelt in detail on such matters I would have run the risk of justifying the annexation. The feudal class was bound to go into extinction and deservedly so. I saw no point in flogging a dead horse. Easy targets don't interest me very much. The condemnation is there, ultimately, but the process of arriving at it is different. I was portraying two negative forces, feudalism and colonialism. You had to condemn both Wajid and Dalhousie. This was the challenge. I wanted to make this condemnation interesting by bringing in certain plus points of both the sides.