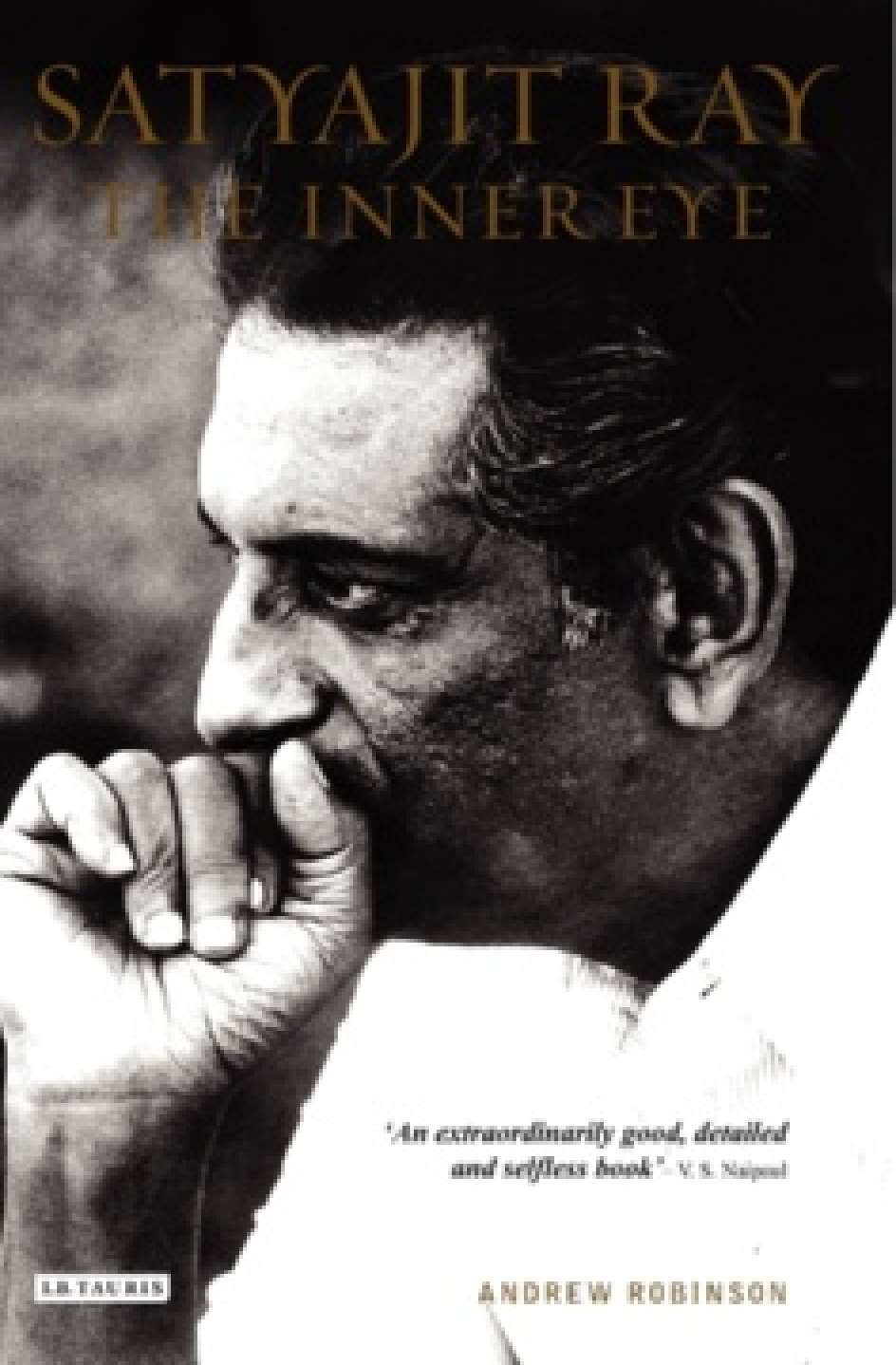
SATYAJIT RAY
THE INNER EYE



'An extraordinarily good, detailed and selfless book' – V. S. Naipaul

I.B.TAURIS

ANDREW ROBINSON

SATYAJIT RAY

THE INNER EYE

The Biography of a Master Film-Maker

Andrew Robinson

I.B. TAURIS
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For Krishna and for my parents

'The eye, which is said to be the window of the soul, is the primary means by which the brain may most fully and magnificently contemplate the infinite works of nature . . .'

Leonardo da Vinci

'All great civilisations have been based on loitering.'

Jean Renoir

'I do not put my faith in any new institutions, but in the individuals all over the world who think clearly, feel nobly and act rightly. They are the channels of moral truth.'

Rabindranath Tagore

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Preface to the Second Edition

In the summer of 2002, the National Film Theatre in London announced the first-ever complete retrospective of Satyajit Ray's films. Some of the prints were coming from the Academy Film Archive in Hollywood, which had magnificently restored the image and sound; these had been seen only in the United States. Here was an opportunity too rare to miss, and I decided to see every film again on the big screen (and Ray's long-lost documentary *Sikkim* for the first time).

From the opening night, when Ravi Shankar – now in his eighties but still vigorously performing – made a surprise speech and moved everyone by humming the main theme from *Pather Panchali*, to the screening of Ray's swansong film *Agantuk* (*The Stranger*) two months later, the retrospective was unexpectedly well attended, with showings even selling out. And the people coming were remarkably varied: some were Bengalis or of Indian origin, naturally, but the majority were not, furthermore many were young, seeing the films for the first time as I had in 1982 at an earlier major NFT Ray season. They generated a palpable buzz of excitement. In his introduction, David Robinson, veteran film critic and biographer of Chaplin, promised: 'To discover or to revisit the world of Satyajit Ray is one of the supreme pleasures of the cinema. The ten years since his death give us the perspective to see more clearly that he was by any reckoning – not just for the cinema – one of the world's great artists.' The audience reaction proved that this was not critic's hyperbole but actually true.

For me personally, the greatest satisfaction was that the films engaged and moved me afresh. Since completing the first edition of this book in 1988, I had travelled – via the writing of books on Rabindranath Tagore – away from Ray's world and eventually into writing several books unrelated to India. To a considerable extent, I felt detached from Ray. Would his films still rekindle the old passions? In particular, how would I respond to the last three films, made in 1989–91 after severe illness, which were widely criticised when they were released? Would I be forced to conclude, in all honesty, that there was a decline in Ray's vitality in the 1980s like that of Akira Kurosawa in the 1970s and after (with the exception, for me if not

for Kurosawa's biographer Donald Richie, of his poignant *Dersu Uzala* and his delightful last film *Madadayo*)?

Watching Ray's films again as a body of work reminded me, once more, of his incredible range – of period, setting, social class, tone and genre. No other film-maker, apart maybe from Kurosawa (though his depiction of women is notably inferior to Ray's), has encompassed a whole culture; and no other film-maker, full stop, has covered such a range, from pure farce to high tragedy and from musical fantasies to detective stories. Satyajit Ray, whatever some superficial or ignorant critics may say, is *not* primarily the maker of the Apu Trilogy. I fear that his range may never be fully understood, given that the films describe Bengal, which (unlike Japan) is of little political, economic or cultural importance to the world – and in a language unknown even to most Indians. But I hope his extraordinary diversity may gradually sink in, as his work at last becomes widely available on video and DVD.

As for the individual films, I stand by my first assessments almost entirely, though I now feel that *Pratidwandi* (*The Adversary*) is even more profound than I wrote, while *Jana Aranya* (*The Middle Man*) somewhat suffers when you already know the plot and *Mahanagar* (*The Big City*) is definitely too long. The last three films – *Ganasatru* (*An Enemy of the People*), *Sakha Prasakha* (*Branches of the Tree*) and *Agantuk* – are the subject of my new final chapter, replacing the original 'Postscript'; here I will say only that they do not disappoint me.

Apart from the correction of errors and some refinements of language, the necessary substitution of *Sakha Prasakha* in the chapter entitled 'Unmade Films', and the updating of the Filmography and Bibliography (which, for reasons of length and cost, is now restricted to the works of Ray alone), this final chapter is the main change to the book. (Sadly, many of the original illustrations also had to go for reasons of cost.) Besides covering the making and reception of Ray's last three films, the chapter deals with the award of an Oscar for lifetime achievement to him; his death in 1992; the posthumous publication of his autobiographical *My Years with Apu*; the ongoing programme to restore, preserve and disseminate his films; and finally the state of his artistic legacy.

In writing this chapter, I was constantly reminded of Tagore. To quote the first edition of my book, 'Non-Bengalis now have at least two good reasons for wishing to learn that beautiful but elusive language: to read Rabindranath Tagore in the original, and to follow Satyajit Ray's films.' I think that is still true, but perhaps Ray's name should now come first. In his time, Tagore's fame far exceeded Ray's – it was almost like that of his friend Einstein – both as a man and artist. Today, the picture is more confused. In the future I believe the world is more likely to watch Ray's films (including his inspired Tagore adaptations) than to read, look at, sing and perform Tagore's works. Tagore, however, will remain the more

compelling, indeed legendary personality. For Tagore was an artist in life as Ray was in film. Neither man, of course, lends himself easily to biography. My friend the late E. P. Thompson, whose father was Tagore's English biographer, wrote in his small book *Alien Homage* (1993) about his father's deeply admiring but troubled relationship with Tagore: 'Those who feed the fires of genius can expect no reward but burnt fingers.' I feel the same way about Satyajit Ray.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For lack of space, I have not repeated the names of those who were acknowledged in the first edition. Since then, I am grateful to the following people for providing me with significant letters from Ray: the late Lindsay Anderson, the late Alex Aronson, Janet Aston (sister of the late David McCutchion), Norman Clare, Lenny Gordon and Julian Crandall Hollick. Nemai Ghosh and Indrani Majumdar proved invaluable in digging up various materials. Ujjal Chakravarti, Anita Desai, Dipankar Home, Pico Iyer, Nasreen Munni Kabir, Dilip K. Roy and Ani Sanyal kindly gave me reviews, articles and interviews. Norman Clare was a sensitive critic. Clare Dubois carefully looked after the production of the book.

Henri Cartier-Bresson, Akira Kurosawa and V. S. Naipaul – long-standing admirers of Ray – have all been inspirations, direct and indirect. I cherish Kurosawa's Christmas cards to me with his own designs (one of the few kinds of illustration Ray never did!).

Krishna Dutta, my co-author on Tagore, who loves both Tagore and Ray, more than merits the original dedication renewed in this edition.

Illustrations

A NOTE ON THE PRONUNCIATION AND SPELLING OF BENGALI

'It's a critical disadvantage to admire a director's work immensely and to know that one can never quite come to terms with pronouncing his name', Penelope Houston of *Sight and Sound* once wrote. For readers of this book who wish to know the Bengali pronunciation of 'Satyajit Ray', 'Shottojeet Rye' is about as close as one can get. Almost every 's' in Bengali is a soft 's'. Most Indians who are not from Bengal will pronounce the name 'Sat-y-a-jit Ray', with a hard 's' and his second name rhymed with 'say' – just as a westerner would tend to do. Either pronunciation seems to me equally acceptable outside Bengal.

The same disparity applies, a fortiori, to all the other Bengali names that are unavoidably scattered through the book. If it is any consolation to western readers, they should at least know that Indians who are not Bengalis face almost the same difficulties with pronunciation as they do.

The spelling of Bengali words and names in English is a tricky matter, since there is no widely accepted system of transliteration. Mostly, I have retained the commonly used spellings with all the inconsistencies that these entail – e.g. Tagore rather than Thakur – rather than adopting the more accurate (but off-putting) spelling used by many academics. I have also arbitrarily chosen to use 'ch' rather than the cumbersome 'chh' throughout, 's' rather than 'sh' in general, except for words ending with an 's' – e.g. I prefer Ghosh to Ghos – and to use a single spelling for each of the names Banerjee, Chakravarti, Chatterjee and Mukherjee. This avoids the confusion inherent in the many transliterations of these names in use, often for the same individual – Banerji, Banerjee, Bannerji, Bannerjee or Bandopadhyay (the direct transliteration), for instance. As the irritable old printer of visiting cards in *The Middle Man* insists, 'There are fourteen ways of spelling Banerjee!', while the Calcutta telephone directory lists some fifty ways of spelling Chakravarti. I hope that those affected by this fiat will be understanding of my reasons.

INTRODUCTION

Getting to know Ray

My earliest memory of a Satyajit Ray film is vague but slightly threatening. I must have been watching his ghost-story *The Lost Jewels* on BBC television when I was about ten. I don't remember seeing any others until becoming a member of the university film society at Oxford. By then I had spent some months living and working in India – which might have been expected to focus my interest in Ray rather more sharply. But they had not; perhaps because India is so vast and I had been nowhere near Ray's native city Calcutta.

It took the world première of *The Chess Players* at London's National Film Theatre in late 1977 to awaken my interest properly. I had never enjoyed watching a film so much before, even though we all had to wear headphones to follow the Urdu dialogue in Saeed Jaffrey's mellifluous English reading, which we knew had been arranged at the last minute. The warmth and urbane humour of the film, coupled with its unobtrusively innovative style, suggested that its creator must be a highly civilised individual; and its intriguing range of references showed him to be equally at home in both East and West.

When Ray himself appeared afterwards on stage with Jaffrey he seemed in tune with his film. Standing a foot taller than his actor, dressed in a well-cut suit and tie, he talked briefly and simply in a strong, pleasant, above all musical voice of indefinable accent. His affection for Jaffrey and Jaffrey's devotion to him were transparent, and the capacity audience radiated goodwill towards them both. Much later I learnt that Ray had not heard the commentary that night, because he had handed over his headphones to an usherette who wanted them: an impressive gesture of faith in his actor's ability.

The next time I saw Ray he was dressed in full academic regalia, ready to receive an honorary doctorate from Oxford – only the second film director to be so honoured after his hero Chaplin. He looked much sterner than he had in London the year before, somewhat ill at ease, and carried his mortar-board in his hand rather than wearing it like the others (so scared was he that it would be blown away, as he later told me). Nor had

he, unlike his fellows, brought a camera to the ceremony: he thought it would be forbidden in the Sheldonian Theatre.

The incongruity amused me as much as Ray's first biographer Marie Seton when she relayed it to me with her inimitable gusto at our first meeting a few years later. Her pioneering book on Ray, which I had read in the meantime, amply confirmed my first impressions of an unassuming nature. It also contained a graphic description of Ray's struggle to finish *The Chess Players* and have it seen in India. Without exchanging a word with Ray, I had begun to feel I already knew him.

In the spring of 1981 he visited Oxford again, this time to attend a season of his films there. I hoped to meet him at last but his plane was late and I had to leave the screening before he arrived. Instead, I wrote him what amounted to a fan letter. I had a job in a publishing house at the time and asked Ray if he had considered writing his autobiography. Walking away from All Souls College after delivering this billet-doux, I noticed a very tall man just getting out of a car, followed by a woman dressed in a sari. They were Ray and his wife of course; and my nerve failed me. The letter would have to serve as my introduction.

A month or two later I received his reply from Calcutta. From reading Seton, I guessed that he had typed it himself – on a ribbon not in its first youth.

> I have long been toying with the idea of writing a book on my experiences as a film-maker, possibly confining myself to the Apu Trilogy ('My Years with Apu'), but the snag is, as you have yourself guessed, I never seem to have the time. Apart from making a feature film a year, I also jointly edit a children's monthly magazine, doing most of the illustrations, writing stories, poems, devising puzzles etc. This takes up all my free time between films. So you see how difficult it is for me to make any kind of commitment at this stage. Let me, however, thank you for your offer. If and when there is an MS, may I send it to you?

That was all: frank and informal, like all the letters I have received from Ray in the years since then, as well as those he wrote to Marie Seton from 1955 onwards which appear as a body for the first time in this book. Ray has never employed a secretary or personal assistants, preferring to answer his correspondence himself, usually without bothering to keep copies; and nearly everyone who writes to him gets a reply – often prompt and always to the point. I felt even more determined to meet him.

The right moment came in April the following year. Ray was in London again for a few days to see friends and answer questions at the National Film Theatre, following a season of almost all his films. He spoke well but this time seemed a bit tense. I watched how his normally mobile face would sometimes glaze over at a question that did not engage him. 'Would you ever make a film about Indians in London who are fifty-fifty?' a London

Indian in the audience asked him. There was a pause. 'Fifty-fifty . . .?' queried Ray in a heavy voice almost a drawl, and then lapsed into silence; he obviously wished to avoid giving offence, but clearly people without roots – whether in London or in Calcutta – did not much interest him as an artist. When I mentioned this interview afterwards to Indians who had been present, I noticed that this response had touched a nerve, and I could guess how Ray's reputation for remoteness had grown up. It made me slightly nervous about our meeting the following morning.

In the event it was enjoyable – I felt for both of us. We met in Ray's room at the Savoy Hotel – the accommodation arranged for him by the NFT. He was wearing what I came to recognise as his directing garb: short-sleeved shirt, slacks and sandals. In a letter he had agreed to give me an interview for a film magazine. We talked for nearly three and a half hours. From time to time he puffed on a pipe, as an alternative to the cigarettes he had been told to give up a few years before. Once, the phone rang: it was Marie Seton. Ray chatted to her amiably for a while.

His mildly wary air of the previous evening was nowhere in evidence now. My questions were mostly very specific, which he seemed to like. His replies came slowly but surely and in complete sentences – a fact that did not surprise me as it should have, because he was the first person I had ever interviewed. They were never glib, and occasionally I felt they would never emerge at all (such as when I asked him 'What is your overall attitude to the British heritage in India?'). He often smiled and chuckled and occasionally burst into the hearty laugh I would later often hear. 'Life is full of funny things', he happened to remark at one point. No one who knows Ray well would ever call him solemn; he is the inheritor of a long family tradition of making Bengalis laugh.

At the end I showed him some fine colour artwork for a new edition of Kipling's *Just So Stories* I was involved in publishing. With his love of children's writing and illustrating I had a hunch he would be interested. He was, and studied it carefully for several minutes. At the same time he returned to me a proof copy of his friend Kurosawa's autobiography that I had earlier left at the hotel in the hope of encouraging Ray to write his own. Even on his short visit he had found time to read it, and when I said I did not need it back, he was happy to take it to Calcutta for his son, who had just made his first film there with screenplay and music by his father.

Eight months later I arrived in Calcutta myself. Ray had written to say I was welcome to watch the shooting of *The Home and the World*. My plan was to cover it for *American Cinematographer*. I felt that would give me the ideal excuse to pry into every aspect of its production.

Ray's home city was just as simultaneously depressing and fascinating as other sympathetic foreign visitors have frequently commented, though I was lucky to make my first acquaintance with it during the coolest part of the year; in the summer it is a humid inferno. Its ramshackle sprawl and

unfathomable levels of human activity overwhelm the mind, at least to begin with. But, unlike the casual visitor, I had a point of reference; I did not exactly feel I knew Calcutta in advance as someone might feel he knew New York after seeing Woody Allen's films, but neither did the city seem alien. It never struck me either as the 'City of Dreadful Night' (the phrase made famous by Kipling), or as the 'City of Joy' – the title of a recent bestseller. It defied labels. I had already read and understood Ray's 1966 comment on it, that 'there is something about creating beauty in the circumstances of shoddiness and privation that is truly exciting.'

Within a few days I got to know the city from a unique perspective: Ray on the hunt for props, costumes and materials to suit the lavish period settings of Tagore's story, in the shops and homes of his intricate network of relatives, friends and contacts. 'Come any time. We are very busy shopping around getting props from people's houses,' he had told me without preliminaries over the phone at my hotel – and he meant exactly that. Over the next few days I tagged along as he and his assistants, including his son, went calmly in pursuit of a wind-up gramophone of *c.* 1907 vintage, a pistol that originally belonged to Tagore's grandfather, imitation classical figurines and other *objets d'art*, and bric-à-brac of all kinds from a shop in central Calcutta stuffed with the relics of a more expansive age. Everything we collected was put into his Ambassador car (a version of the 1950s Morris Oxford ubiquitous in India), then we all climbed in too and bumped off through the polluted air towards the studio several miles away. Once, there was nothing for it but for me and Ray (whose legs match his six-foot-four-inches height) to cram into the front seat next to the driver. I could imagine no other world-famous film director used to operating quite like this.

When I first entered his flat in a large, pleasantly shabby mansion-block dating from the time of Ray's birth in the 1920s, I found him discussing the exact kind of button required by one of his costume designs with a member of his production team. He struck me immediately as more animated than in London – thoroughly at ease with his surroundings. Apart from some months during his childhood and about six months in Europe in 1950, Ray's life has been spent in Calcutta. As he later remarked to me, 'I don't feel very creative when I'm abroad somehow. I need to be in my chair in Calcutta!' Looking around the room where he likes to work, I could see why. It has the subdued colours, cavernous ceilings, louvred windows and revolving fans of the Raj – no air-conditioning. Every day at certain times which change with the seasons, Ray follows a ritual of opening and closing windows as the sun moves round. Everywhere, in crammed bookcases and in mushrooming piles, there are magazines and books, some of them old and rare, many of them presents from his friends and contacts all over the world. He has a good record and tape collection too, with a preponderance of the western classical music he and his wife

have loved since their teens, plus a hi-fi system acquired rather late in life that has replaced its faithful but unsophisticated predecessor since Ray's recent illness. There is also a piano, at which he used to sit and pick out tunes for his background scores (until the arrival of synthesisers in Calcutta), with his doors and windows for once firmly closed to guests and the city's racket to allow him to concentrate fully. On top of it stand some of his many awards and a bust of Beethoven, and on the wall above hangs a photograph of Eisenstein, whose films Ray once compared to Bach's music. But unlike most Bengali homes, Ray's has no image of Rabindranath Tagore, who has influenced him, as well as his father and grandfather, more than anyone else. 'Such a cliché!' he told me when I once mentioned it.

This is the atmosphere that Ray finds congenial and creative. He is one of the most unostentatious men ever to make a film – and in a country renowned for the brashness of its movie industry. There are residences in Calcutta – once known as the 'City of Palaces' – to match the most baroque mansion of a star in Bombay (or Malibu), but Ray has never wanted to live in one, nor to be a VIP Indian-style, with an entourage of flatterers and rumours. (In fact he has yet to own a house or flat.) He 'detests' making public speeches and has given only one lecture on his own work. The many generous offers of films he received from abroad, he almost always eventually turned down because of strings attached. When in the late 1960s he went against this instinct, and embraced a Hollywood offer to direct a science fiction film in India, the project ran aground in acrimony (though it seems to have influenced *E.T.*). To work properly, Ray needs to be entirely free, and because he is patient and has relatively few personal wants, he has managed to achieve this freedom and maintain it. He in fact feels himself to be rich and seemed surprised when I once queried this. What I had not realised was just how short of money he had been until his early twenties. 'I mean I have no money worries as such' he said, 'thanks to my writing, not from films really. I'm certainly not as rich as Bombay actors – by no means; but I'm comfortable, I can buy the books and records I want.'

Ensconced in his favourite chair – an intermittently functioning telephone within easy reach and his drawing-board, brushes, pens, inks and paints to hand when he wants them – Ray likes best to recline in loose clothes with his bare feet resting on a convenient low table, and work at the red cloth-bound shooting notebooks that contain literally every aspect of a film, and at his children's magazine. Often he spends a whole day at a stretch in his chair (though bad health has forced him to rest more in recent years). Much of this time he is deaf to the world, absorbed in his thoughts, an ability cultivated by him in the several houses and flats he has passed through in south Calcutta, so as to exclude the increasing blare of car horns, amplified film songs and festivals from the teeming city, the chatter of visitors talking among themselves and, sometimes, unwelcome attempts at

conversation. The flat he lives in now with his wife Bijoya and their son Sandip is comparatively spacious and the neighbourhood relatively quiet, but the habit of switching off the outside world has become second nature.

The day I first visited the studio with Ray was typical of life in Calcutta in recent years, even for the well-off. There was an extended power cut (known as 'load-shedding') and we found ourselves driving gingerly through a ghostly, smoky city lit only by hurricane-lamps, cooking-fires and those fortunate premises with electric generators. The studios were lit by hurricane-lamps. Ray, dressed in his home clothes – loose pyjamas and Indian-style shirt (*panjabi* or *kurta*) with a large shawl wrapped boldly around the upper half of his commanding form – examined the almost-finished set and instructed his art director on the precise manner in which the curtains should fall, the shape of the half-moon windows above the doors and other details. 'It looks rather spectral, doesn't it?' he said with a smile.

Seeing the studio in the clear light of day I realised what I had missed on our nocturnal visit. 'Load-shedding', while not the least of Ray's problems, must take second place to the primitive lighting arrangements, the lack of air-conditioning (which made me admire the actors in *The Chess Players* even more, especially Richard Attenborough who had to face a Calcutta summer), and the ineffective soundproofing that means much dialogue has to be dubbed later. There were some very persistent pigeons roosting in the roof of the studio, for instance, which had sometimes to be driven off with stones so that shooting could continue. One of Ray's assistant directors later volunteered, 'We are proof against all hazards.' Ray himself told me, without a trace of affectation, 'After all, we do have the bare essentials – and the rest is here, in my head. I don't think you need any more than that really.'

The day the shooting began I was touched when he suddenly produced some sheets of dialogue from the film script he had translated for me and written out the night before in his forceful handwriting, so that I could get the maximum out of my experience in the studio. Over the next two weeks he produced several more batches as shooting progressed.

The atmosphere on his set was the result of an accumulation of such careful forethought. It was alert, without being tense. There was a stream of visitors – mainly members of Ray's extended family or relatives of his wife, his old friends, or the family and friends of his cast – whom Ray usually greeted and sometimes chatted to between shots without any sign of irritation. I felt that what was taking place inside the studio was not so very different from his life outside it; there was none of the hyped-up artificiality and much less of the boredom of a western film set, or, for that matter, of the sets next-door to Ray's, where other Bengali directors continue to churn out the trashy melodramas that Ray swept aside with *Pather Panchali* in 1955. Ray's film-making, like his films, is never divorced from life.

Whenever he felt he had something to contribute Ray was on the move around the studio, talking volubly, often vociferously in Bengali with occasional phrases in English, indicating what he wanted to his small production team and, once the set was ready, to his actors. In general he kept his rehearsals to a minimum, however, to reserve his actors' spontaneity for the camera. Otherwise he sat quietly, on a small wicker stool, pondering with his red shooting notebook in his hands and smoking or just biting his pipe; as his production team went about their jobs I was sometimes hardly aware that Ray was present at all. Only when he perceived that all was ready for him would he then almost shout out in English, 'Come on. Taking, taking!' This tendency to withdraw when not needed must be what he had in mind when he once insisted to me that the aristocratic image of him held by many, is a wrong one. 'When I'm working I'm a *complete* democrat. It's when I'm sitting at home alone and doing nothing that it seems aristocratic,' he said, and laughed at the notion. 'Film-making is a democratic undertaking, I think.'

Near the end of my stay I was lucky to be witness to a historic shot: the first full-blooded kiss in a Ray film! He decided to clear the studio of all but his production team and family, who are normally present throughout the production process (his son Sandip as an assistant director, his wife Bijoya to advise on costumes, make-up, music and anything else that comes to her mind – she is the first to read everything Ray writes). On this occasion his wife's elder sister was there too and told me, with a laugh, that the idea of watching a kiss in front of her relatives made her a little embarrassed. Critics of Ray as something of a puritan would have said that he was too, but I didn't feel him to be; nervous yes, in case his actors muffed the scene, but not embarrassed. Outwardly he looked calm and very focused, brows furrowed behind the camera, which had to track rapidly from one side of the couple to the other. Three takes were made – more than average for Ray – but the actors were still not quite right. Swatilekha Chatterjee's hair was getting in her way, and her bangles were not in the correct place. Ray wanted to zoom in on these as she embraced Soumitra Chatterjee and gripped his shoulder. The fourth take was going well when Ray looked up from the camera waving the zoom control – technical malfunction. 'This has betrayed me,' he said heavily. Five takes were required in all before Ray was satisfied, and everyone, the actors especially, could unwind. As we left the studio a little later, Ray remarked slightly mischievously, 'There's another kiss tomorrow.'

During 1983 he continued to shoot the film and compose and record the music for it. I saw him again in London in May – this time staying in the rather functional hotel he uses near Russell Square in a box-like room with a bed that can barely have fitted him. I wanted to raise a vital question: how would he feel about me writing a book about him? 'I don't want

another foreigner writing a book about me without learning Bengali' was his reply. I gulped a bit, even though I had anticipated the idea after watching him at home and at work in Calcutta. Otherwise he appeared to accept my suggestion.

At the end of September there arrived a characteristic letter beginning '*Important* I have to buy a woman's hat (circa '05) in London'. This was for Jennifer Kendal to wear: could I make enquiries in advance of his arrival in early October? He was about to accept a Fellowship of the British Film Institute from the hands of Prince Charles, along with Orson Welles, Marcel Carné, David Lean, Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger. The idea obviously tickled him, as it did me, and I had sent him a four-line verse on the subject. His letter ended with his improved version of my verse, a proper limerick:

When Bonnie Prince Charlie met Life-Fellow Ray
He really couldn't think quite what to say
Then he thought it'd be dandy
To ask 'Have you seen Gandhi*?'*
But Ray beat him to it to his utter dismay

which has the nice twist to it that only an Englishman would pronounce 'Gandhi' to rhyme with 'dandy' – or an Indian wanting to oblige an Englishman.

To his great regret Ray never made it to this award ceremony. He had a heart attack just days before his flight was due to depart. The very few remaining scenes in *The Home and the World* and the post-production had to be completed by Sandip under the close supervision of Satyajit. Both the film and Ray were invited to the 1984 Cannes Festival. The film just reached there in time, along with Sandip and others, but not Ray; he was in hospital again following a second attack.

The next time I met him was at Heathrow Airport on his way back to Calcutta from Houston, where he had undergone a heart bypass operation. The experience had been a very unpleasant one and he was still in pain. He was sitting in a wheelchair and looked much thinner. I couldn't think quite what to say, but Satyajit was not at all put out. 'You've put on weight,' he straightaway remarked with almost his old smile.

He spent some days in London along with his wife and son, recuperating in a hotel off Oxford Street, where I saw him regularly. Just down the road, at the now-defunct Academy Cinema (where *Pather Panchali* played nearly thirty years previously to lyrical reviews), *The Home and the World* was about to open. A five-minute taxi-ride would have taken him there. Ray had not yet seen his film, and as the days passed, I realised he did not intend to either – until he returned to familiar territory. Considering all that the film meant to him, his restraint was formidable. Instead, we all went to see a Spielberg film – *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* – which

Ray had heard about while convalescing in Houston. Throughout the film he watched impassively, except for when some particularly grotesque 'Indian' priests appeared – 'A *brown* sacred thread,' he said quizzically with perhaps a touch of disgust. Afterwards, he admitted to feeling somewhat depressed that audiences seemed to enjoy such unrelenting action. Later still, in Calcutta, he remarked that all but the first ten minutes of the film were 'absolutely haywire, unbelievably bad.'

Since then, Ray has stayed inside his flat much more than in the past, recovering his strength to make another feature film – and also, in the early days, waiting for a lift to be installed to give him easy access. Meantime, besides writing, illustrating and editing stories for his children's magazine, writing best-selling novellas about his detective duo for other magazines and for book publication (which provide him with his regular income), and translating some of his stories for publication abroad during 1987, he has written a series of screenplays and music scores for his son's television films under the title *Satyajit Ray Presents*, and made a documentary film about his father, a comic writer and illustrator much-loved in Bengal, whose birth centenary fell in 1987.

In a sense it was a good time to draw Ray out on the subject of himself and of his work. I was in and out of his flat during visits to Calcutta, catching him in many moods, even loquacious (especially in Bengali). At mealtimes – taken Indian-style of course, with the fingers, but sitting at a table rather than on the floor – his wife and son would be there and maybe a family friend or two. Occasionally there would be some mild disagreement. I remember the kiss in *The Home and the World* was controversial, for instance; Bijoya was convinced it would not get past the censors. 'You've been saying that for years,' replied Satyajit in a quiet, firm voice that spoke volumes for his capacity to outface every kind of convention once he has set his mind on it.

On the whole though, he prefers to listen and watch, rather than talk, just as he did as a solitary child 'imbibing' life – to use his own word – in a houseful of unselfconscious adults. You can feel his powers of observation acting upon you in a manner that goes a long way towards explaining the psychological intensity of his films, 'the pleasure of recognising the familiar pin-pointed by art' (in the words of Ray's closest British friend, now dead). A Bengali friend of mine, who dropped her handbag in Ray's room, recalls distinctly the sensation of him studying the movement of her body as she bent to pick the bag up. The moments with him I myself have enjoyed most are his pauses and laughs – neither of which, like the wordless peaks of his films, can really be caught in print. They punctuate the most revealing passages of my many hours of interviews with him. I cannot truthfully say Ray welcomed the prospect of these talks, at least partly because it was a filmed interview he gave that helped to precipitate his first heart attack; but in the event he spoke freely. I got the feeling that he could not resist

answering a well-constructed question. Those that were not – such as that question at the NFT a few years earlier – usually elicited a loud request for a repeat, silence, or perhaps a brief response trailing off into a sort of dismissive sniff.

Satyajit is 'very much a private person', as he once volunteered to me. Although he knows himself extremely well, he is 'guarded' about revealing that knowledge to anyone else – to use the adjective favoured by Lindsay Anderson, who has been a friend since 1950 – except obliquely. Most of those in Bengal who have known him since his youth feel he is at heart a loner, like his own detective hero Felu. Not that he is a snob; he is willing to talk to anyone at any level – hence his unrivalled rapport with children as a director – but he finds it difficult to tolerate insincerity, insensitivity or stupidity in a person or artistic production for very long. That is why he avoids and distrusts politicians and lawyers, for instance, and why he can seem remote, aloof or even cold to some. But I have yet to meet anyone with a genuine feeling for a subject that interests Ray who did not enjoy talking to him about it – whether it was cinema, music, painting, literature, a new scientific theory, cricket, the fast-changing face of Calcutta, someone he admires, or any of a host of other things, often quite unexpected.

In the short time that I have known Satyajit he has constantly surprised me. I knew about his liking for chess, crosswords and Scrabble, for instance; but I never suspected his addiction to one-armed bandits. In the last few years, it turned out, he has several times vanished from Calcutta to Katmandu, where few people recognise him, so that he can play the machines at a casino there to his heart's content. 'He's become a slot-machine freak,' says his son with a grin, who shot a television film in Katmandu during one such visit.

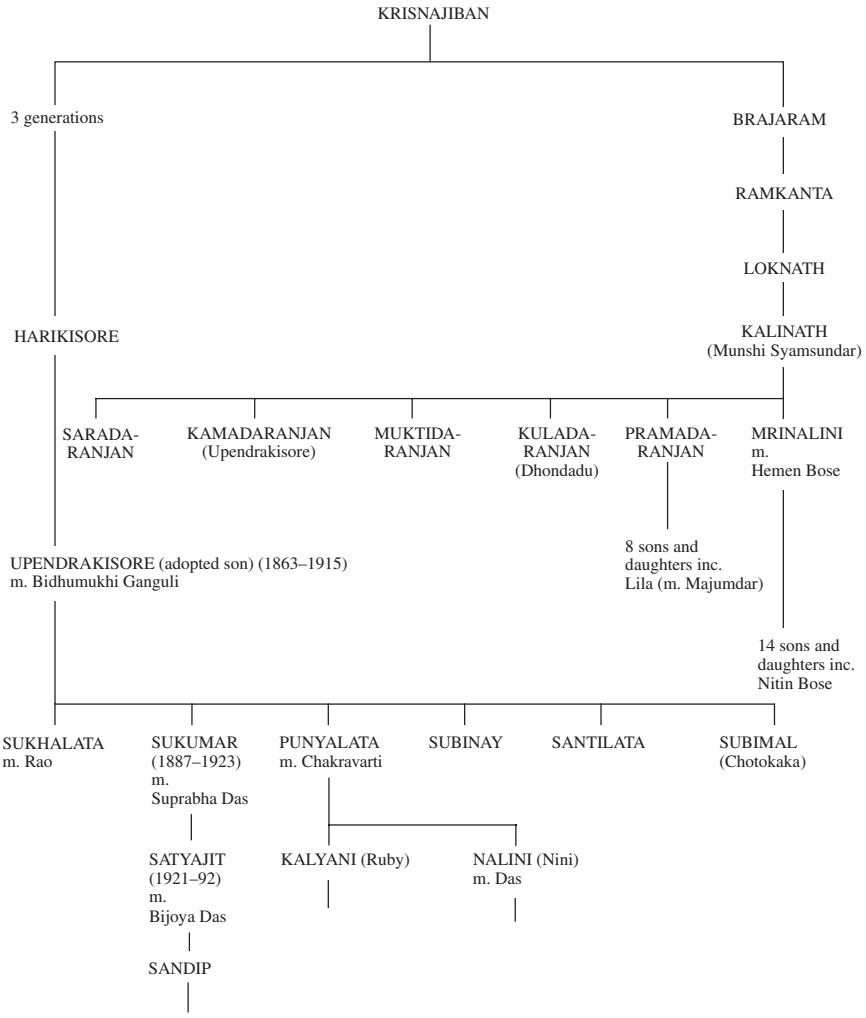
Ray is a rich and multifarious person in an age of impoverished specialisation. As V. S. Naipaul remarked of him to me, 'Ray and Kurosawa are among the most prodigious personalities in the cinema since it came into being.' Or as Satyajit himself replied in 1982 when I asked him if he had felt conscious of the range of eastern and western influences on him as he grew up: 'I never had the feeling of grappling with an alien culture when reading European literature, or looking at European painting, or listening to western music, whether classical or popular.'

To do Ray full justice would take a wide understanding of world cinema of all kinds and of western and Indian classical music, as well as an informed appreciation of the language, literature, music, art, religions and history of Bengal, the cultural confluence of India – and especially of Bengal's greatest creative figure Rabindranath Tagore. That is not to mention a grasp of the classical heritage of the Mughals at Lucknow, portrayed in *The Chess Players*, and the history of the British Raj in India. Even the little I have read in Bengali, including much of Ray's own writings (and

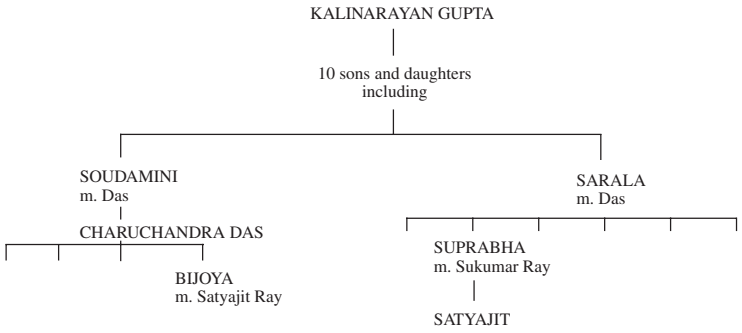
his charming memoir of his early life), hints at depths and subtleties in his work that most viewers sadly will never appreciate – which helps to account for the common impression that Ray's films are 'slow'. I have seldom felt this myself, even when I first got to know them. Their characters always felt so vivid, so individual, so *real*. In fact my chief credential for writing about Ray is the lasting satisfaction I have had from repeated viewings of his films and from my friendship with him. I hope that some of this pleasure, at least, will engage the reader of what follows.

London (Islington and Palmers Green)
December 1988

THE RAY FAMILY TREE (PATERNAL)



THE RAY FAMILY TREE (MATERNAL)



[1]

A Bengali Banyan Tree:
The Ray Family

UNTIL quite late in Satyajit Ray's life many Bengalis thought of him as 'the son of Sukumar Ray' and 'the grandson of Upendrakisore Ray', rather than as an artist in his own right. Besides indicating their tacit disapproval of the cinema, they were also expressing an engrained reverence for the family. This the Rays more than justified. Upendrakisore was a pioneer of half-tone printing, a musician and composer of songs and hymns, and a writer and illustrator of classic children's literature. His son Sukumar was a writer and illustrator of nonsense literature, the equal of Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear. Both men were also universally considered the epitome of courtesy, artists in their lives as much as in their works.

Their earliest-known ancestor was Ramsundar Deo, a Hindu youth who uprooted himself in the mid-sixteenth century from his village in what is now West Bengal and wandered into East Bengal (now Bangladesh). He reached Serpur where, at the house of the local zamindar, he met the ruler of nearby Yasodal, who took a liking to him for his quick intelligence and invited him to Yasodal. There he gave him a house, land and a daughter in marriage. For the rest of his life Ramsundar Deo administered his father-in-law's estates.

Subsequent generations of his family lived at Yasodal and, later, in a village called Masua further east, on the other side of the river Brahmaputra. They steadily gathered wealth and education and acquired the honorific title 'Majumdar', a common Bengali surname today meaning roughly 'revenue accountant', in recognition of their service to the Muslim rulers of Bengal. The name 'Ray', which they later took, is also an honorific. A derivative of 'Raja', it was usually assumed by landowners and showed that the family had moved steadily up the social scale.

At some point in the latter half of the eighteenth century a flood destroyed Masua and divided the family into two branches, one of which became noted for its learning, the other for its wealth and piety. Of the first, Ramkanta Majumdar was fluent in several languages, an expert singer

and musician and a man of great physical strength and courage. It is said that he would eat a full basket of parched rice and a whole jackfruit for breakfast, and that once, when he was sitting on his verandah, a wild boar attacked him. He grabbed its snout and held it in his vice-like grip before shouting for help. The boar was done to death with sandals and bare hands. In another story Ramkanta single-handedly retrieved a cow stolen from him at the behest of a local zamindar, upturning a couple of the zamindar's toughs and sticking their heads in the mud of a river-bank.

The eldest of Ramkanta's three sons had the habit of replying to a question in verse; the youngest became a famous scholar in Persian; but the second son, Loknath, was so fluent in Sanskrit, Arabic and Persian that he was able to read aloud in one language from a book written in another so fluently that his listeners would not know he was translating. In his twenties he began practising certain austerities associated with Tantric yoga and increasingly withdrew from the world. His father, concerned that his son would become a sannyasi, secretly gathered together his books and sacred objects one day and dropped them in a river. Loknath was so shattered that he took to a fast and died within three days. As he lay on his deathbed he told his weeping wife, who held their only child, 'Now you have only one, but from him will come a hundred!' – a family story often repeated in Satyajit Ray's childhood a century later.

This son, Kalinath, father of Upendrakisore Ray, was probably born in the 1830s. He too was a scholar in Sanskrit, Arabic and Persian, but not a sannyasi. Held in high esteem for his integrity, he would be called to adjudicate at the disputations of Hindu pundits – and, remarkably, those of Muslim maulvis too. They regularly appealed to him to interpret *firmans*, the legal documents that had formed the basis of administration from the earliest days of the Mughal Empire. In fact, Kalinath Ray became better known as 'Munshi' (Professor) Syamsundar: an unusual distinction for a Hindu in a period when Islam was in retreat all over India.

Apart from Hinduism and Islam, the third major influence in Bengal at this time was of course European, acting initially through the East India Company, under Clive, Hastings, Cornwallis and others, then, after 1857, through the British Government and its representatives in India. Calcutta was their capital and the second city of the British Empire, known as the 'City of Palaces' after the grand mansions of British merchants and their Bengali collaborators lining the banks of the river Hooghly. The intermixing of all three civilisations, but principally the Hindu and the European, produced the cultural upsurge in nineteenth-century Bengal in which the Ray family figured prominently. Conveniently labelled the Bengal Renaissance, it embraced the entire gamut of imaginative response of one culture to another – from the most creative, in the persons of Sir William Jones and Rabindranath Tagore, to the most sterile: those Bengalis who preferred to speak in English, write in English and think in English

and who 'would be supremely happy when they could dream in English' (in the words of a contemporary Bengali poet/satirist). The Renaissance included perhaps a dozen men of world stature, and one dazzling genius (Tagore), but its typical representative was an imitator of the West. As David Kopf, an American historian, observed, 'The Bengal Renaissance was the child of eighteenth-century cosmopolitanism and pragmatic British policy built around the need for an acculturated civil-service class.'

The most energetic group of Bengalis to emerge from this colonial interaction were the Brahmos, a small minority within Hindu society who from the late 1820s reacted strongly both to Christianity, western literature and ideas and to the appalling social excesses of that time, such as *sati* (widow burning). They rejected idolatry and caste and, in due course, the concept of a revealed religion. Founded by Raja Rammohun Roy, a phenomenal linguist and the greatest Indian intellectual of the nineteenth century, who died in Britain in 1833, the Brahmos were subsequently led by Devendranath Tagore, father of Rabindranath. In the 1860s and 70s two schisms took place, leading to the creation of the Sadharan (Low Church) Brahmo Samaj. This was the branch with which the Ray family became associated in the 1880s.

Brahmo beliefs were never clearly distinguished, despite endless debate, either within a Samaj, or sect, or between the different Samajs. Throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, Christian missionaries continued their efforts to claim Brahmos for Christ, but the attempt was a vain one, as much enmeshed in the political and social differences between Britain and India as in theological controversy. Brahmoism at its highest was more Christian than the religion of the missionaries. Perhaps Rabindranath Tagore put it best years later when he reminded westerners that 'much of the spirit of Christianity runs counter, not only to the classical culture of Europe, but to the European temperament altogether.'

In its heyday Brahmoism was a vigorous movement for social reform motivated by ideas of 'plain living, high principles, industry and perseverance' which bore a resemblance to Victorian values of the time in Britain that is by no means accidental. From the 1860s to the 1890s, Brahmos were 'very powerful figures,' to quote Satyajit Ray, 'very demanding figures with lots of social fervour in them: the willingness, the ability and the eagerness to do good to society, to change society for the better.'

A typical Brahmo protagonist was Dwarkanath Ganguli, Upendrakisore Ray's father-in-law. Born in East Bengal in 1844, he fled his orthodox Hindu home in the 1860s and later founded a journal dedicated to exposing the sexual degradation of women known as 'Kulin Brahminism' – a pioneering expression of male sympathy for female values integral to his great-grandson Satyajit Ray's films. In the 1880s he became a champion of the rights of workers on the British-owned tea plantations in Assam, where he defeated the sahibs in bare-fisted duels. Meanwhile, after the

death of his first wife, he had married again – a student of the school he had founded in Calcutta half his age, the elegant and accomplished Miss Kadambini Bose. In 1882 she had become one of the earliest women BAs in the British Empire (only three years after Oxford University's first woman BA), which she then capped by becoming the first fully qualified woman physician in India, completing her training in Edinburgh. It was Kadambini who delivered baby Satyajit and although he never knew her (she died when he was only two), he felt her influence through the profound effect she had on all the Ray women, including his mother.

Upendrakisore, Satyajit's grandfather, born in 1863, was about the same age as Kadambini. Although his birthplace was in rural Masua, several days' journey from the missionaries, littérateurs and intellectuals in Calcutta, he soon felt the attraction of Brahmoism. His position was rather a peculiar one. The second of Munshi Syamsundar's five sons, he had been adopted at the age of five by a childless relative belonging to the orthodox, wealthy branch of the Ray family. This relative, a zamindar and lawyer in Mymensingh, the headquarters of the area, apparently chose Upendrakisore from amongst the brothers because his skin was very fair – a quality still sought after in India today. He changed the boy's name from Kamadaranjan to Upendrakisore, after the style of his own name, Harikisore, to which he added the honorific 'Ray Chaudhuri'.

Ironically, he had picked the brother probably least suited to his traditional Hindu outlook. Though not a fanatic, Harikisore was a scrupulous observer of caste taboos and ceremonies, like the zamindar in Ray's *The Goddess* which relates to this period; he was the president of the Mymensingh association for the upholding of Hindu practices in the face of Brahmo encroachments. He forbade his adopted son to meet a school friend who was sympathetic to Brahmoism. So the two boys met in secret, in some nearby woods, with the notes of Upendrakisore's flute for signal.

A love of drawing and of music had made an early appearance in Upendrakisore. When the Governor of Bengal paid a visit to his school in Mymensingh some time in the 1870s, he spotted the boy drawing intently in class. Picking the book up he saw an excellent sketch of himself. The teachers were worried as to how the sahib would react. But he patted Upendrakisore on the back and told him, in English of course, 'You must not let this skill disappear. When you grow up you should follow this line.' In Ray's *Aparajito*, the young Apu in his country school guilelessly recites the poem '*Bangla Desh*' ('Land of Bengal') to a spellbound Bengali inspector. Although the circumstances differ greatly, the spirit of these scenes is similar.

Like Apu half a century later, Upendrakisore won a scholarship to study in Calcutta. Although in later life he paid frequent visits to Mymensingh, it appears he never lived there again after starting at Presidency College, the city's foremost academic institution. Not only was the cosmopolitan atmosphere of India's capital city more congenial to him than that of a rural

zamindari, Harikisore had now produced children of his own. Though Upendrakisore retained a share in the land at Mymensingh, he preferred drawing and singing in Calcutta. He began to practise classical Indian styles under the best teachers and to develop his love of Brahmo songs and hymns. Soon he was composing some of his own which were incorporated into the Brahmo repertoire. His singing and playing were much in request at meetings and social gatherings: a performance he gave at Jorasanko, the Tagore family mansion in north Calcutta, led to a lifelong friendship with Rabindranath.

In 1884 he graduated in the arts and the following year he married the daughter of Dwarkanath Ganguli by his first marriage, moving into the large family house at 13 Cornwallis Street in central Calcutta, opposite the main temple of the Brahmo Samaj. Though she was no match in intellect for her young stepmother Kadambini, Upendrakisore's wife was a remarkable woman in her own right who bore him three sons and three daughters. Sukumar, Satyajit's father, was the second child to arrive, born in 1887. The third was Punyalata, author of a vivid memoir of this period in the life of the Ray family – *Chelebelar Dinguli* (*Those Childhood Days*), published in 1957 with exquisite illustrations by her nephew Satyajit. She depicts Upendrakisore constantly drawing and painting, or playing his violin or singing, either in performance or in class as the teacher of a great variety of pupils, including non-Indians. Listeners gathered in the street outside when he played, just as they did around him when he took his family to an exhibition or festival and explained things to his children. He was obviously the most affectionate of fathers, with an understanding of young children's minds which enabled him to write with great charm and simplicity for them. Some of his earliest Bengali writings were children's versions of the epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. His grandson Satyajit thrilled to these as a child in the 1920s and 30s; and as an adult, reading the full versions of these sprawling epics, he was astonished to find that his grandfather had managed to pack 'practically everything' from them into his abridgements.

Sukumar took after his father in very many ways. He was serious, lively and intensely curious, and a natural story-teller. He would show his brothers and sisters pictures of weird and wonderful animals from their father's storybooks and invent his own stories about them. He created his own creatures too, with untranslatable onomatopoeic names – forerunners of the verses and drawings which today are loved wherever Bengali is spoken.

He also dreamed up a novel way of relieving frustration through story-telling – 'Fake Anger', as he called it. Like his son Satyajit, Sukumar was famously even-tempered from early childhood on. If one of his friends felt angry with somebody but could not get back at him, Sukumar would say, 'All right, let's fake some anger!' Then he would begin spinning strange stories about his victim, with everyone else joining in. 'There was no hatred or malice in them,' recalls his sister in her memoir, 'we only imagined the

person in a ridiculous situation. We had to think of all the possible ways of making that person look foolish and of all the embarrassing positions he could get into. It soon reduced you to stitches, and the peculiar thing was, that in the course of all this giggling the anger just evaporated, leaving one feeling light and happy.'

When Sukumar was about eight, a new element appeared in the lives of the Ray children which would later have a profound influence on Satyajit's life and films – a printing press. There were already advanced presses in Calcutta in the early 1890s but good-quality printing of illustrations simply did not exist. Upendrakisore's illustrations for his children's *Ramayana* had been ruined as a result. With merely the help of technical books published in the West, Upendrakisore acquired the confidence to set himself up as Calcutta's first high-quality process engraver and went on to win international prizes for the quality of his reproductions. He began by ordering a camera and various pieces of half-tone equipment from Britain, which Punyalata remembers arriving by bullock cart; soon after that, they moved out of 13 Cornwallis Street to a house not far away which Upendrakisore had made into a studio.

The money for this came from selling most of his share in the zamindari at Mymensingh to his foster brother Narendrakisore, who was in charge of it following his father Harikisore's death. Never much inclined towards his childhood milieu of orthodox religion and caste conventions, Upendrakisore had by now moved away from it almost totally, no doubt accelerated by such incidents as a libellous attack on his father-in-law's wife, Kadambini Ganguli, in 1891 by the conservative editor of a Hindu journal in Calcutta: as a liberated Brahmo woman she was accused of being a whore.

A few years after that the zamindari itself was the focus of trouble. Harikisore's widow, apparently insulted by a Muslim peasant, demanded and was brought the peasant's head – an act of feudal vengeance of a type by no means unheard of in rural India at that time. The subsequent criminal case did much damage to her son Narendrakisore's finances and of course to his estate, which steadily declined like that of the doomed zamindar in Ray's *The Music Room*. The case became a celebrated scandal which the writer Nirad C. Chaudhuri remembered hearing about in his childhood in East Bengal at the turn of the century.

The printing firm of U. Ray was founded in 1895. Experimentation began immediately. Starting in 1897, Upendrakisore wrote a series of articles for the best-known British printing journal of the time, *Penrose Annual*, based on his researches. Their titles, though technical, are self-explanatory: 'Focussing the screen' (1897), 'The theory of the half-tone dot' (1898), 'The half-tone theory graphically explained' (1899), 'Automatic adjustment of the half-tone screen' (1901), 'Diffraction in half-tone' (1902–3), 'More about the half-tone theory' (1903–4), 'The 60° cross-line screen' (1905–6), 'Multiple stops' (1911–12).

U. Ray, working solo in distant Calcutta, had arrived on the printing scene at the beginning of a revolution in half-tone processes. The rational part of his mind was excited by the possibilities of applying the scientific theory governing the transmission of light, as it was then understood, to a very inexact craft. Perhaps, too, the family tradition of scholarship in the subtleties of the ancient Sanskrit texts, with their conception of the dual nature of the universe, gave Upendrakisore insight into the nature of light in advance of the advent of quantum theory in the West in the 1920s. The article Upendrakisore wrote on diffraction shows his unusual perspective on the problem, besides demonstrating the clarity of his English prose:

> One writer has said that the effect of diffraction is to make the half-tone dot *smaller* than it otherwise would be. Another has said it makes it *larger*. And this has very naturally provoked the remark that 'both can hardly be right'. Yet, strange as it may at first sound, both these contradictory statements are true. The writers in question looked at the subject from different points of view, and were thus, in each case rightly, led to opposite conclusions.

This particular article concludes with some remarks that bear a remarkable resemblance, both in attitude and style, to the unpretentious analyses which grandson Satyajit began to write about the making of films more than half a century later. A multiplicity of techniques applied to an art are fine if you have the resources, both Rays make clear, but you cannot do without imagination.

The following year, *Penrose Annual* carried no contribution from U. Ray. He had fallen seriously ill and been forced to give up work and retire to a health resort for some time. In his stead, the *Penrose* editor in London (noting that his readers would 'miss an article from the classical pen of Mr. U. Ray B.A.') summarised Upendrakisore's latest researches, and informed the printing trade that U. Ray had anticipated by some years the important screen just patented by someone in Britain. Unable to prove his theory in Calcutta for lack of resources, Upendrakisore had appealed to his colleagues in Britain for help and one of them had plagiarised his ideas. It is difficult to say how much Upendrakisore resented this in private, but his later articles in *Penrose Annual* do have a faintly bitter tang; he was obviously irritated by what he felt to be the sloppiness of most technical writing in the field and by an intransigent refusal to give theory its due, coupled to some unscrupulousness. Both his son and his grandson would encounter similar behaviour, but each refused to let such overtones of imperial arrogance cloud their overall judgment of the West.

Like the majority of educated Bengalis Upendrakisore came into direct contact with the British relatively rarely, which minimised the potential for the kind of friction found in Forster's *A Passage to India*. Even when contact was unavoidable, Upendrakisore seems to have been able to deflect

it with irony somewhat as Satyajit would do in *The Chess Players*. Once, for instance, Upendrakisore was sharing a train compartment with a group of Englishmen. At a station one of them, a young man, commanded Upendrakisore, 'Call the biscuitwallah here!' Either because he had misheard or because he felt amused, Upendrakisore enquired: 'You want *pani* – water?' The youth became indignant and demanded – 'Are you deaf? Why don't you listen? Don't you know that we have conquered your country!' 'Is it you who has conquered this country?' asked Upendrakisore mildly, 'Then you must be a very old man by now, though you look so young.' This made the older sahibs laugh and deflated the young man.

Such unfailing courtesy in real life and in his original works may have prompted Upendrakisore's interest in less benign stories, as a form of release. His first collection of retellings of Bengali folk-tales free from their dialect appeared in 1910 and has become a Bengali classic. Satyajit has translated a few of them into English, and a scholar has published an edition in Britain. Stupid tigers, foolish weavers and Brahmins, and cunning jackals stalk their pages. Most of the endings, though not all, are notably cruel and there is much cynicism.

Rabindranath Tagore was an enthusiastic advocate of Upendrakisore's writing, encouraging him to translate and adapt stories from abroad as well as from Bengal and from the Indian legends. As a frequent visitor to the house Tagore came to regard Upendrakisore's son Sukumar as one of his favourite young friends. Like everyone else, and especially Sukumar's five brothers and sisters, he fell for his open-mindedness and brilliant wit; in later life Tagore apparently tried to outdo Sukumar's nonsense verse but gave up in admiration. His jokes could be reassuringly practical too. Once his sister Punyalata and two other children planted flowering shrubs in tubs. Theirs produced some beautiful blue flowers, but hers showed only white ones. Not long afterwards though, she was delighted to see that her plant had burst into multi-coloured bloom. It was only later that she noticed splashes of paint on the floor and realised that Sukumar had been up early with his brush. One wonders if he knew then of the famous scene in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*; the book later influenced him strongly.

At school both the teachers and his classmates liked Sukumar. He had an independent spirit without being rebellious. Once, when he was about thirteen, a master expatiated on the harmful effects of the bioscope – a favourite bugbear of Brahmo puritans, along with the theatre, alcohol and smoking – and then asked Sukumar for his opinion. He declared that among all the trashy pictures there were some good ones too. He persuaded the master to go and see one with him (*Les Misérables*) – and made a convert: 'You have disabused me of a wrong notion. I had no idea there were such good bioscope pictures,' the master told him afterwards.

As a young man, Sukumar fully supported the movement that swept Bengal from about 1903 in reaction to Lord Curzon's proclaimed intention

of partitioning the province (about which Tagore later wrote his novel *The Home and the World*, filmed by Ray). Although Sukumar, like his father and son, was never involved in active politics, he was a patriot. He had earlier snubbed his sister when she greeted a British victory in the Boer War with enthusiasm, by making the rhymed remark (here translated): 'When we ourselves are beat, can you laugh at another's defeat?' It was around this time that he composed his first songs, which were patriotic ones, and his first play, a comedy about a 'brown sahib', an imitation Englishman who gets his comeuppance. But he could also joke about the dreadful quality of the much-vaunted *swadeshi* (Indian-made) products of the time in a song which he called 'Swadeshi Fever'. He dubbed them 'awful-looking, less-lasting, expensive at the price'. Even so, he used them.

In 1906 Sukumar left Presidency College with double honours in physics and chemistry. His Nonsense Club began around this time. Its inspiration came from one person – Sukumar – but many of his family and friends took part in it. He wrote two plays for it, and produced a hand-written magazine, *Sare Batris Bhaja* – literally, 'Thirty-two-and-a-half delicacies', a street cry of Calcutta hawkers who sold thirty-two varieties of savoury and half a chilli. According to Punyalata, 'there was no sarcasm in it, only a spirit of pure, effortless wit.' One copy survived with Satyajit Ray.

The first play *Jhalapala* (a nonsense title) is all word play, the second, *Laksmaner Saktisel* (*Laksman and the Wonder Weapon*), is a spoof on the *Ramayana*. Funny excerpts from each, staged by Ray, appear in his 1987 documentary film *Sukumar Ray* (made for the centenary of his father's birth). As Ray put it, 'Characters out of the *Ramayana* descend from the epic heights . . . Unpoetic matters easily find place here . . . Hanuman eats sugar-puffs, the Messenger of Death finds his salary in arrears.'

Sukumar began to make his mark as a critic in his early twenties. His first piece, 'Photography as an art', was based on considerable practical experience; he took photographs from his early teens, developed and printed them himself, and in 1922 became the second Indian to be made a Fellow of the Royal Photographic Society. Another article, which he sent from London two years later, discussed the Post-Impressionist exhibition organised by Roger Fry; and a third – in reply to a pompous art critic – showed that Sukumar could be caustic: 'O. C. Ganguly says that spirituality is the essence of Indian Art . . . Does he mean that if the eyes are half-closed, the figure is meditating and looks limp, then so much the better?'

Upendrakisore Ray never went to Britain, but in October 1911 his son took up a scholarship to study printing and photographic techniques in London, where Satyajit would go in 1950 to study graphic design. He was then twenty-four, a youthful energetic man of few prejudices, wide learning and even wider interests, high-spirited but perhaps a shade pampered by a doting mother and sisters, who was determined to learn as much about his chosen profession as he possibly could, before anything else. This single-

mindedness was later shared by Satyajit, with his pursuit of films in London; neither father nor son had much time for conventional sight-seeing.

Sukumar inhabited two distinct worlds during his stay in Britain. One was that of a specialised craft, notoriously inward-looking, located first at the London School of Photo-engraving and Lithography just north of Fleet Street and then at the School of Technology in Manchester, the country's second city and in 1911 the hub of imperial commerce. The other was his social and artistic life – visiting galleries and museums, and meeting artistic, literary and religious Englishmen with a sympathy for things Indian, but making only one lasting friendship amongst these new acquaintances. In June 1912 his circle became much wider with the arrival in London of his friend Tagore, then on his third, historic visit to London.

Two lucid articles in English written by Sukumar in this period epitomise these two worlds. It is quite hard to believe that the same person was responsible for both pieces. The first, 'Half-tone facts summarised', is typical of his father's style (and of his son's); it appeared in *Penrose Annual* along with a follow-up entitled 'Standardising the original'. The second, 'The spirit of Rabindranath Tagore', which could never have been written by Satyajit because of its philosophical bent, began life as a lecture and then appeared in a well-known religious journal of the day, the *Quest*. It was the first serious critique of Tagore by an Indian to be published in the West, about a year after W. B. Yeats' ecstatic introduction to Tagore's poems, and it remains today one of the most perceptive because of its writer's uniquely informed empathy with the subject. Besides insight into Tagore, it offers special insight into Sukumar's state of mind, of which there are only a few hints in his many letters home (apart from their tone, which is surprisingly serious for so humorous a man). In Britain Sukumar seems to have been undergoing an inner conflict, accentuated by a growing awareness of the power of imperialism that led to war within a year of his departure from Britain. In the article, too, is the outline of his future clash and disenchantment with the Brahmo Samaj, and even the beginnings of the frightening loss of faith in life that took hold of him seven years later. He shares Tagore's doubt whether organised religions have any answers to the really important questions, but suggests that Tagore himself may point the way:

> Where poetry is coextensive with life itself, where art ceases to be the mere expression of an imaginative impulse, it is futile to attempt a comprehensive analysis. Rabindranath's poetry is an echo of the infinite variety of life, of the triumph of love, of the supreme unity of existence, of the joy that abides at the heart of all things. The whole development of his poetry is a sustained glorification of love.

Sukumar left Britain for Calcutta with Tagore in September 1913, two months before the news of Tagore's Nobel Prize came through. In December he married Suprabha Das, a beautiful girl from a well-known

musical Brahmo family whom he had met before his trip to Britain, and soon settled down in the new house-cum-printing press that Upendrakisore had begun building in north Calcutta at 100 Garpar Road during his son's absence abroad. He had also started the magazine for young people which his grandson would later edit – *Sandesh*, which means both 'Sweetmeat' and 'Information'. The first issue appeared in May 1913 and included some illustrations by Sukumar – his first to be published – sent from Britain. Upendrakisore published *Sandesh* until his death in December 1915. He was its chief contributor and illustrator; stories, articles, drawings and paintings, riddles and poems streamed from his pen, pencil and brushes. *Sandesh* was the culmination of a quarter of a century's imaginative affection for young people. No doubt it also – along with his violin-playing – helped to take Upendrakisore's mind off his worsening diabetic condition, which appears to have been aggravated by the disruption of drugs from Europe caused by the First World War. In the *Penrose Annual* obituary, delayed because of the war, Upendrakisore was described with moving simplicity as 'an Indian gentleman of remarkable scientific gifts, who probed deeply into the mysteries of half-tone.' To his grandson Satyajit, who was much averse to hyperbole, he was always an inspiration.

> My grandfather was a rare combination of East and West. He played the *pakhwaj* as well as the violin; wrote devotional songs while carrying out research on printing methods; viewed the stars through a telescope from his own roof; wrote old legends and folk-tales anew for children in his inimitably lucid and graceful style and illustrated them in oils, water-colours and pen-and-ink, using truly European techniques. His skill and versatility as an illustrator remain unmatched by any Indian.

His son Sukumar's achievement was not so much his drawings, brilliant though the fantasy ones are, as the creation of a nonsense world unique in Bengali literature. Satyajit marvelled at its originality, while weaving a fantasy world of his own. His father's came into being between 1914 and his premature death in 1923. In some ways it is reminiscent of Carroll's and Lear's – and there is no doubt that he was by then fully aware of Carroll, if not so much of Lear – but, as Satyajit pointed out, Sukumar's creatures are not pure fantasies but generally half-known to us, both in the language they speak and in their appearance. They also usually impinge on ordinary human beings, unlike many of Lear's creatures. Much of his humour is also rooted in Bengali behaviour, which means it does not always travel well. (In translating Carroll and Lear for *Sandesh*, Satyajit invented Bengali 'equivalents' to keep them funny.) But whatever the limitations of translation, no non-Bengali speaker can look at the Stortle, the Whalephant or the Porcuduck (to use their paler English names) and miss the fertility of Sukumar's imagination, even if its full flavour is elusive. Some of the most charming of Sukumar's whimsies, they are also some of his earliest, being

first spotted in *Sandesh* in 1914. The poem in which they appear is called '*Khichuri*' ('Hotch-potch'). Here it is in Satyajit Ray's 'translation':

A duck once met a porcupine; they formed a corporation
Which called itself a Porcuduck (a beastly conjugation!).
A stork to a turtle said, 'let's put my head upon your torso;
We who are so pretty now, as Stortle would be more so!'
The lizard with the parrot's head thought: Taking to the chilli
After years of eating worms is absolutely silly.
A prancing goat – one wonders why – was driven by a need
To bequeath its upper portion to a crawling centipede.
The giraffe with grasshopper's limbs reflected: Why should I
Go for walks in grassy fields, now that I can fly?
The nice contented cow will doubtless get a frightful shock
On finding that its lower limbs belong to a fighting cock.
It's obvious the Whalephant is not a happy notion:
The head goes for the jungle, while the tail turns to the ocean.
The lion's lack of horns distressed him greatly, so
He teamed up with a deer – now watch his antlers grow!

Some verses must surely have been provoked – at least in part – by the solemnity of Brahmos who surrounded Sukumar in the Samaj. Others are keenly satirical. We can guess that Sukumar was mocking those Bengalis obsessed with using *swadeshi* products instead of foreign ones, those who pigeon-holed life in dogmas, and those who distrusted the scientific attitude towards medicine as foreign-inspired. Some of his satires are still acutely topical: one pokes fun at the snobbery and money-mindedness of arranged marriages; another has a go at the timid, office-bound mentality of the Bengali clerk (the 'babu' whom Kipling mercilessly lampooned), who believes that his moustache – an important symbol of his status – has been stolen while he was dozing. The mirror that his cringing subordinates are holding up to his face only infuriates him the more. Here are the last three verses in Satyajit's 'translation':

'Know this – in the near future
I ought to – no, I must *reduce your wages.'*
This he did. And then at random
He composed a memorandum.
Herewith quoted (minus appendages):

'If you think your employees
Deserve your love – correction please:
They don't. They're fools. No common sense.
They're full of crass incompetence.
The ones in my establishment,
Deserve the highest punishment.

'They show their cheek in not believing
Whiskers lend themselves to thieving.
Their *moustaches, I predict,*
Will soon be mercilessly picked:

And when that happens they will know
What Man is to Moustachio:
Man is slave, Moustache is master,
Losing which Man meets disaster.'

Finally, an example of pure nonsense is the chant written by Sukumar for a king in one of his plays. Ray, in *The Philosopher's Stone*, put some of this chant in the mouth of the *nouveau riche* clerk played hilariously by Tulsi Chakravarti; it is supposed to be a secret Sanskrit formula for the stone that turneth all to gold. This is Sukanta Chaudhuri's 'translation':

A green and gold orang-outang,
Rocks and stones that jolt and bang,
A smelly skunk and izzy-tizzy,
No admission, very busy.
Ghost and ghoul, do re mi fa
And half a loaf is better far.
Coughs and colds and peanut plants,
Pussies are the tiger's aunts,
Trouble-shooters, blotted blobs,
City centre vacant jobs.

The nuclei of some of these verses, plays and stories, may have formed at the new club that Sukumar Ray started in 1915 as a successor to his Nonsense Club. Called the Monday Club after the day it met, it soon became known as the Manda Club, for its tendency to indulge in feasts (*manda* meaning roughly 'sticky sweet'). It also discussed serious subjects as diverse as the jute industry, Swami Vivekananda, Bengali dialects, Strindberg, Turgenev and Plato; and its members included some of the best and brightest of young Bengal. A note from the third annual meeting of the club indicates that it could poke fun at itself too: 'Datta Das Babu to move that "In the interests of plain living, high thinking, tea and biscuits" . . .'

The club also served to bring together a group of like-minded young Brahmos with a passion to reform the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj. They shared a feeling that the Samaj had become puritanical and more concerned with in-fighting than social reform. The burning issue had come to be whether or not Tagore was fit to be an honorary member, given his stated view that Brahmos were Unitarian Hindus. 'I cannot separate Brahmoism from inner Hinduism,' he had said. This had deeply upset many Brahmos who regarded themselves as neither Christians nor Hindus but as a kind of separate caste. Not only that, Tagore was opposed to the missionary efforts of the Samaj,

and was said to favour the subordination of women, to the extent of marrying off a daughter well below the age acceptable to Brahmos; he had also written love songs and the novel *Gora*, which was a frontal assault on Brahmo dogmatism. Worst of all, he had made it clear that he had no real desire to be part of *any* group, whatever its beliefs. Despite the fact that the Brahmo Samaj hymn-book contained a very large number of Tagore's songs, many Brahmos chose to regard Rabindranath as a somewhat frivolous person, especially in comparison with his saintly father, 'Maharsi' Devendranath Tagore, the leader of the Samaj in the nineteenth century.

It is this background of rancour and factionalism that helps to explain an extraordinary letter written by Sukumar to a friend in the Samaj. In it he explained that while at a meeting making a speech in memory of a well-known Brahmo, he had suddenly lost control of his words and found himself making a very pessimistic speech in complete contradiction to all that he believed. He had come to the conviction that it was a premonition of his own death. (The word 'death' is in English and underlined.) He therefore wanted to withdraw from the Samaj and its squabbles with immediate effect, to concentrate on his own life in whatever time still remained to him. In early 1921, six months after writing this letter, Sukumar contracted the virulent malarial disease kala-azar; within three years he was dead, at the age of only thirty-five.

This paternal psychic experience, together with others, deeply affected Satyajit, though he was not born at the time of the premonition. For many years it was regarded as a family secret. 'This is something you have to believe,' Ray said, 'you can't help it.' Thinking of his great-great-grandfather Loknath he added: 'There's probably some streak of mysticism or spiritualism in our blood. This whole business of creation, of the ideas that come in a flash, cannot be explained by science. It cannot. I don't know what can explain it but I know that the best ideas come at moments when you're not even thinking of it. It's a very private thing really.'

Whatever psychological speculation one might indulge to explain Sukumar's strange experience, he certainly adhered to his resolution and abandoned his very active role in the Brahmo Samaj. To all the bitterness and doubt of that period he responded characteristically – with humour. A friend who stayed with Sukumar for a week in a sanitorium in Darjeeling during May 1921 – the very month Satyajit was born in Calcutta – recalled that neither of them discussed the controversy; instead, Sukumar read out his latest poems from *Abol Tabol*, the collection he began publishing in *Sandesh* in 1914 and which has since become his best-known work. Its preface contained a typical note of warning to those around Sukumar: 'This book was conceived in the spirit of whimsy. It is not meant for those who do not enjoy that spirit.'

'As far as my father's writing and drawing goes, nearly all his best work belongs to his last two-and-a-half years,' Satyajit thought – that is, after Sukumar contracted kala-azar. It includes *Ha-Ja-Ba-Ra-La*, a story with

some obvious similarities to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* but infused with Sukumar's own spirit; *Hesoram Husiar's Diary*, a sort of parody of Conan Doyle's *The Lost World* introducing prehistoric animals that, wrote Ray, 'only Sukumar knows about, and only he could have named, in matchless compounds of Latin and Bengali'; and an unfinished attempt to introduce each letter of the Bengali alphabet through long poems using traditional alliterative techniques. He also wrote a history of the Brahmo Samaj for children in the form of a long poem, of which the last few lines were surprisingly pessimistic, considering its young readership. 'Obviously the feeling was so strong that he couldn't avoid expressing it,' said Satyajit.

Although he was very ill, and mostly bedridden, Sukumar Ray worked until the very last days of his life; it appears that the disease allowed him periods of lucidity when he could compose, followed by relapses. 'The dummy for *Abol Tabol* was laid out by him,' said Satyajit. 'He was composing little tailpieces where there was room left at the bottom: filling them up with two-liners and four-liners. That was done straight into the dummy itself. That's the only place where you can find these tailpieces.'

In fact he never saw the finished book; it was published by U. Ray and Sons nine days after his death on 10 September 1923. The last poem in it, '*Abol Tabol*' itself, was Sukumar's last composition. Here are the first four lines and the last four, in Sukanta Chaudhuri's 'translation':

On hazy nights, among the clouds,
Through moonlit veils and rainbow shroud
With crazy rhyme and puckish note
I sing my song with open throat . . .
. . . A keen primordial lunar chill,
The nightmare's nest with bunchy frill –
My drowsy brain such glimpses steep,
And all my singing ends in sleep.

'I do not know of any other humourist,' his son later wrote, 'who could jest in this spirit at the meeting-point of life and death.' Tagore, who used to request Sukumar and his wife to sing his own songs privately for him soon after he had composed them, sang some himself at Sukumar's request at his bedside not long before he died. When the news reached him that Sukumar was gone, Tagore said: 'I have seen a great deal of Death, but I have seldom seen such a youthful figure, with such a short span of life behind him, stand before Death and offer so much to the Divine Spirit and with such dedication. At the gate of Death itself he sang a song of praise for eternal life. As I sat beside his death-bed he filled my soul with the note of that music.'

[2]

Early Years

1921–40

> You can never tell in advance which incidents in your childhood will stick in the mind and which will be wiped away for ever. To stick or not to stick; these things obey no rule. That is the mystery of memory. When I was five, I left my birthplace at Garpar Road for ever and went to Bhowanipur. The day we actually moved from the old house to the new is gone beyond recall, but I have a distinct recollection, even today, of a very ordinary dream I had there about the son of our cook called Haren.

So begins Ray's introduction to his short memoir of his childhood *Jakhan Choto Chilam* (*When I Was Small*), which he originally wrote in 1981 for *Sandesh* and later revised and published as a small book with his own pint-sized drawings. Like his aunt Punyalata's memoir *Those Childhood Days*, which inspired him, Ray's book is a gallery of sketches of family, friends and teachers, for the most part affectionately drawn, interwoven with his childish preoccupations – stories and games, magic and magic lanterns, circuses and cinema – against a serene Calcutta backdrop, and interspersed with regular visits to Lucknow and Darjeeling, and other places, to stay with his relatives who had spread over Bengal and into neighbouring Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. The book's vision is deliberately that of a boy growing up but, like the films and stories Ray has created for children, it can hold an adult reader too.

Satyajit had only one memory of his father Sukumar, who died when he was about two and a half. It belongs to the courtyard of a house on the banks of the Ganges outside Calcutta, where the family had gone for the sake of Sukumar's health. His father is sitting indoors by the window painting. He suddenly calls out 'Ship coming!' His son remembered running into the courtyard and seeing a steamer pass by with a loud hoot. As a sort of private tribute to this memory, the painting Sukumar was then at work on appears in Satyajit's documentary on his father.

His main memories of those earliest years revolved around his grandfather's house-cum-press, U. Ray and Sons at 100 Garpar Road, and the relatives who occupied it. It stood in a peaceful road in north Calcutta with a deaf-and-dumb school on one side and a private school on the other which was no doubt typical of the crammers that Tagore tells us he spent his childhood years trying to escape in the 1860s and 70s. In the heat of midday, when Calcutta traffic of all kinds came to a stop, Satyajit would hear the chant of multiplication tables, of reading out loud and, sometimes, the shouts of angry masters.

The building had three storeys and a fine flat roof, which Upendrakisore had used for his astronomy. The printing machinery was housed at the front of the building on the ground floor and directly above that were the block-making and typesetting rooms. The Ray family lived at the back on all three floors. To reach them, a visitor entered a small lane to one side of the house. A door gave on to stairs to the right which led to the family apartments; those turning left were on press business.

Satyajit was fascinated from the beginning by the whole paraphernalia of printing, particularly as one of its end products was *Sandesh* with its three-colour cover. He became a frequent visitor to the first floor. As he entered, the compositors, sitting side by side in front of their multi-sectioned typecases, would glance up at him and smile. He would make his way past them to the back of the room – to the block-making section with its enormous imported process camera, and its distinctive smells. 'Even today,' wrote Ray in 1981, 'if I catch a whiff of turpentine, a picture of U. Ray and Sons' block-making department floats before my eyes.' The main operator of the camera, Ramdohin, was his friend. He had had no formal education; Upendrakisore had trained him from scratch and he was like one of the family. Presenting Ramdohin with a piece of paper with some squiggles on it, Satyajit would announce: 'This is for *Sandesh*.' Ramdohin would solemnly wag his head in agreement, 'Of course, Khoka Babu, of course' and lift Satyajit up to show him the upside-down image of his drawing in the screen of the camera. But somehow it would never appear in *Sandesh*.

Satyajit and *Sandesh* were mixed up in two other ways. With his widowed grandmother he spent hours sorting out and cleaning old picture blocks in her room on the first floor. And with his uncle Subinay, Sukumar's younger brother who managed the press after his death, he would discuss *Sandesh*'s paper requirements. Books of paper samples, sent from Germany, lay in his uncle's room on the second floor. They had a wonderful range of textures. His uncle would hand him one and say: 'Take a look inside. Which ones shall we order?' Running his hand over them like an expert, Satyajit would tender his advice. 'I really imagined the ones I had chosen would be sent from Germany.' He was saddened by the look of his own *Sandesh* (which he revived in 1961) in later years;

good paper was unobtainable in Calcutta at a price the magazine could afford.

He and his mother Suprabha lived in a room on the first floor, below his uncle Subinay. Besides a hazy recollection of English lessons there with an aunt, Satyajit recalled his mother reading Conan Doyle stories to him in English, translating them into Bengali as she went along. Two of his horror stories were favourites.

What he completely forgot were the early visits of his girl cousin, Kalyani, 'Ruby', the elder daughter of Punyalata, who used to help Suprabha Ray by bathing her little boy while she coped with her invalid husband. Full of affection for him, and a sense of fun too, Ruby liked to offer her charge some *pan* to chew and then ask him for a kiss; the blood-red juice would leave a small mark on her face. She recalled that Satyajit was really 'coddled' and 'adored' as a child, though not spoilt; to begin with because his parents had wanted a child for a long time, afterwards to make up for his lack of a father. A jewel had been born, and the baby soon became known as Manik – meaning 'jewel' – the name by which Ray's friends and co-workers called him (or Manikda, if they preferred to add the formal Indian suffix).

The person Ray himself remembered best from this period was undoubtedly the occupant of the ground-floor rooms below his own: his grandfather's younger brother Kuladaranjan – 'Dhondadu' to Manik. It is obvious why from the way Ray describes him in his memoir:

> Dhondadu threw the hammer, he enlarged photographs of those who had died, he introduced me to the ancient stories, and, at one time, he played cricket. As Captain of the Bengali team at the Town Club he had once, in a match against the European team, been stuck at ninety-nine runs right through the match, and then at the end scored a century. I heard the story of how he pulled this off many times from him.

His craft – photographic enlargement – must have been enthralling for a young child. As soon as an acquaintance of Kuladaranjan's died, someone from that person's household would appear at Garpar Road and place an order. The original would very likely be a small, slightly fuzzy face in a large group, but by the time Dhondadu had finished it felt like the deceased was actually looking out from the frame. Relatives would now come, the picture would be set upright on a table and unwrapped, and they would gaze at it and wipe their eyes. This was a scene Ray often saw in his childhood; in fact his mother wept before a portrait of Sukumar on the first anniversary of his death and so did the three-and-a-half-year-old Manik (though he did not remember this). Very early on, he learnt to treat death as part of life.

He liked to watch the entire process of photo-transformation in his grand-uncle's room. Placing an enlarged photograph on an easel, Dhondadu

would press a pair of bellows with his foot and spray the photograph with a nozzle held in his hand. The colour used was mainly black or dark brown, but once he finished a photograph of the deceased Maharaja of Natore in green for the background vegetation and red for the drapes of his Kashmir shawl, while the new Maharaja and Manik stood watching.

Upstairs, on the first floor, were piled the storybooks written by Kuladaranjan and published by U. Ray and Sons. He retold the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in Bengali, and a great many Indian legends and folk-tales; he also corresponded with Conan Doyle's widow and obtained the rights to translate his works into Bengali gratis.

Where Dhondadu's many activities were purposeful and productive, the eccentricities of Satyajit's youngest uncle – 'Chotokaka' – were pointless but beguiling; they remind one of some of the characters in the films Ray made for children. 'I doubt if there has ever been anyone at all like him', Ray reckoned. He lived first at Garpar Road, in a room on the second floor, later away from Satyajit (though he regularly visited him), and later still in Ray's own ménage with Satyajit's mother, wife and son until his death in 1973.

Chotokaka was a master at the City College School all his life and never married. In fact he had something about him of the sannyasis he used to visit for enlightenment – he was introverted and content with very little. Perhaps that was what helped to draw him and Manik together; an unusual degree of self-sufficiency and an indifference to luxury were marked characteristics of Ray from the very beginning.

Apart from retelling his peculiar dreams (which were reminiscent of the nonsense world of his elder brother Sukumar), dubbing members of the family with incomprehensible names which everyone was expected to understand, and chewing his food thirty-two times like Mr Gladstone which made his meals an hour longer than anyone else's, Chotokaka also kept a diary which intrigued Manik. He began each entry with important headlines from the day's papers and carried on with an almost hourly account of what he did, what he read, what he ate, where he went and what he saw. Any train journey Chotokaka undertook meant recording precise details of the engine types. Everything was noted in his diary in one of four colours – red, green, blue and black. Manik never understood Chotokaka's code properly but he realised that descriptions of nature were in green, nouns were in red and the rest was in black or blue.

Oddest of all in Manik's eyes was Chotokaka's sudden urge to learn judo, which came when Manik was about thirteen. Until then Chotokaka had been wholly unathletic, but he was quite serious about going through with it and so – to Manik's surprise – was Takagaki, a judo expert brought over from Japan by Tagore after his visit there. Uncle and nephew stuck at their lessons for quite a while (though the adult Ray could remember only a couple of the holds), and they watched spellbound as Takagaki fought