

Premchand through Satyajit Ray's Cinematic Eye: Film Adaptation of *Shatranj Ke Khiladi*

- N D Dani

Abstract: This paper is a serious study of India's most awarded filmmaker of world stature, namely, Satyajit Ray's adaptation of Premchand's well known short story *Shatranj Ke Khiladi*. Ray goes beyond Premchand and presents before us the clever and crooked colonial moves that were being played by the British Resident of Avadh to annex the province of Wajid Ali Shah's kingdom although there was a treaty between the nawab and the East India Company to the effect that the kingdom of Avadh will not be annexed.

Keywords: Satyajit Ray, Colonial Moves, Avadh, Annex, Lord Dalhousie, Wajid Ali Shah, Treaty, East India Company, Misrule,.

In this paper I propose to look at Premchand's famous short story *Shatranj Ke Khiladi* and its film adaptation by Satyajit Ray. Although adaptation of books into films has been very popular with both film makers and filmgoers, for any number of reasons, the opinion on adaptation is divided. There are people who think that films should be copies of books on which they are based and there are people who champion the freedom of the film maker to stamp his work with his own vision. The latter hold the view that it is the singer not the song that makes the splendour of communication successful. So we have faithful adaptations, literal adaptations and loose adaptations. Dennis Lehane, contemporary American novelist and screenwriter, some of whose books have been very successfully adapted into films once remarked tongue in cheek that literature and film, movies and books compare like apples and giraffes. But, he maintained, that they do compare. They do interbreed. Although literature and movies are distinct forms of communication umpteen solutions and accommodations have been found so that they can get along and have fruitful relationships. The number of adaptations from historical or literary sources into films is indeed very large. In fact, we now have a new term 'litflicks' on Internet which means literature adapted into flicks, the flickering medium of the motion pictures. But the question is: How and why literature and movies fruitfully nourish one another? When apples, giraffes, and other exotica interbreed what results? My paper shall try to answer this question by showing why and how Ray created another work of art, in another medium, turning a great

storyteller's short story into a famous film.

There can be several ways of approaching the two works. I have decided to approach the two works in terms of the question that must agitate the mind of every sensitive Indian who is familiar with an important segment of modern Indian history. The question is: why Wajid Ali Shah, the king of Awadh, a very rich kingdom in northern India, surrendered his kingdom to the British, in February 1856, without even a pretension to resistance. Surrenders by kings are not considered, at least not in India, honorable and the knowledge of this recorded fact of Indian history comes as a slap on the face of every self-respecting Indian. Both the works raise this question in their own ways. Premchand asks this question not directly but by implication. This is what he says:

Nawab wajid Ali Shah had been taken prisoner, and the forces were taking him to some undisclosed location. But there was no outrage in the town, no signs of struggle at all. Not a drop of blood had been shed. Never had the prince of a sovereign kingdom been humiliated so peaceably, without any blood shed at all. But this was not the Ahimsa that pleases the gods. This was merely the cowardice that reduces even cowards to tears. (Alok Rai: SKK p61)

In Ray's film this question is raised, towards the end, through the bafflement and incomprehension of Kalloo, the 13 year old boy, living on the outskirts of Lucknow and running small chores for the two nawabs Mir Roshan Ali and Mirza Sajjad Ali. They now play chess in Kalloo's village to avoid any interference whether from wife or imagined fear of being recruited in the royal army. I am quoting from the screenplay (see Sandip Ray & Aditi N. Sarkar: *Original English Film Scripts* p64) of Ray's film. "Kalloo (to Mirza): They say that the King has surrendered, sir. And there will be no fighting, no gun fire. The *Angrez* will be our King now on." Both Premchand and Ray attempt to answer this question in their own different ways. Let us see how. Premchand paints a brilliant picture of the life and times of Wajid Ali Shah at the beginning of the short story. I quote from Alok Rai's translation of the work: "It was the time of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah. All Lucknow was steeped in the pursuit of luxury. (Premchand's original word is *Vilasita*.) The great and the not-so-great, rich and poor alike, all were busily engaged in the pursuit of luxury. While some favoured soirees with music and dancing girls, others dedicated themselves to intoxication, to opium. But in every department of existence, entertainment and pleasure reigned supreme. Whether in the administration, or in the field of literature, in the arts as in commerce, in everyday living itself, indulgence had become the norm.... In sum, the whole kingdom was fast in the grip of luxury. Contests with pheasants, cockfights were being set up; and still others beguiled themselves with games of *chauuser* and chess. King and commoner alike, all were engaged in these pursuits. Even beggars used their meagre earnings to purchase opium and alcohol rather than bread." (Alok Rai: p53-54) A heavy consequence of this *Vilasita*, according to Premchand, was mismanagement of the affairs of the kingdom. I quote Premchand again:

The people were being fleeced in broad daylight, and there was no one they could turn to. All the wealth produced in the countryside was being sucked into Lucknow, and there it was being squandered on pimps and prostitutes. The kingdom as a whole was sinking ever deeper into debt at the hands of the British company. Even the annual taxes could not be collected in time because of mismanagement. The resident would issue dire warnings from time to time, but all were deep in the arms of luxury, and there was none to hear those warnings. (Alok Rai: p58)

The two nawabs, Mir Roshan Ali and Mirza Sajjad, Ali are telling illustrations of the aristocratic class – self-centered, withdrawn into self, indifferent to their king and the affairs of the state or the impending threat of annexation and cowards of the first waters. They are afraid that they might be called upon to render military service. I illustrate the attitude of the two nawabs towards Wajid Ali Shah and the fact of annexation as presented by Premchand. The two friends used to play at Mirza's house but Mirza's Begum Sahiba won't leave them in peace. She gave Mirza hell and threw away the chess pieces in a fit of anger one day. So the two friends now started playing at the house of Mir. Mir's wife, too, was not happy with their presence at her home and she cleverly arranged a horseman to impress upon her husband Mir Saheb that he has been called to enlist in the king's army. Mir is shaken to the bone. Mirza, too, is very uncomfortable at this piece of news. They now decide to be away from home. They now start playing in an abandoned mosque on the banks of the Gomti. Premchand is at his sarcastic best when commenting upon their engrossment in the game he says that "not even a yogi could have maintained such concentration in his meditation." The two nawabs were so engrossed in the game of chess that the deposition of Wajid Ali Shah is simply a non-event for them. I once again quote conversation between the two from Alok Rai's translation:

Mirza- So our king has been taken captive by the tyrants. Mir-Maybe. Now, check! Mirza- Just pause a little, my friend. I am not able to concentrate on this right now. Our poor king must be crying tears of blood right now. Mir- So he should. There he will hardly get the luxury he is used to. Here is check again! Mirza- Destiny knows such strange ups and downs. But what a painful situation is this. Mir- That it is, of course-and here is check again! And this is mate for sure, you can't get away now. Mirza- Heaven knows, you are completely heartless. Such a terrible calamity has happened, and you are not moved even a little. Poor, poor Wajid Ali Shah! Mir-Look to your king first, you can bewail of Wajid Ali Shah after that. Here is check, and mate! Shake on it! (Alok Rai: SKK p61-62)

Lest anyone should be misled to believe in the patriotism of Mirza, let it be told that since Mirza's game was a little weak at this point of time and Mir was subjecting him to check after check, Mirza resorted to the ploy of diverting his adversary's attention by pouring pity on their real king Wajid Ali Shah. Premchand continues:

And so the armies passed that way, with the captive king. And as

soon as they had passed, Mirza set out the pieces for another game. The defeat had stung him. Mir said- So let us now sing a marsiya lamenting the fate of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah.

Premchand comments sarcastically: "But Mirza's patriotism had been annihilated by the sting of defeat. And he was impatient to avenge his loss." (Alok Rai: SKK p62) The King of Awadh was being taken away as a prisoner and these two aristocrats were lost in a game of make-belief, anxious about their victories on the chess board. Here you have Premchand's answer and explanation to the question I referred to above. Ray not only broadens the canvas of his material, he shifts focus away from Mir and Mirza. In Ray's film there are not one but two stories. The Mir and Mirza are certainly there but they have undergone a hilarious transformation in Ray's hands. Mirza is a braggart. Please recall the scene in which he talks brave words to Munshi Nandlal who says that there is a rumour that the British are going to depose their king. Mir is the opposite of Mirza. He is the equivalent of Sir Andrew Aguecheek of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* about whom Sir Toby said that the fellow has less blood than a flea. Plus he is gullible. Here Ray is following Premchand. Mir is shaking with fear on being told by his unfaithful wife Nafeesa and her lover Aqil, his nephew, that people are being enlisted in the king's army. However, to enhance the comic effect Ray has turned Mir into a naïve cuckold in his own house. Notice his words of assurance to his wife's paramour, Aqil, whom he surprised in his own bedroom: "Don't worry Aqil Mia. You're perfectly safe in my bedroom. Perfectly safe." (Sandip Ray: p51) Ray has taken ample care to differentiate and individualize the two aristocratic characters. If Mir is naïve, Mirza is sharp. He quickly sees through the concocted story of Mir's wife Nafeesa and her lover Aqil. Recall the scene in which Mirza, played by Sanjeev Kumar, is besides himself with laughter at the silly fool that his friend is. Mirza is also clever. He uses the Aqil-Nafeesa affair to upset Mir at the time when he is losing to Mir in the game of chess. Recall the last scene. "Mirza to Mir- Looks like you had a good massage yesterday, Mir Saheb. Mir- Why, I have a massage from my Begum every night. Mirza-Where was Aqil Mia, when you were being massaged by Begum Sahiba? Under your bed?" (transl. from the film) It is this insinuation by Mirza against Mir that leads to a fight between them in which Mir takes out his country-made pistol. Poor Mir can't fire but accidentally releases the trigger on hearing the excited words of Kalloo that the Angrez fauz has come. It is no surprise that Ray's Mir and Mirza have been compared to Laurel and Hardy, the famous comic duo of Hollywood. Ray has a purpose in heightening the comic effect of these two jagirdars. By contrast the other story, the story of the deposition of Wajid Ali Shah, looks more pathetic. Also, Ray wanted to make the jagirdars of Wajid Ali Shah's time look more comic and hardly the custodians of the so-called Awadhi aristocratic culture. The character of Munshi Nandlal and the Nafeesa-Aqil affair are Ray's inventions. So is the change in the fate of Mir and Mirza. In Ray they do not die fighting. Ray once pointed out that he wanted to convey that degradation into which Awadh had sunk continued even after the end of Wajid Ali Shah's

rule. It is now to the chief story of Ray's film that we must turn. Although the titles of both Premchand and Satyajit Ray's works are the same, it is important to remember that Ray's film is far from an imitation of Premchand's famous short story. It is an adaptation in the real sense of the word. He has adapted the material to his own purposes. Ray has expanded the short story to present his own understanding and vision of a significant period in India's history.

In order to do this Ray had to introduce several new characters which are not in Premchand's story. Ray has introduced the character of Wajid Ali Shah in all its variety and multifariousness. In Premchand he is just mentioned. In an attack on Ray's Wajid Ali Shah as "effete and effeminate" Ray pointed out the historical and other sources that he had consulted before sketching Wajid Ali's character. (*Illustrated Weekly of India*, Dec 31, 1978) In popular imagination Wajid Ali Shah is a sensualist who was also a promoter of kathak dance, classical music and a composer of thumris but who ignored his administrative duties to the detriment of the kingdom of Awadh. Ray's Wajid Ali Shah no doubt is fond of women, classical dance and music and a composer of poetry. Wajid appears in three successive shots. In the first he plays Lord Krishna in his raas; in the second he leads a Mohurram procession; in the third he is shown in his harem with half a dozen concubines. In a scene Wajid Ali Shah is shown as listening to a classical recital by a singer while charming women are dancing a classical dance. The king is rapt in the whole performance and his eyes have a hint of sentimentality which disappears only on seeing the Prime Minister Ali Naqi Khan. The portrait that emerges is that of a pleasure loving king who also loved and understood classical music, poetry and dances by charming women. To many Wajid Ali Shah is an enigma. He prays five times. In one shot he is shown as delivering namaz about which devout Muslims are very particular. He was a Shia and like devout Shias he took part in the Muharram ceremony. There is a shot in which he and his ministers are shown in the traditional black dress while the king is beating the ceremonial Muharram drum. General Outram, the British Resident in 1856, the year of Awadh's annexation - played in the film by Richard Attenborough - fails to understand his character.

Ray unlike Premchand is not satisfied with putting all the blame at the Awadh jagirdars' doors. He is equally interested in the political chess that is being played by the British. He dramatically exposes the cunning, immoral colonial moves aimed at annexing one of the richest provinces of India. This Ray does by introducing the character of General Outram, the British Resident, at the time of annexation. Outram was entrusted with the responsibility of a peaceful abdication by Wajid Ali Shah by the orders of Governor-General Lord Dalhousie, the inveterate imperialist. The British eyed Awadh for a long time but the position of Awadh as a buffer state between India and Nepal and the freedom to fleece the Awadh rulers without taking the responsibility of governance strategically delayed the annexation. Much before annexation, the comment of Dalhousie commenting upon the crown of Wajid Ali at an exhibition in London in 1851 shows the real face of the East India Company. Dalhousie wished

that Wajid Ali had sent his head also inside the crown and he hopes that this cherry will soon fall into their hands. As Wajid says in a scene in the film he had his own army and he had given beautiful names to his battalions, Tirschcha, Banka, Ghanghor. He was persuaded by the British Resident Richmond to disband his army on the pretext that he had no need of one. Ray carefully makes the assessment in the film that Wajid and his entire dynasty had been hypnotized into gradual immobility by the East India Company ever since 1765, when the British took half of the Awadh as indemnity for the Battle of Buxar. On the pretext of 'misrule' the Company acquired large tracts of land and additionally extracted heavy payments from time to time from the Awadh rulers. It suited the British to paint Wajid Ali as effeminate and therefore unfit to rule. Here is snatch from a conversation between Outram and his ADC Weston, who is appreciative of Wajid Ali's artistic achievements.

Outram- And what kind of a king does all this make him, Weston?
All these various accomplishments? Weston- Rather a special king, Sir, I should think. Outram-Special? I should use a much stronger word than that, Weston. A bad king. A frivolous, effeminate, irresponsible, worthless king. Weston- He is not the first eccentric in the line, Sir. There was- Outram- I know he's not the first but he certainly deserves to be the last.

One can see how cleverly the argument against Wajid Ali has been built. The best answer to the charge of 'misrule' comes from Wajid Ali himself. I quote Wajid Ali from a scene in which he is speaking to the Prime Minister after receiving the new treaty :

Wajid Ali: I've been a bad king. If my people had come to me and said so - if they had said: 'We don't want you, Jane Alam; you are making us suffer; we don't want you' - I would have cast away my crown then and there. But they didn't. They didn't! Do you know why? Because I went out to them and showed them my true self. I was not afraid to do that... They're sending troops, the Company Bahadur. Why? Because they know, they are afraid, that my people may rise against them. They know this...If my people are ruled badly, why haven't they left my kingdom and gone to theirs, which is next door? (Sandip Ray: p 41-42)

Colonel Sleeman's report titled *A Journey through the Kingdom of Awadh*, which Outram mentions to the Prime Minister Ali Naqi to support the charge of misrule, was a cleverly manipulated account. Even General Outram, the British Resident, who knows the value of the revenue from Awadh, cannot justify the decision to replace the old treaty with a new treaty which takes away both Awadh and its King. :

Outram- I've quite lost my appetite, Frayer. Frayer- Have you? Outram- To what do you ascribe that? Frayer- It's not unusual in times of stress, you know. Outram- It's not stress. I've been under stress before, and never missed a meal...It's conscience....I don't like this damned business, Frayer... You know my views on Sind? Frayer - Yes, sir. Outram- Well, we have even less justification for confiscation here than at Sind....The administration here is execrable. And I don't like our fat king either. But a treaty is a treaty,

Frayer. Do you know that the king has every right to insist on the validity of the early treaty and refuse to sign the new one?...Outram- Therefore-while we have every right to take over the administration - we cannot dispense with the king.

As Outram informs Doctor Frayer, the attempt to make Wajid Ali sign the new treaty of abdication was a clever game of the British to gain a kingdom without losing face. Wajid Ali's helpless Queen Mother Begum Aulea makes an important point during her interview with Outram: "Aulea-Does the Queen of England know how her servant is treating the king of Awadh, who is servant of the Almighty God and no one else?" The British were guilty of doublespeak. While they advocated the divine right theory of kingship in England they had no conscience in deposing the Awadh king. The portrait of Wajid Ali that emerges is that of a man who values self-respect and is not afraid. "Wajid Ali: Wazir Sahib, please go and tell the Resident that my throne is not theirs for the asking. If they want it, they'll have to fight for it." When Outram comes to him with the draft of the new treaty he tells him, offering his crown, "Resident Sahib, I can bare my head for you, but I cannot sign the treaty." The view presented by Ray in the film about the immorality of annexation is supported by the views of several British authorities. Some names that deserve mention are: Malleston, Metcalfe, Mill, Beveridge and Major Robert Bird. As for as the charge of 'misrule' against Wajid Ali is concerned the film points out that the Company left little room for him to rule. First the British took away all power from him and then accused him of not exercising power to govern. The portrait of Wajid Ali that emerges is that of an unfortunate and helpless king who drowns his frustrations into poetry and other arts in which he had been trained much before he ascended the throne. Recall the scene in which Wajid tells his courtiers when he composed a particular thumri: *Tarap, tarap saari raen gujari/Kaun desa gayo, sanwariya*. ... He tells them that he composed it while sitting on the throne and faced by a man who was presenting his petition before him. Wajid Ali might have made an exceptional king had destiny not placed him in a situation where he was at the mercy of a Company whose servants had no talent for the arts and culture and who were only interested in satisfying their philistine and mercantile interests which they secured by using chicanery, threat, cunning and immorality. This is the impression you have on seeing Satyajit Ray's film *Shatranj Ke Khiladi*. History is on record that the 'misrule' argument that the Company used to depose the King was a hollow charge. In fact they stymied every effort of the King towards the welfare of the people. (see Yogesh Praveen: *Tajdaare Awadh* p154-155) Fact is, after the takeover the condition of Awadh became very, very bad. I wish to quote from an article based on the reports published in a contemporary Urdu Weekly called *Tilism* published from Lucknow:

The annexation had a severe economic impact on Awadh. On the one hand, it led to unemployment and soaring prices of all the merchandise including foodgrains and other commodities; on the other hand, it destroyed the indigenous industries, specially of cotton. (Iqbal Hussain: p94)

The highly informative article by another writer Roshan Taqui entitled

'Awadh on the eve of Annexation' gives us the details of the Awadh army and shows the soundness of economy on the eve of annexation with substantive proof. (see Roshan Taqui) The impression that Awadh was made up of cowards is shown to be false by Ray in the scene in which Dewan Balkishan informs the King that "the rajahs and zamindars of Awadh have informed us that if you so wish they will send a united army of one lakh men and one thousand pieces of artillery to resist the company's troops." (Sandip Ray: p55) Wajid Ali made an abject surrender not because he was a coward but because he knew that a fight with the stronger British army will only result in defeat and bloodshed to his innocent people for whom he had great love. Premchand's purpose is didactic and he also wants to raise the self-respect of the people of India in their own eyes. Remember his story was published in 1930s when India was a slave of the British and Indians needed morale-boosting. That is why after describing his jagirdars as sunk in luxuriousness and indifference, towards the end, Premchand changes his tone. This is what he has to say about Mir and Mirza who died fighting because their personal pride had been wounded.

And while both were fond of luxury, they were not cowards. Their political emotions had atrophied - and they were unwilling to lay down their lives for the king and the kingdom, but they did not lack in individual courage. (Alok Rai: p64)

Ray's explanation is historical and he refuses to judge. He shows us the truth about Wajid, Dalhousie, Outram, Weston. There are the comic cowards Mir and Mirza but also the zamindars who have the intention and capacity to back their king with soldiers and artillery to resist the Company's forces. Ray leaves it to his audience to judge.

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Abbreviations Used: SSK: *Shatranj Ke Khiladi*

