

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

Stuart Blackburn, Ph.D.

## THE CHESS PLAYERS (SHATRANJ KE KHILADI) 1977

Satyajit Ray

(Hindi, Urdu, English)

### OVERVIEW

As a big-budget, primarily Hindi-language production of a story set in the colonial past, *The Chess Players* occupies a unique place in the feature films directed by Satyajit Ray. The acting and cinematography are also closer to that seen in films made in the Bombay studios and unlike that in Ray's more independent work. The film is more costume drama than art-house drama. However, *The Chess Players* still has a subtlety and wit that elevate it far above the typical Bollywood film.

The story, taken from a 1924 Hindi short story of the same name published by Premchand, is set in 1856. The British are about to annex the important north Indian kingdom of Awadh (Oudh, in older sources) ruled by Nawab Wajid Ali Shah. While this political drama unfolds, another sort of game is played by two noblemen, Mirza and Mir. They are the chess players, so besotted with the game that they neglect their responsibilities and allow the British to take over the kingdom without firing a shot.

### CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

As a history lesson, this film has the merit of explaining how a small number of British officers (members of the East India Company) and their armies, comprised mainly of Indian recruits, managed to conquer nearly the whole of the Indian subcontinent. It is valuable in its dissection of the interaction between the two opposed groups: the British officers and the Indian rajas (and other elites). Ray does not paint a black-and-white picture but apportions responsibility between the two groups. He also succeeds in showing that while the chess players and the Nawab might be detached from affairs of state, they were devout Muslims and, in the case of the Nawab, an intellectual and an aesthete. The British, on the other hand, are less cultured and more extroverted, although Capt. Weston speaks perfect Urdu and appreciates Urdu poetry.

As a footnote, *shatranj*, the Indian form of chess, literally means 'four arms' referring to the divisions of an army. The modern game of chess came to the west with the arrival of Islam, via Persia, Sicily and Spain.

### MAIN CHARACTERS

The Nawab	The Nawab Wajid Ali Shah is the ruler of Awadh.
General Outram	General Outram is the chief British official in Awadh.
Mir and Mirza	Mir and Mirza are the chess players, who are also noblemen at the court of the Nawab.
Capt. Weston	Capt. Weston is General Outram's assistant.

### STORY

*Setting* The story opens in 1856 in Lucknow, the capital of the wealthy kingdom of Awadh (in present-day Uttar Pradesh) with a chess game played by two wealthy nobles, Mirza and Mir. The first line of dialogue ('Mir, save your king. If the king is lost, the game is over') is a clever bit of foreshadowing. Next, a narrator comments on the indulgence of these men and the hard labour of the peasants, before providing some background information. After the decline of the Mughal court in Delhi in the late eighteenth century, Awadh 'became the emerald of etiquette, where throwing money about was seen as work.'

*The Nawab* Then we learn about the ruler, the Nawab, who sought pleasure in dance, music and poetry, but cared little for ruling his kingdom. Next we are told how Awadh was conquered by the East India company in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The British forced the ruler to sign a treaty giving them 5 million rupees year in tribute money. The Nawab was allowed to keep the symbols of power while

surrendering control of taxation and diplomacy to the British. The narration continues, 'Whenever the British need money to wage war [on the subcontinent] the Awadh treasury is opened.'

*The General* Now, the setting shifts to the offices of General Outram, the current British officer in charge of Awadh. In conversation with his subaltern, Captain Weston, he is told about the Nawab's daily habits, including his kite flying, poetry recitals, music concerts and dalliance with his 400 concubines. Weston even offers the opinion that the Nawab is a rather good poet, which prompts an outraged Outram to declare that he is a 'bad king, a frivolous, effeminate, irresponsible, worthless king.' Outram silently decides that the decadent reign of the Nawab should be replaced by sound British rule, in the form of the East India Company.

*Chess players* The film shifts to its third setting, the chess game between Mirza and Mir. The two noblemen are praying in their opulent chamber, dressed in silk garments and showing pious faces. But as soon as the prayer is over, they turn around and sit down at the chess board. Smoking hookahs and chewing betel nut, they are soon interrupted by a visitor who informs them that the 'Company' is going to take over Awadh. The chess players laugh. They have heard nothing; they're too busy playing. This section is farcical, typical of the broad-brush farce of Hindi cinema, as the two overweight players display their self-absorption and utter lack of a grasp on reality. They are, however, impressed to learn that the English have improved the game of chess by allowing a pawn to move two squares.

*Wives* We also gain insight into the domestic lives of these two obsessives. Both have neglected their wives, who grow frustrated and take retaliatory measures. One accepts a lover, while the other steals the chess pieces. Not to be deprived of their game, Mir simply substitutes food items for the missing pieces and they play on.

*Real politick* General Outram summons the Nawab's representative and, via a translation provided by Weston, informs him that the Governor-General in Calcutta has decided to remove the Nawab and establish direct Company rule. If the Nawab does not abdicate, he will face violence. This is shocking and distressing to the Nawab's emissary who attempts to argue the case but is dismissed summarily.

*Nawab's dilemma* the Nawab has been placed in a difficult position. He must either humiliate himself and his ancestors by abdicating or trigger a war that will force Indians to kill Indians (the great majority of the Company's soldiers were sepoys, or native troops). The Nawab is a contemplative man. He seeks solace in praying and then in enjoying a sensuous (*nautch*) dance by a young and beautiful girl.

*General's dilemma* Another long conversation takes place between General Outram and a recently-arrived official from London. The British have the military power to achieve the annexation, but General Outram realises that such a move would dishonour a treaty signed with the Nawab only twenty years earlier. 'I don't like that fat king, but he would be fully justified in refusing to abdicate, since such a move is explicitly ruled out by the treaty we signed...But I am trying my damndest to make him sign the treaty and abdicate.' The General decides to seek a private audience with the Nawab to resolve the issue.

*Nawab's mother* Although he does not see the Nawab, the general has a conversation with his mother, who makes an eloquent speech in defence of her son and his rights as a loyal subject of Queen Victoria. The new treaty offers the Nawab a large pension, but she says that 'we do not want money, we want justice. If you cannot grant justice, I will go across the ocean myself and plead with the Queen.' This conversation is relayed to the Nawab, who is also told that a large army is ready to defend his crown.

*Surrender* Having heard his mother's pledge, the Nawab calmly announces that he will surrender. He orders his court to get ready to leave the palace, his soldiers to lay down their weapons and the people of Lucknow (capital of Awadh) not to resist the Company army when it marches into town.

*The General and the Nawab* The general is summoned to the palace and informed by the Nawab of his decision not to wage war. Outram is relieved and gracious in his praise of the Nawab's pacifism and wisdom. After the talking is over, the Nawab and the general stand and face each other. The

Nawab takes off his plumed crown and offers it to the general, who is confused and says he has no use for it. 'You can take my crown,' the Nawab explains, 'but not my signature.' In other words, he will not fight but he will not sign the treaty either. (He was later imprisoned and exiled to Calcutta, though the film does not include this aftermath.)

*Fleeing chess players* Meanwhile, having been informed that the time is neigh, the chess players flee. Taking their chess piece, and their wives, they cross the river looking for a mosque in which to continue their game. Unable to locate the mosque, they are taken to a poor village house, where they set up the playing board outside in the dust. The game is intense, paralleling the dramatic events around them, and spirals out of control when one player wins and belittles his opponent, who responds by revealing that the other is a cuckold. Humiliated, the cuckold shoots at the other but misses.

*White king* At that very moment, the Company army comes into sight, some in blue uniforms, some in bright red, riding on horses and flying the Union Jack. Behind them come the native troops walking beside bullock carts and camels and elephants. Mir and Mirza are disconsolate. A young boy tells them that the Nawab has surrendered. 'The white people are our king now,' he says, matter-of-factly. 'But there is no fighting.'

*Endgame* Mir admits that they have run away and pursued trivial games while the English army takes over their country. Mirza is more pragmatic. 'What could we have done in the city?' Mir accepts this and sits down to play another game. 'Let's play a fast one, this time,' he says with a little cheer. 'Fast?' 'Umm, like a train.' Mirza picks up the king piece and says, 'Ok, king, you move aside. Queen Victoria is coming!'

## THEMES

*Mughal indolence* On one level, the chief theme of this film is the indolence that plagued the elites of the late Mughal empire. By the middle of the nineteenth century, when the story is set, the Nawab's court at Lucknow was characterised by its detachment from ordinary people and its obsession with pleasure-seeking. The Nawab, who has been honoured by Queen Victoria with the title of 'king,' spends hours flying kites, reciting and composing poetry, listening to music, watching dancing and indulging himself among his harem of 400 ('Enough to supply a whole army,' as General Outram remarks.) Of course, the most obvious example of this aesthetic lethargy is the pair of chess players themselves. Their obsession with the game and abandonment of domestic and court duties is an analogy of the political situation as a whole. The two players, Mirza and Mir, enact scenes of near-slapstick farce. When they speak pompously of their martial ancestry and foolishly brandish a grandfather's sword, we are only reminded of the great military conquest of past Mughal emperors. The Nawab, on the other hand, is a dignified figure, pious and thoughtful. Yet, he, too, has become detached and self-absorbed. While many others (including the source narrative) have condemned this court as morally deficient, Ray is not so censorious. Rather than decadence, he shows us opulence and inherited privilege, which have bred complacency and indolence.

*British cunning* The other side of this historical coin—the fall of the last great Mughal court at Awadh in 1856—is the craftiness of the British. If the noblemen of Lucknow were too detached, the British were only too eager and cunning to take advantage. Here, the film provides us with a healthy slab of history. A cartoon shows us Lord Dalhousie, the Governor-General of India, plucking cherries one by one, each representing an Indian kingdom that the British acquired by force, diplomacy and offering huge pensions to the rulers. The result was what historians call the 'hollow crown.' The Nawab or raja became a ceremonial ruler, a symbolic head of state, while the British held real power, the power to tax and to raise armies. When the film begins, the Nawab Awadh is just such a symbolic ruler. Awadh, the last and wealthiest of these princely states, had signed a treaty with the British in 1801, under which it allowed the British to use its treasury to wage war while protecting Awadh itself. In 1816, another treaty made Awadh a protectorate of the British and granted the Nawab a large payment. But the foreigners wanted total control and sought a way to force the Nawab to abdicate. They found it in the infamous 'Doctrine of Lapse,' under which the British could assume total control of a protectorate when its ruler was 'manifestly incompetent.' In the film, General Outram is convinced that the Nawab qualifies as incompetent. 'He doesn't wish to rule,' he declares. 'He has no capacity to rule and therefore has no business to rule.' There is, of course, the small inconvenience of the existing treaty, which forbids such an action. Outram puzzles over this and decides that the only way

is to force abdication by threatening force. In other words, if you have no legal argument, or indeed moral argument, you can always resort to brutal force.

*The Game* The film suggests that the combination of these two themes—the indolent Mughals and the cunning British—explains the fall of the last Mughal court and led to the spread of colonial rule over the subcontinent. Ray, however, undercuts this political and historical explanation with a focus on the chess-playing of Mir and Mirza. The parallels with the game of politics are obvious, as the opening line of the film indicates: 'Save your king. If the king is lost, the game is over.' Both chess and politics involve strategy, deception, humiliation, loss, pride and confidence. The annexation of Awadh is a hugely significant event in modern Indian history—it led the following year to the Mutiny, which itself led to full imperial rule of India by the Queen. In the eyes of a young village boy, however, it is merely the changing of the colour of the overlords. At the very end, when we see an impressive advance of the Company army toward Lucknow, the boy says, 'Oh, now white people will be our king.' In other words, the white pieces on the chess board have defeated the black pieces.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

### **Nawab**

Character The Nawab is a brilliantly realised character brilliantly performed. His is, as General Outram comments, 'A bundle of contradictions. Prays five times a day, doesn't touch alcohol, but keeps a harem the size of an army.' Rather than the decadent rajas of orientalism, he resembles an aesthete in another Ray film (*The Music Room*), the zamindar who lives of the fumes of nostalgia. Certainly, this Nawab is cultured and sensitive, even a pacifist. He is pious and contemplative and capable of generosity. His flaw is perhaps not his fault, but simply that he has inherited a status that leads one to indolence and self-absorption.

### Illustrative moments

*Reflective* When informed of General Outram's ultimatum (abdicate or face war), the Nawab is shocked, disconsolate and then reflective. He paces around in front of the throne and his courtiers, trying to make sense of this history-changing event. 'Of course, it was my own mistake,' he says. 'I shouldn't have agreed to sit on the throne [as a mere symbolic ruler].' He walks over and caresses the jewel-encrusted throne. 'But it was my boyhood,' he muses. 'These diamonds, these gems, the splendour, the royal court. It tempted my heart.' Then he recites one of his poems (about 'the suffering soul in the lonely night') and turns with a grief-stricken face to his courtiers. 'But I tried to be a good ruler,' he says. The Nawab then sails off into memories, of his grand army and the pet names he gave to each platoon. 'What does a king do who is no longer a king?' he asks rhetorically. He answers his own question as he meditates on past glories and revels in the love that his people feel for him. It is a rambling, romantic speech, which reveals him as a thoughtful if indulged man, a man capable of compassion and self-examination.

*Proud* Beneath the nostalgia, there is also a layer of pride that even the British cannot destroy. We hear this in the scene described above when the Nawab first learns of General Outram's plan and says, 'They can take over the administration—I don't care about that—but they can't take away my title.' But an even more dramatic illustration occurs later when the Nawab and Outram meet face to face, for the first time in the film. The Nawab has agreed to surrender and summons Outram. The general explains the terms of the new treaty and asks him to sign it. The Nawab listens with an anguished face, his eyes red with sadness, as he is stripped of everything and stands naked in his own court. Even the general is embarrassed for him and looks away. Without speaking, the Nawab stands, takes two steps toward the general, removes his splendid crown and offers it to his enemy. The general is perplexed, and the Nawab explains: 'You may take my crown, but not my signature.' In other words, the Nawab will not fight and he will vacate the palace, but he will not abdicate. His attachment to his ancestry, to the history of the Mughal empire and perhaps to his own self-importance prevents him from fully renouncing his title.

## **General Outram**

Character In many respects, General Outram's character stands in sharp contrast to the Nawab's. He is a man of action, with little aesthetic appreciation. His official title is 'Resident', which is the chief British officer resident in an independent princely kingdom. Outram is not, however, a caricature of the wily and despotic colonial officer of many films and books. Instead, he shows an understanding of others, even empathy toward his opponent. He is kind toward his assistant, Captain Weston, and wise enough to take his counsel.

### Illustrative moments

*Decisive* General Outram is a decisive man. He has little time (and less understanding) of the aesthetic pleasures pursued by his counterpart in the Lucknow palace. He has one goal: to annex the wealthy kingdom of Awadh. His single-mindedness is revealed in an early scene when he is in conversation with Capt. Weston. Outram has just been reviewing the Nawab's character, as described in a report sent to him. The Nawab, Outram says, is addicted to opium, to poetry, to dances and to kite flying. He then asks Weston what he thinks of the Nawab as a poet, and Weston (who reads Urdu) says he's 'rather good.' The general smiles and says, 'Well, keep that under your hat. Because I'm minded to recommend you for a promotion when we take over and your favouritism for the deposed Nawab wouldn't look good.' This announcement stuns Weston. 'Take over, sir?' he asks, in disbelief. For half a century, the British had been content to let the Nawab act as symbolic ruler and they as 'protector.' But Outram has made his decision and he will implement it.

*Empathetic* General Outram is a hard-nosed diplomat, but he is also a man who has spent many years in India. And although he has little respect for the administrative capabilities of the Nawab Wajid Ali Shah, and despite his belief in the supremacy of British rule, he still is capable of empathy when the abdication ultimatum is issued. This element of his character is revealed in one of the most dramatic scenes in the film. The Nawab has summoned the general to his palace. At eight o'clock the next morning, the general speaks to the Nawab in a conciliatory and kind tone. He thanks the Nawab for the gesture of disarming his soldiers, which he takes as a sign that he will peacefully resolve the issue and sign the treaty of abdication. He ends by saying, 'You will have three days to sign, after which the Company will assume control of the palace.' Outram sits erect, with his white-plumed helmet on his lap. The Nawab looks at the general with his sad eyes, and Outram cannot hold the man's gaze. He turns away and looks down for split second. He feels the Nawab's loss and despair. He has humiliated his counterpart and feels a twinge of regret for his defeated opponent.

### *Chess Players*

Character Although the two players display minor differences, they are best considered as a composite character, as Ray hints in his choice of names (Mir and Mirza). As a pair, they are selfish, disregarding their wives and their country. Together, though, they are good company, always ready to enjoy a laugh, chew some betel nut and smoke a little opium.

### Illustrative moments

*Obsessed* The dominant element in their character, and a main theme of the film as a whole, is their obsession with playing chess. A good illustration of this addiction to idle game-playing occurs in an early scene. Following the historical background given by the narrator, the camera shifts to a well-appointed apartment in the Lucknow palace. Mir and Mirza, dressed in silks and wearing prayer caps, are facing a niche in the wall. They stand and open their hands in prayer; they kneel and touch their heads to the floor in submission. They mouth a silent prayer and remain motionless. The next moment, they jump up and call a servant to bring the pipes and betel leaf. They rub their hands with glee as they look down at the chess board. It is evident that during that silent prayer to Allah they had been considering their next move on the board.

*Jolly* Serenely self-absorbed in their obsession, the players don't have time to worry about the worsening political situation outside the palace walls. They prefer to play and remain happy. And they are jolly fellows, always ready to have a laugh, to crack a joke, even at their own expense. A memorable display of this joviality occurs in a scene when, as usual, they are deep into a chess game and a friend arrives. The friend asks them which version of the game they are playing. 'Version?'

they ask. 'Is there more than one?' 'Oh, yes,' the friend says, 'the English also play.' 'You mean the Company has taken over our chess game, too?' one says, eliciting laughter from the other. The friend goes on to explain the differences in the English game. 'Why should they do that?' one player asks. 'To speed it up,' the other answers. 'You mean they find our game too slow?' one asks. 'Yes, just like our transport. That's why they're bringing in the railroad and the telegraph wires.' The chess players find everything funny.

*Shame* In the very last scene of the film, the obsessed and jolly Mir and Mirza show us that they are not entirely without a conscience. In a village, where they have (of course) been playing chess, they watch the English army march past on their way to the palace in Lucknow. One of the players is disconsolate. 'Even the crows think me vile,' he says, while the other tries to cheer him up. 'While the English take our city, we are sitting here, fighting over trivialities [one has accused the other of cheating].' Both players are overcome with shame at their behaviour. One of them says, 'Sit down. Let's finish our game. We will go back to town after nightfall. We need the dark to hide our faces.' It might seem unlikely that these two rogues would feel any guilt, but such is the scale of the humiliation of the annexation of their city that it penetrates even their opium-soaked skin.



(Mir and Mirza leave Lucknow behind)



(The Nawab speaks to his prime minister)



(The Nawab enjoys a dance)



(The chess board with fruit for pieces after one of the wives has stolen the real pieces)



(General Outram, right, talks with Capt. Weston)



(The Nawab on the throne)