

# Checkmate Chronicles: Reflections of nineteenth-century Awadh in Satyajit Ray's '*Shatranj ke Khilari*'

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*"Shatranj ke Khilari," or 'The Chess Players,' is a historical drama set in 1856 during the colonial era, directed by the legendary filmmaker Satyajit Ray, and based on the short story of the same name by renowned twentieth-century novelist Munshi Premchand. It is the only full-length Hindi feature film directed by Ray. The story depicts the contemporary aristocracy engrossed in luxuries, starkly detached from ground realities. The narrative focuses on two feudal lords from Awadh—Mirza Sajjad Ali and Mir Roshan Ali—who become consumed by shatranj (chess) while remaining completely unaware of the socio-political chaos unfolding around them. British East India Company troops move toward Awadh, while its extravagant Nawab, Wajid Ali Shah, stays indifferent, indulging in luxury and ignoring both his people's suffering and his kingdom's safety. Ray employs an allegorical representation of the chess game to illustrate how the Awadh nobility remained ignorant and complacent about the looming British annexation. The movie presents an intricate examination of noble extravagance set against the struggles faced by ordinary people, which worsened under British oppression. The work depicts cultural confrontations, where British principles and modernity face off against traditional Indian customs and values. "Shatranj ke Khilari" serves as a poignant commentary on Awadh's decline and the broader impact of colonialism on Indian society, using the metaphor of chess to explore power dynamics, politics, and historical change. It masterfully mirrors the socio-political scenario of nineteenth-century Awadh. In this paper, I explore the use of symbolism in the film, correlate the film with factual information, and examine the historicity of this path-breaking movie.*

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**Keywords:** History, Awadh, Satyajit Ray, Premchand, film, chess, power-politics, nawab.

## The Film at a Glance

*"Shatranj Ke Khilari"* is a cinematic masterpiece released in 1977 that delves deep into the intricacies of human behaviour, political manoeuvrings, and the impact of colonialism on Indian society. Directed by Satyajit Ray, the film is a faithful yet innovative adaptation of Munshi Premchand's short story, capturing the essence of the original narrative while adding layers of complexity and depth. This film was the most expensive film Ray ever made, drawing as it did on Bombay film stars, along with stars of Western cinema,

and large period sets. Being Ray's first and only fictional film venture into a culture and a language not those of Bengal, writing a screenplay for it was challenging. In order to get around this, he brought in Urdu-speaking collaborators, mainly Javed Siddiqui and Shama Zaidi, and more professional actors.

The film opens with a panoramic view of the bustling city of Lucknow, capturing the essence of Awadh's cultural richness and political intrigue. Set in the historical backdrop of 1856, during the reign of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah in the kingdom of Awadh, the film portrays two friends of noble descent, Mirza Sajjad Ali and Mir Roshan Ali, played by Sanjeev Kumar and Saeed Jaffrey respectively. These characters are emblematic of the decadence and apathy that had crept into the ruling class of Awadh, as their hours and honour are both swallowed by their obsession with the game of chess, because of which they remain oblivious to the contemporary political changes taking place. With very calculated steps, the British advanced towards Awadh. Rumours of General James Outram's strategic plans to annex the kingdom struck fear and uncertainty among the local nobility. However, Mirza Sajjad Ali and Mir Roshan Ali remain detached from these concerns, choosing to fight on the chessboard rather than the battlefield.

The film intricately braids numerous narratives, displaying the stark differences between the opulent lifestyle of the aristocracy and the hardships faced by the commoners. The British East India Company targets Awadh for annexation, the calculative General James Outram, portrayed by Richard Attenborough, being an embodiment of the strategic nature of British imperialism. His character stands as a relentless power-seeker whose aggressive quest for dominance diametrically opposed the complacent attitude of the indigenous rulers. Rumours of British advancements towards Awadh led by General Outram, made the nobles shift uneasily on their velvet seats, yet for Mirza Sajjad Ali and Mir Roshan Ali, their chess match was of a greater priority.

Throughout all this time, the Nawab of Awadh, Wajid Ali Shah, remains immersed in his cultural reverie. The Nawab remains deeply engaged in extravagant celebrations and cultural activities while the British plan their domination, oblivious to the impending threat. Amjad Khan's performance

embodies the Nawab's charming persona while simultaneously depicting his ignorance regarding the state of affairs in his kingdom. The film's narrative unfolds with meticulous attention to detail, showcasing the grandeur of Lucknow, the capital of Awadh, as well as the growing tension and unrest among the people. The cinematography by Soumendu Roy captures the essence of the era, from the ornate palaces of the nobility to the bustling streets filled with commoners struggling to survive. One of the film's most striking elements is its portrayal of the game of chess as a metaphor for the power play between nations and individuals. Mirza Sajjad Ali and Mir Roshan Ali's obsession with chess reflects their detachment from the harsh realities of political intrigue and the impending threat of British annexation.

The climax of the film is both poignant and tragic, as the British forces finally take control of Awadh, signalling the end of an era. Mirza Sajjad Ali and Mir Roshan Ali engrossed in a game of chess until the very end, are confronted with the harsh reality of their lost kingdom and the futility of their obsession. In the aftermath of the annexation, the film explores the consequences of British rule on the local populace. The once vibrant city of Lucknow is transformed into a colonial outpost, with the British imposing their authority and restructuring the socio-political landscape. Mirza Sajjad Ali and Mir Roshan Ali, now powerless and marginalised, symbolise the downfall of the traditional ruling class in the wake of the imperial conquest.

*"Shatranj Ke Khilari"* concludes with a haunting reflection on the human cost of political ambition and the tragic consequences of indifference. It stands out not only for its stellar performances, intricate storytelling, and rich visual aesthetics but also for its profound exploration of themes such as power, decadence, and the clash of cultures. Satyajit Ray's directorial finesse, combined with a stellar cast and a haunting musical score, elevates the film to a timeless classic that continues to resonate with audiences worldwide.

### **From Print to the Pictures**

The film adaptation of *"Shatranj Ke Khilari"* excels in visually representing the historical setting, costumes, and ambience of nineteenth-century Awadh, rather than simply being an expansion of the story. Satyajit Ray's direction and cinematography capture the grandeur of the era, from the opulent palaces to

the bustling streets. The visual elements add a layer of authenticity and immerse viewers in the period setting, enhancing their engagement with the story. Symbolism has been extensively utilised to depict various themes. In contrast, the book relies on readers' imagination to visualise the scenes and settings based on the author's descriptions.

In his film, Ray utilises his creative freedom and scholastic knowledge to his fullest extent while keeping the base structure of the story intact. Ray breathes fresh life into little-explored characters such as those of the British Resident, the Nawab, and the wives of the feudal vassals, while incorporating new characters like the Queen Mother, the Minister, the child who watches the final chess match, and they offer new angles to gauge the emotional depth of each scene. While Premchand's tale ends on a note of total annihilation wherein both protagonists Mirza Sajjad Ali and Mir Roshan Ali fight to death over a chess match, Ray closes his film with an air of continuity, while retaining a sense of poignancy. Both protagonists make amends after an intense showdown. Ray masterfully depicts the closure of an old era and the simultaneous dawn of a new age.

In conclusion, "*Shatranj Ke Khilari*", in both its book and film form, offers a compelling narrative set against the backdrop of historical and political turmoil. Complementing each other, the book provides a crisp, detailed, and introspective exploration of characters and themes while the film brings the story to life through visual and auditory storytelling techniques, thus offering audiences a multifaceted experience of the timeless tale.

### **Historical Reflections**

As stated earlier, the film is set in the 1850s, and subtly portrays the impact of British imperialism on Indian society, with British officers depicted as indifferent overlords, focused on their own pleasures amidst the political landscape of the time. Set against the backdrop of British colonial expansion, the film portrays the decline of Nawabi culture through its protagonists, who indulge in leisure while ignoring political duties leading up to the 1856 annexation of Awadh.

*Political background*

The film brilliantly mirrors the contemporary socio-political scenario, and traces the history of Awadh from the Treaty of Allahabad (1765) till the annexation of Awadh in 1856. Awadh, also known by the British as Oudh, was a princely state situated in the region of North India. With the decline of the Mughal Empire after Emperor Aurangzeb's death, Awadh became a province where governors began to consolidate their power. The governors of Awadh gradually increased their autonomy, transforming Awadh into an independent state. The British East India Company rose to paramountcy following the Battle of Buxar in 1764 wherein the combined forces of the Nawab of Awadh (Shuja-ud-daulah), the Nawab of Bengal, and the Mughal Emperor Shah Alam II were defeated by the British. Following the battle, the Allahabad Treaty was signed in 1765 which provided that the East India Company would be paid Rs. 50 lakhs by Awadh. In exchange for this, both parties agreed to assist each other in the event of war with any other power. Thus Awadh fell under the nominal power of the British colonial powers after this battle.

The capital of Awadh was Faizabad until Asaf-ud-Daula shifted it to Lucknow in 1775 AD. In the short story by Premchand, a mosque built by Asaf-ud-Daula is mentioned, where Mir Sajjad Ali and Mir Roshan Ali play chess. British agents, referred to as “residents”, established their base in Lucknow. The Nawab of Awadh constructed a Residency in Lucknow as part of a broader civic reform programme. Here it may be mentioned that the contemporary Resident was Sir James Outram, whose character Ray brought to life.

In the latter part of the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth, Oudh was the repository of Mughal culture after the erosion of Mughal power in Delhi. The British recognised this and bestowed the power of kingship on the rulers of Oudh in 1814, while steadily undermining their sovereignty and revenues from 1765 onwards. They, and the city they embellished with palaces and mosques, gradually became bywords for decadent refinement in every department of life, whether it was dress, banquets, the hookah, pigeon-

breeding, music and poetry, or love-making; Lucknow in its heyday was the 'Paris of the East', the 'Babylon of India'.<sup>1</sup>

The Nawab of Awadh became increasingly dependent on the British to maintain law and order in the kingdom. The system of Subsidiary Alliance was imposed on Awadh by Lord Wellesley in 1801. In May 1816, the Kingdom of Awadh became a British protectorate. Wajid Ali Shah, who ascended the throne in 1822, was the tenth and last Nawab of Awadh. Despite Wajid Ali Shah's competent rule, the British residents submitted exaggerated reports about his incompetence to the company authorities. This provided the East India Company with a *Casus Belli* to annex Awadh.

On 7 February 1856, Lord Dalhousie ordered the deposition of Wajid Ali Shah due to alleged internal misrule. This was in accordance with Dalhousie's Doctrine of Lapse, which allowed the British to take over a kingdom in case of misrule. The Kingdom of Awadh was formally annexed in February 1856.

### *Mirroring the Society*

Through characters like Mirza Sajjad Ali and Mir Roshan Ali, who represent the indifferent ruling class, the movie delves into the decadence and detachment of the Indian aristocracy, showcasing their preoccupation with trivial pursuits like chess while remaining oblivious to the political and social upheavals around them. Meanwhile, the struggles of Mirza Mir, a common man fighting against social injustices and economic hardships, underscore the harsh realities faced by the lower classes. The film also subtly critiques the decline of traditional Indian culture and values, symbolised by the aristocrats' adoption of Western lifestyles and neglect of their heritage. Through the intricate symbolism of chess as a metaphor for power dynamics and strategic manoeuvring, "*Shatranj Ke Khilari*" invites viewers to reflect on the consequences of political indifference, class privilege, and cultural erosion in a society undergoing profound changes under colonial influence.

लखनऊ विलासिता के रंग में डूबा हुआ था। छोटे-बड़े, गरीब-अमीर सभी विलासिता में डूबे हुए थे। कोई नृत्य और गान की मजलिस सजाता था, तो कोई अफीम की पीनक ही

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Robinson, *Satyajit Ray: The Inner Eye* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 241.

में मजे लेता था। जीवन के प्रत्येक विभाग में आमोद-प्रमोद का प्राधान्य था। शासन-विभाग में, साहित्य-क्षेत्र में, सामाजिक अवस्था में, कला-कौशल में, उद्योग-धंधों में, आहार-व्यवहार में सर्वत्र विलासिता व्याप्त हो रही थी। राजकर्मचारी विषय-वासना में, कविगण प्रेम और विरह के वर्णन में, कारीगर कलाबत्तू और चिकन बनाने में, व्यवसायी सुरमे, इत्र, मिस्सी और उबटन का रोजगार करने में लिप्त थे। सभी की आँखों में विलासिता का मद छाया हुआ था। संसार में क्या हो रहा है, इसकी किसी को खबर न थी। बटेर लड़ रहे हैं। तीतरों की लड़ाई के लिए पाली बदी जा रही है। कहीं चौसर बिछी हुई है; पौ-बारह का शोर मचा हुआ है। कहीं शतरंज का घोर संग्राम छिड़ा हुआ है। राजा से लेकर रंक तक इसी धुन में मस्त थे। यहाँ तक कि फकीरों को पैसे मिलते तो वे रोटियाँ न लेकर अफीम खाते या मदक पीते। शतरंज, ताश, गंजीफ़ा खेलने से बुद्धि तीव्र होती है, विचार-शक्ति का विकास होता है, पेंचीदा मसलों को सुलझाने की आदत पड़ती है।<sup>2</sup>

Lucknow was immersed in the colours of luxury. People of all ranks — rich and poor, high and low — were steeped in indulgence. Some held gatherings of dance and music, while others found pleasure in the stupor of opium. Every sphere of life was dominated by amusement and extravagance. Luxury had spread across the administration, the literary world, social life, the arts and crafts, industries and trades, and even food habits. Government officials were lost in sensual pleasures; poets were absorbed in verses of love and separation; artisans were busy weaving *kalabattu* and *chikan* embroidery; merchants were engaged in the trade of *surma* (*kohl*), perfumes, *missi*, and herbal cosmetics. The intoxication of luxury had clouded everyone's eyes. No one had any awareness of what was happening in the world. Quail fights were being held. Partridges were being trained for battle. Somewhere, dice games were laid out with cries of '*pauna baraah*' (a win), and elsewhere, intense battles of chess were underway. From kings to beggars, all were immersed in the same obsession. Even the fakirs, when given alms, wouldn't buy bread — they would consume opium or drink intoxicants. It was said that playing chess, cards, or *ganjifa* sharpens the mind, develops thinking skills, and creates a habit of solving complex problems.

[translation by author]

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<sup>2</sup> Munshi Premchand, "शतरंज के खिलाड़ी," *Munshi Premchand*, accessed April 2, 2024, <https://premchand.co.in/story/shatranj-ke-khiladi>.

The system reeked with corruption. The subsidiary alliance with the British in 1801 deprived the Nawab of actual power, and he only remained the titular head of the state. The sole motive of his subordinates was acquiring wealth and leading a luxurious life. This is evident from the fact that the vassals of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah, Mir Sajjad Ali and Mir Roshan Ali, instead of supplying the Nawab with soldiers at a time of crisis, concentrated on winning their chess game instead of the real battle against the British. The utter collapse of law and order can be seen from the following statement in the film when Mir Roshan Ali is questioned about the firearm that he was carrying:

*Nawab Wajid Ali Shah ke ahd mein nihatte ghoomne waale ghar waapas nhi aate* (Those who roam around unarmed in the kingdom of Nawab Wajid Ali Khan, don't come back home).<sup>3</sup>

Awadh became synonymous with apathy. On the eve of the annexation of Awadh, when the Nawab lost his throne and the people lost their independence, this is what happened, as written by Munshi Premchand.

यह वह अहिंसा न थी, जिस पर देवगण प्रसन्न होते हैं। यह वह कायरपन था, जिस पर बड़े-बड़े कायर भी आँसू बहाते हैं। अवध के विशाल देश का नवाब बन्दी चला जाता था, और लखनऊ ऐश की नींद में मस्त था। यह राजनीतिक अधःपतन की चरम सीमा थी।<sup>4</sup>

This was not the kind of nonviolence that pleased the gods. It was a cowardice so deep that even the most cowardly would weep over it. While the Nawab of the vast land of Awadh was being taken captive, Lucknow remained lost in the slumber of luxury. This was the absolute nadir of political decline.

[translation by author]

### Use of Symbolism

*“Shatranj Ke Khilari”* (The Chess Players) by Satyajit Ray is replete with symbolism, masterfully woven into the narrative to convey deeper meanings

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<sup>3</sup> Banti Kumar, “Shatranj Ke Khilari {HD} Satyajit Ray, Sanjeev Kumar, Shabana Azmi, Hindi Film (With Eng Subtitles),” January 11, 2015, YouTube video, 2:09:14, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A3Fgm0yaWbA>.

<sup>4</sup> Premchand, “शतरंज के खिलाड़ी.”

and thematic layers. The film employs various symbols that enrich the storytelling and offer insights into the characters' motivations, the historical context, and broader socio-political themes. Here are some key instances of symbolism in "*Shatranj Ke Khilari*:"

1. **Chess Game:** The most prominent symbol in the film is the game of chess itself, which serves as a metaphor for the power struggles of the era. The chess players, Mirza Sajjad Ali and Mir Roshan Ali represent different approaches to dealing with the changing political landscape. Mir is obsessed with playing chess, symbolising the aristocracy's detachment from the harsh realities of governance and their focus on trivial pursuits. On the other hand, Mirza Sajjad Ali's reluctance to play reflects his concern for the fate of Awadh and his resistance to colonial influence.

Their apathy towards their duty and attitude towards the contemporary political scenario are reflected here:

मिरज़ा: किसी के दिन बराबर नहीं जाते। कितनी दर्दनाक हालत है।  
 मीर: हाँ, सो तो है ही- यह लो, फिर किशत! बस, अबकी किशत में मात है, बच नहीं सकते।  
 मिरज़ा: खुदा की कसम, आप बड़े बेदर्द हैं। इतना बड़ा हादसा देखकर भी आपको दुःख नहीं होता। हाय, गरीब वाजिदअली शाह!  
 मीर: पहले अपने बादशाह को तो बचाइए फिर नवाब साहब का मातम कीजिएगा। यह किशत और यह मात! लाना हाथ!<sup>5</sup>

MIRZA: No man's fortune stays constant. What a heartbreaking turn of events.

MIR: Indeed, that's how it is — here, take this move! With this one, it's checkmate. There's no way out now.

MIRZA: By God, you are truly unfeeling. Even in the face of such a tragedy, you show no sorrow? Alas, poor Wajid Ali Shah!

MIR: First, save your own king — then grieve for the Nawab. Here's the move... and there's your checkmate! Now, give me your hand!

[translation by author]

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

**2. The Chess Pieces:** Each chess piece represents a specific persona of the society: The king symbolises authority and power, the queen represents influence and manipulation, the knights embody loyalty and courage, the bishops signify religion and morality, and the pawns depict common people trapped in the power games of the elite. Their final moves on the chessboard towards the end of the movie mirror the final moments of Awadh's sovereignty, highlighting the futility of their obsession in the face of imminent collapse. Mir Sajjad Ali while playing his piece, says:

*Wazir sahab aap hat jaiye,  
Malka Victoria dashvi padhar rahi hai  
(Mr. Prime Minister, you move aside,  
Queen Victoria is coming [signifying the onset of the rule of Queen  
Victoria in Awadh, as well as the rest of India])*<sup>6</sup>

**3. The Clock:** The ticking clock in the background serves as a reminder of the passage of time and the impending changes facing Awadh. It symbolises the inevitability of progress and modernity, which threatens to erode the traditional way of life and cultural heritage.

**4. The Mirror:** The scene where Mirza Sajjad Ali gazes into a broken mirror reflects his own fragmented identity and the disillusionment of the aristocracy. The shattered mirror symbolises the disintegration of old values and the loss of identity in a changing world.

**5. The Elephant:** The elephant is featured in the film as a reminder of Awadh's past glory and the fading influence of the Nawab.

**6. The Dust Storm:** The climactic dust storm symbolises the chaos and upheaval brought about by colonialism and political betrayal. It highlights the termination of the old era, which had fallen into stagnation, and the beginning of a new, uncertain future for Awadh.

**7. The Red Coat:** General Outram's red coat symbolises British imperialism and military dominance. Red is the colour of revolution, red denotes change, and above all, red signifies bloodshed. It serves as a visual reminder of the

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<sup>6</sup> Kumar, "Shatranj Ke Khilari."

colonial presence and the threat posed to indigenous rulers like Nawab Wajid Ali Shah.

8. **The Courtyard:** The courtyard where the chess game takes place symbolises the arena of power and competition. It represents the political landscape of Awadh, where alliances are forged, betrayals occur, and destinies are decided.

9. **The Courtesan's Song:** The song performed by the courtesan in the Nawab's court serves as a metaphor for the allure of power and the temptations faced by those in positions of authority. It reflects the seductive nature of wealth, luxury, and privilege, which can distract rulers from their duties.

10. **The Sparrows:** The scene with the sparrows trapped in a cage symbolises the loss of freedom and innocence. It mirrors the plight of the common people who are marginalised and oppressed by the ruling elite and colonial powers.

11. **The Broken Chandelier:** The broken chandelier in the Nawab's palace symbolises the decay and decline of the aristocracy. It represents the crumbling infrastructure and neglect of public welfare under frivolous and ineffective leadership. A broken chandelier denotes the absence of light, thus depicting the darkness that Awadh had plunged into because of the utter negligence and selfishness of the aristocracy.

12. **The Puppet Show:** The puppet show depicting the British annexation of Awadh symbolises the manipulation of power and the loss of sovereignty. It reveals how local rulers like Nawab Wajid Ali Shah were often pawns in the larger game of colonial expansion. Awadh eventually became a subsidiary ally of the British.

16. **The Empty Throne:** The empty throne in the Nawab's court symbolises the absence of effective leadership and governance. It represents the vacuum created by Nawab's indulgence in trivial pursuits and his failure to fulfil his responsibilities towards his people.

17. **The Cherries:** Towards the beginning of the film, Ray masterfully presents a cartoon which depicts the annexation of the princely States. It shows the

British eating cherries which are labelled as Princely States one by one, starting from Punjab to Burma, Nagpur, Satara, Jhansi, and finally Awadh.

**18. The Crown of the Nawab:** The intricately crafted crown, which graced the head of the Nawab of Awadh, was sent for an exhibition in London by Nawab Wajid Ali Shah. On seeing it, the words of the Governor-General, Dalhousie, which were reiterated in the film, were as follows: "The wretch at Lucknow who sent his crown to the... ..exhibition would have done his people and us a great service if he had sent head in it and he never would have missed it. That is the cherry that would drop into our mouth one day".<sup>7</sup> Being a man of his word, his tenure as Governor-General ended the same year as the annexation of Awadh, i.e. 1856.

**19. The Duel:** Matters come to a head when the chess players, towards the end of the film, enter a dispute regarding the game and start cursing each other's bloodline. This happens in the backdrop of the British army approaching Awadh. Mir Roshan Ali draws his pistol and accidentally fires it. Luckily, it misses Mirza Sajjad Ali, and Mir Roshan is deeply ashamed. The sheer irony is the fact that, while they did not move an inch to defend their territories from the British onslaught to preserve the sovereignty of Awadh, they did not hesitate to draw arms against each other over a small dispute regarding the game of chess. Their sense of "honour" superseded their sense of duty.

In the book, it is shown that they drew their swords and fought to the death. Premchand writes:

दोनों दोस्तों ने कमर से तलवारें निकाल लीं। नवाबी जमाना था; सभी तलवार, पेशकब्ज, कटार वगैरह बाँधते थे। दोनों विलासी थे, पर कायर न थे। उनमें राजनीतिक भावों का अधःपतन हो गया था- बादशाह के लिए, बादशाहत के लिए क्यों मरें; पर व्यक्तिगत वीरता का अभाव न था। दोनों जख्म खाकर गिरे, और दोनों ने वहीं तड़प-तड़पकर जानें दे दीं। अपने बादशाह के लिए जिनकी आँखों से एक बूँद आँसू न निकला, उन्हीं दोनों प्राणियों ने शतरंज के वजीर की रक्षा में प्राण दे दिये।<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Rosie Llewellyn-Jones, *The Last King in India: Wajid Ali Shah* (London: Hurst & Company, 2014), 140.

<sup>8</sup> Premchand, "शतरंज के खिलाड़ी."

Both friends drew the swords from their waists. It was the age of the Nawabs—everyone carried swords, daggers, or poniards. The two were indulgent men, but they were no cowards. Their sense of political duty had decayed—why should they lay down their lives for the king or the kingdom? And yet, they lacked no personal courage. Wounded, both fell to the ground and there, writhing in pain, they breathed their last. For their king, not a single tear had been shed—yet for the protection of a chess piece, the wazir, both laid down their lives.

[translation by author]

In the film, however, after their tempers cool, Mir Roshan feels deeply ashamed, and they make amends. They ultimately resort to another game of chess. The emotional exchange between two proud friends has been subtly yet impactfully shown in the film:

(After the shots have been fired and the dust seems to settle Mirza Sajjad asks Mir Roshan whether he is upset over the onslaught of the British)

MIR ROSHAN: I am not upset about this.

MIRZA SAJJAD: Then why are you upset?

MIR ROSHAN: That, with whom will I play chess now?

MIRZA SAJJAD: You have a player here before you and there are...  
...kebabs and bread. Eat on and play on. *Khaate jaiye khelte jaiye*. We'll go back home as soon as it is dark. The dark is necessary for hiding the face, Mir Sahib. *Muh chhupane ke liye andhera zaroori hai sahib*.<sup>9</sup>

These symbols collectively contribute to the thematic richness of “*Shatranj Ke Khilari*,” adding layers of meaning and depth to the narrative. They invite viewers to interpret the film beyond its surface plot, encouraging reflections on power dynamics, moral dilemmas, and the consequences of historical events for individuals and societies.

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<sup>9</sup> Kumar, “Shatranj Ke Khilari.”

### Ray's Portrayal of hitherto Unexplored Characters

Ray, unlike Premchand, was not vociferous in condemning the irresponsible aristocracy. Ray chose not to take sides, since he was neither in support of feudalism nor in favour of colonialism. Instead, he used his film as a medium for the audience to interpret and analyse on their own, using their respective ideological standpoints. Ray himself summed up his view as follows:

Easy targets don't interest me very much. The condemnation is there, ultimately, but the process of arriving at it is different. I was portraying two negative forces, feudalism and colonialism. You had to condemn both Wajid and Dalhousie. This was the challenge. I wanted to make this condemnation interesting by bringing in certain plus points of both the sides... by investing their representatives with certain human traits. These traits are not invented but backed by historical evidence. I knew this might result in a certain ambivalence of attitude, but I didn't see *Shatranj* as a story where one would openly take sides and take a stand. I saw it more as a contemplative, though unsparing view of the clash of two cultures – one effete and ineffectual and the other vigorous and malignant. I also took into account the many half-shades that lie in between these two extremes of the spectrum.... You have to read this film between the lines.<sup>10</sup>

There are several characters whom Ray breathed life into, due to which the film received more depth and background compared to the novel.

#### The King

The Nawab Wajid Ali Shah has been skilfully portrayed as a connoisseur of beauty and refinement, a patron of the arts who values creativity and expression above all else. However, this cultural extravaganza, often scaling to manic proportions, is a facade for the detachment and obliviousness of the monarch to the political realities of his time. Immersed in pleasurable pursuits and hedonistic activities rather than the affairs of the State, he remains blissfully unaware of the manipulations and deceptive activities of the British

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<sup>10</sup> Robinson, *Satyajit Ray*, 288. For detailed reminiscences of Ray, see Satyajit Ray, *Our Films, Their Films* (New York: Hyperion, 1994).

East India Company until he gets checkmated. Despite his flaws and vulnerabilities, Wajid Ali Shah is also portrayed with empathy and humanity. With a certain vulnerability and naivety, he is shown as a compassionate ruler who cares for his people and is loved by them in return. His interactions with his subjects reveal a genuine concern for their welfare, although this concern is often overshadowed by his indulgences.

The film's depiction of Wajid Ali Shah intertwines fact with fiction by drawing from historical records while incorporating artistic interpretation. The film presents his cultural legacy and artistic pursuits accurately, yet reduces certain personality traits to fit into Ray's cinematic storytelling. The work manages to deliver an intricate and stirring portrayal of a multifaceted historical character entangled in cultural fervour and political unrest.

Ray himself pointed out that Wajid Ali Shah was such an incompetent ruler that he had to force himself to feel sympathetic to him to make the film. At several points, he felt like giving up the film altogether and wrote to say so in several letters jointly addressed to his Urdu collaborator Shama Zaidi and to Bansi Chandragupta, who was then in Bombay too. On one occasion, Zaidi had written to Ray offering to translate Wajid Ali's autobiography for him, in which the King describes his sex life from the age of eight. "Manikda (Ray) said– don't tell me all this because then I'll dislike him even more," Shama recalled with a laugh.<sup>11</sup> Later Ray remarked:

I think there were two aspects to Wajid Ali Shah's character, one which you could admire and one which you couldn't. At one point I wrote to Shama that I just could not feel any sympathy for this stupid character. And unless I feel some sympathy I cannot make a film. But then finally, after long months of study, of the nawabs, of Lucknow, and of everything, I saw the King as an artist, a composer who made some contributions to the form of singing that developed in Lucknow. The fact that he was a great patron of music– that was one redeeming feature about this King.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 241.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 288.

From the earliest scenes, Ray emphasises the king's musicality to show his passion for the fine arts, primarily to de-vilify the absolute carelessness of royalty. The sheer irony screened in the film is that while all his subjects revelled in war-like games such as chess, cockfighting, and mock duels, the king revelled in cultural pursuits and sensual pleasures. The song that he created is a reference to the sorrowful plight of the State of Awadh and the Nawab.

*Tadap tadap sagari rain gujari  
Kaun des gayo sawariya  
Hoa bhar aayi ankhiyaan madwari  
Tadap tadap gayi chunariyaa*

*Tumhare ghodan mere  
Dwaare se jo nikase  
Sudh bhul gayi mai bawariya  
Dwaare se jo nikase  
Sudh bhul gayi mai bawariya.<sup>13</sup>*

The night passes away in suffering  
To which country has gone my soul mate  
My soulful eyes are tearful  
They are yearning, and waiting for you.

When your horses left from my doorway  
I took leave of my senses, crazy woman that I am  
The night passes away in suffering  
To which country has gone my soul mate.<sup>14</sup>

This paints the situation of Awadh, which was slowly descending into the gaping jaws of the British Empire. "*Shatranj ke Khilari*" offers a nuanced portrayal of Wajid Ali Shah as a cultural enthusiast and a vulnerable ruler, highlighting both his strengths and weaknesses in the face of colonial encroachment. It invites viewers to contemplate the intersection of art, politics, and power in the historical context of nineteenth-century Awadh.

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<sup>13</sup> Kumar, "Shatranj Ke Khilari." 1:04:41-1:06:00,

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 1:53:43.

## The Prime Minister

This is a novel character that Ray introduced in the film—Wazir of Wajid Ali Shah, Madaruddowla. It feels as if he represents the director's thoughts in the film. A sense of disappointment in the king's activities yet a feeling of loyalty towards the royal dynasty, Madaruddowla is helplessness personified. Portrayed by the iconic Victor Banerjee, this character is laced with melancholy and dilemma.

## Women

In *Shatranj ke Khiladi*, Satyajit Ray subtly subverts the conventional portrayal of women in period dramas by endowing them with agency, intelligence, and emotional depth, despite the backdrop of a deeply patriarchal and aristocratic nineteenth-century society. The King's mother, or the Queen Mother/*Rajmata*, is shown to be authoritative. While the king remained immersed in leisure and sensual activities, it was the Queen's mother who spoke to the British authorities when they declared that they would annex the State of Awadh—power behind the Purdah.

The wives of Mir Sajjad Ali and Mir Roshan Ali both have been given substantial personalities—a notable departure from the stereotypical depictions of aristocratic women as either decorative or docile. Mir Sajjad Ali's wife (played by Shabana Azmi) is sharp-tongued, perceptive, and deeply frustrated by her husband's escapist tendencies. Her sarcastic remarks and increasing isolation highlight the domestic cost of male detachment. In one scene, when her husband is preparing to sneak out yet again to play chess, she curtly questions whether he would remember the way back home—a line laced with irony, pain, and suppressed anger. Far from being a passive character, she voices her resentment and reveals the emotional vacuum created by her husband's indifference. Mir Roshan Ali's wife, though gentler in demeanour, also reflects quiet dissatisfaction. She is portrayed as dutiful but emotionally neglected, resigned to her husband's obsession with the game. Yet later on it is revealed that she has a lover and hence her personality is unexplored, like a veil which has not been lifted by the husband. She was smart enough to keep her husband pacified and inebriated with his chess addiction and discreetly managed her personal affairs. The contrast between

these two women allows Ray to showcase the different ways in which women cope with emotional abandonment and patriarchal negligence. Ray's portrayal of women, thus, complicates the narrative of the decline in feudal Lucknow. While the men of the court and nobility are lost in games, poetry, and inertia, the women emerge as figures of reason, resilience, and unacknowledged strength.<sup>15</sup>

### **Advocate Abbajan**

A character with seemingly no importance, Abbajan is an elderly advocate lying on his deathbed. He cannot do anything except emit sounds of anguish. The chess players had entered his house to obtain his chess board when they were ousted from their homes by their spouses. i.e. The complete helplessness of Abbajan symbolically portrays an arena of chaos.

### **The Servants**

Ray's magical lens breathed life into the lives of the servants of the feudal lords. The servants are shown to be serving quietly yet discussing amongst themselves the disorderly state of the households in the absence of the "Man of the House". They also take advantage of this situation and are lethargic. This reflects the condition of the State—absentee government, corrupt administration, and unproductive populace.

### **The Child**

The Child who serves food to Mir Roshan Ali and Mir Sajjad Ali when they decide to play chess near the masjid reflects the new generation. They have witnessed the decadence of the aristocracy and the collapse of administration. They also experienced the dawn of a new era, with the coming of the British. Being disgruntled with the *ancien regime*, they were the ones who rose to usher in social changes and reform the society.

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<sup>15</sup> For useful insights into the question of masculinities in Satyajit Ray's films, see Debarati Sanyal, "Introduction: Satyajit Ray's Films, His Men and the Inscription of the Nation," in *Failed Masculinities: The Men in Satyajit Ray's Films*, 1–22 (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023).

## General James Outram and Captain Weston

These two British characters have been given flesh and blood by Satyajit Ray. The British Resident has only been casually referenced in Premchand's novel. Richard Attenborough's portrayal of General James Outram epitomises the strategic and calculating essence of British imperialism. In 1854, he was appointed Resident at Lucknow, in which capacity two years later he carried out the annexation of Oudh and became the first Chief Commissioner of that province. In the film, Outram's character embodies a relentless drive for power and dominance, starkly contrasting the complacency of the local rulers. He also receives a cultural shock. Meanwhile, Captain Weston, portrayed by Tom Alter, is a subordinate officer under Outram, who is somewhat sympathetic to the plea of the Nawab and harbours an affection towards the local culture and customs. Weston has learnt the local Urdu language and often helps Outram, who has received a huge cultural shock ever since coming to India, in deciphering Indian habits and customs. He even explains and recites *Shayris* to Outram. Sometimes he reads out his self-composed poems. Outram and Weston may well represent the Anglicist and the Orientalist mindsets respectively. The Anglicists were critics of Indian society and culture and staunch advocates of the supremacy of Western education and culture, while the Orientalists were interested in Indology and the promotion of ancient Indian culture and methods of education.

A small yet impactful dialogue from the film between General Outram and Captain Weston is as follows:

(an hour-by-hour account of the king's activities... dated the 24th of January... that's yesterday.)

OUTRAM: Do you know the king prays five times a day?

WESTON: Five is the number prescribed by the Koran, sir.

OUTRAM: Surely, all Muslims don't pray five times a day.

WESTON: Well, not all, sir but some do.

OUTRAM: The king being one of them.

WESTON: The king is known to be a very devout man, sir.

OUTRAM: I see. The king listened to a new singer, Mustali Bai... and afterwards he amused himself by... flying kites on the palace roof.

That's at 4 p.m., when the king goes to sleep for an hour... but he is up in time for the third prayer at 5 p.m.... and then, in the evening... where is it... here it is... the king recited a new poem on the loves of the Bulbul?

WESTON: A bird, sir. The pheasant nightingale.

OUTRAM: ...after the mushaira. What's mushaira?

WESTON: Mushaira is a gathering of poets. They recite the new poems.

OUTRAM: I see.<sup>16</sup>

### The Language

The language spoken in the film differs noticeably from the classical Urdu used in Munshi Premchand's original short story, though it retains the cultural flavour and thematic relevance. Premchand's prose is steeped in a literary, high-register Urdu—richly layered with Persian and Arabic vocabulary, long syntactic structures, and moralistic irony. His narrative voice, for example, uses phrases like “विलासिता के रंग में डूबा हुआ था” (was immersed in the colours of luxury) or “शतरंज, ताश, गंजीफा खेलने से बुद्धि तीव्र होती है...” (playing chess, cards, ganjifa sharpens the mind...), expressing both satire and social commentary through elevated diction.

In contrast, the film's dialogue—written by Shama Zaidi and Javed Siddiqui—adopts a more colloquial and performable register of Hindustani (a blend of Hindi and Urdu) that would be accessible to a 1970s audience while still evoking the grace of mid-nineteenth-century Lucknow. Ray was deeply conscious of linguistic nuance, and his adaptation reflects a calibrated stylistic variation across characters. For instance, Nawab Wajid Ali Shah (played by Amjad Khan) speaks in a poetic, rhythmical Urdu that reflects his artistic temperament: in one scene, he laments the political tension with a line “क्या मैं शायर नहीं हूँ? क्या मैं तानसेन का वारिस नहीं हूँ?” (Am I not a poet? Am I not the heir to Tansen?).<sup>17</sup> This usage, while stylised, is lighter and more dramatic than Premchand's reflective narration.

Meanwhile, the two noblemen Mirza and Mir (played by Sanjeev Kumar and Saeed Jaffrey) speak in a refined but comically self-absorbed dialect. For

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 1:43-55.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 00:15:20-25.

example, Mirza exclaims in a key moment, “हमारी शतरंज कोई मामूली शतरंज नहीं है” (Our chess is no ordinary chess!), underscoring their delusional detachment from political reality. Such lines retain the satirical intent of Premchand’s original but are simplified for cinematic delivery. Commoners and servants in the film speak a more Awadhi-tinged, earthy Hindustani, offering regional texture and comic contrast, while the narration—voiced by Amitabh Bachchan—remains closest to Premchand’s literary tone, using more elevated language and formal phrasing to frame the story.

Ray’s film thus constructs a linguistic hierarchy: narration rooted in literary Urdu, elite characters speaking stylised yet accessible Hindustani, and supporting characters using vernacular forms. The film does not replicate Premchand’s prose verbatim, but rather transforms it for the medium of cinema, preserving its spirit while adapting its form. In doing so, Ray ensures that the essence of decay, irony, and cultural elegance in Premchand’s tale is felt not just through visuals, but through voice as well.

### **Debating Decadence: Contextualising Awadh**

The depiction of nineteenth-century Awadh, especially under Nawab Wajid Ali Shah, as a bastion of cultural opulence and political apathy has been a dominant narrative in both literary and cinematic representations. However, recent historical scholarship cautions against accepting this portrayal at face value and calls for a more nuanced appraisal of the so-called “decadence” of Awadh.

In her seminal book, *The Last King in India: Wajid Ali Shah*, Rosie Llewellyn-Jones argues that the Nawab’s apparent lack of interest in politics was more than a sign of incompetence— it was a characteristic of the ruler with a programme for maintaining a rich, syncretic and culturally lively court life in the face of increasing British intervention. Far from being the indulgent sensualist figure, Wajid Ali Shah was a deeply religious, artistic, and sensitive man who followed the cultural programme of kingship. He actively patronised Urdu theatre, Kathak dance, and Hindustani classical music, and wrote several plays, ghazals, and treatises on devotional music and poetry. Jones argues that many British officials, such as General Outram, deliberately misinterpreted this cultural patronage as political complacency—an image

which the colonial rationale for annexation required. British accounts emphasised "misrule" to justify Lord Dalhousie's application of the Doctrine of Lapse, when Awadh was not in its normal jurisdiction.<sup>18</sup>

Rudrangshu Mukherjee's *Awadh in Revolt, 1857-1858: A Study of Popular Resistance* offers a different critical perspective to the argument. Mukherjee shows that the image of Awadh as politically stagnant is a myth that is broken when one examines the extensive and organised rebellion that broke out shortly after its annexation. Awadh, after annexation, was the focal point of resistance to the Revolt of 1857, not because of the ill will of the dispossessed taluqdars alone but also because of popular outrage among sepoys, peasants, and artisans. Mukherjee is keen to point out that Wajid Ali Shah was hugely beloved by his people, as seen in the symbolic invocation of his name during the rebellion, well after he had been forced into exile in Calcutta. Such post-annexation resistance corroborates that the political decline commonly ascribed to Awadh was neither universal nor unopposed.<sup>19</sup>

In addition, both Mukherjee and Jones reject the binary opposition so often sketched between a "progressive" British imposition and a "backward" native regime. The British depiction of the Nawab's court as one of extravagance and debauchery was part of a larger Orientalist project to represent native rulers as morally unfit to rule. However, Awadh's court and urban culture—especially in Lucknow—were one of the most sophisticated in the subcontinent, and one of the very origins of a distinctive Indo-Persian aesthetic that infused everything from architecture to etiquette. This culture, so abhorred as decadent, was actually a living tradition of composite culture (*Ganga-Jamuni tehzeeb*), one that was systematically destroyed after annexation.

Thus, whilst '*Shatranj ke Khilari*' beautifully brings the metaphor of internal dissolution to life through the medium of chess, secondary sources inform us that the historical reality was a good deal more complex. The fall of Awadh was as much the creation of deliberate imperial strategy, manipulated news of misgovernment, and the suppression of cultural diversity as it was of

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<sup>18</sup> Jones, *The Last King*.

<sup>19</sup> Rudrangshu Mukherjee, *Awadh in Revolt, 1857-1858: A Study of Popular Resistance* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984).

aristocratic sloth. Sophisticated analyses of the context by historians like Llewellyn-Jones and Mukherjee allow us to appreciate Ray's film not merely as a condemnation of feudal sloth but as a eulogy for a lost world, one poised between the cruelty of empire and the fragility of culture.

### Conclusion

*"Shatranj ke Khilari"* serves as a poignant commentary on Awadh's decline and the broader impact of colonialism on Indian society, using the metaphor of chess to explore power dynamics, politics, and historical change. The film's evocative imagery, coupled with Satyajit Ray's masterful direction, leaves a lasting impact on the audience, prompting contemplation on themes of power, responsibility, and the clash between tradition and modernity. It is a cinematic *tour de force* that transcends its historical setting to explore universal themes of human nature and societal change. Through its rich narrative tapestry, memorable performances, and poignant storytelling, the film remains a timeless classic that continues to resonate with audiences, offering insights into the complexities of power dynamics and the enduring legacy of colonialism. Both Premchand's narrative and Ray's storytelling skilfully intertwine historical events with human emotions, offering a critical perspective on societal issues and the impact of colonialism.

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