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Satyajit Ray's *The Chess Players* and Postcolonial Theory

Culture, Labour and the Value of Alterity

Reena Dube

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For My Parents
Jagdish Prasad Dube and Saroj Rani Dube

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Foreword

One of the greatest problems facing the development of human knowledge today is the problem of specialisation. Specialisation is always necessary in order to attain a detailed understanding of the cultural object under examination but that necessary specialization becomes an obstacle when it prevents the placing of that object in the wider social contexts, which allow of real illumination.

This general problem is particularly acute in the case of film studies. Film studies constituted itself as a discipline around a detailed understanding of the formal structure of film, the specific articulation of sound and image, which differentiates each film. This study became a reproducible pedagogy when the technological advance of videotape allowed every student and teacher to enjoy a relation to the image, which in earlier decades had been the preserve of the editor and the director. In many institutions the birth of film studies saw this study of film bureaucratically separated from both the humanities and the social sciences. Such separation could find some justification in the specific formal articulation of film. However, it ignored the centrality of film to twentieth-century history, a centrality often commented in the intensely political role of film in both Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany but just as central to the history of the United States where both the Hays Code and the use of blacklisting in Hollywood after the war are best understood as deliberate attempts to limit the social force of the image. As important, this separation ignored how the wider culture surfaced within the film text, as adaptation, as music, as performance. Reena Dube's brilliant analysis of Satyajit Ray's *The Chess Players* ignores the separations which impoverish much film analysis. Dube is determined to situate this film both within the social forces of its moment of production (1977) and also in the complex presence in *The Chess Players* of a whole variety of textual and cultural histories. Dube locates the film as part of the thinking which produced the collective of *Subaltern Studies* historians and their influential analyses. The subalternists argued that the movement of national liberation which had produced the independent India of 1947 had been fatally flawed in that it had copied the colonial oppressor both in the form of the state it adopted and in the notion of citizenship it espoused – both ignored the reality and complexity of Indian history and experience. In class terms the native bourgeoisie had conceived

the national liberation struggle in terms of their own production of citizen subjects worthy of participation in a modern nation. But these new citizen subjects, modelled on British politics, ruled the subaltern classes with as little attention to their experience as the former masters of the days of the Raj.

The subalternist's analysis grew out of the disillusion with the society of post-Independence India and particularly the catastrophe of Indira Gandhi's declaration of a state of emergency in 1975. Although the film-maker Satyajit Ray had no direct, *documented* contact with the subalternists, he worked and lived in the same Bengal society as did the majority of the radical historians. Dube argues that his film *The Chess Players* should be read from the same perspective. Ray's film, however, has resources not available, to the historians, the resources of cinema. A theoretical weakness of the subalternists was that their analysis of the inadequacy of the national bourgeoisie's model of both subject and state and its erasure of subaltern experience could not produce an alternative model – that had to come from the subaltern classes themselves. The mistake which had been made once could not be made twice. In many ways this mistake was the mistake of a Marxism which was then understood as fatally linked to the particular developments of capitalism in Western Europe. Marx's announcement in the Communist Manifesto that capitalism's great gift to humanity had been its release from "the idiocy of the village" increasingly seemed a simple repetition of bourgeois norms of modernity which were as dangerous in their environmental as in their cultural consequences. But the risk of refusing to speak for the subaltern, of refusing to offer an inadequate discourse to represent an experience which was not directly understood, was that the subaltern might not speak at all. The subalternist intellectual was left attending a potentially evermore radical voice in an evermore actually vacuous political position.

Dube shows how Ray avoids this fate by anchoring his film in the one medium where the subaltern does speak – in the form of popular jokes. Ray doesn't choose just any popular jokes; he chooses the tall tales of the city of Lucknow and in particular a joke which tells of the fall of the city and its kingdom of Awadh. The joke attributes the fall of the kingdom to an indolent ruling class too busy playing chess to notice what the British were up to. Ray comes to this story through the nationalist fiction of Premchand but Ray does not accept the typical nationalist tale that Premchand tells, which castigates the decadent aristocracy for not being earnestly bourgeois enough to fight the English and be worthy of statehood. Rather Ray goes back to the ambivalent subaltern version

which both mocks and admires an aristocracy which refuses to submit to the clock time and work ethic of the imperial Raj. It is impossible to summarise the extraordinarily delicate web that Dube weaves in her analysis of the extraordinarily delicate web that is Ray's film. What can be said is that even if all the specific linearities were to be challenged, and the force of the book means that it will certainly have challengers, any future analysis will need to rival the scope and range of this book as it moves from Indian history to Robinson Crusoe, from neo-realism to contemporary Hollywood.

What lies at the centre of this book is a passion, a passion for the city of Lucknow and its vanished past, the kingdom which had abandoned the Persian language of its conquerors for a society in which Hindi and Urdu were both validated and in which Hindu and Muslim could live together. It is this heritage that Ray sketches in his film; it is this heritage that Dube promotes in her analysis. Its relevance to a time of Hindu and Muslim fundamentalism is obvious. It may be that Dube like others who have found a value in aristocracy from Coleridge and Carlyle to T. S. Eliot can be accused of wishful thinking, of valorizing a society that never actually existed. But even when every historical fact has been challenged we will be left with the simplest of Lakhnawi tall tales: the two nawabs who meet on a station platform and who when the train arrives are so busy saying "After you" that that the train leaves without them. For Indian nationalism the joke is on the nawabs unable to board the train of modernization but no one can read this book without considering that perhaps the joke is on the world of timetables and anger and not on the leisurely courtesy of the nawabs.

Colin MacCabe
Pittsburgh, January 2005

Preface

This book began with two dream projects in mind. First, I wished to interrogate how the colonial and postcolonial gendered worker is ideologically interpellated and discursively inserted into the grand narrative of global capitalism. My second dream project was to execute the first project through thick descriptions of postcolonial cinematic texts. It is in the conjunctures and conflicts between these two projects that this book takes shape: I try to understand how discourse mediates labour and its value, and how language and the conventions of discourse virtually determine the signification we attach to each labouring activity. Films are cultural texts that can provide us with the sediments and traces of dominant, popular, and critical discourses about labour and its value.

Meditating and thinking through how to analyze, represent, and write about postcolonial cultural production is not simply the functionalist work I had to do to clear a path for my substantive thesis on labour; rather, cultural labour is a central and inextricable part of my examination of the discourses of labour. It is not enough to study, as the Subaltern historian Dipesh Chakrabarty does with considerable brilliance, the history of the jute workers of Calcutta, or the painstakingly researched histories of industrial workers' strikes, the unions or peasant rebellions. The history of labour in colonial India – whether it be the subhuman conditions in which indentured labourers were procured, transported, and worked to early death, or the bonded labour that continue to serve the feudal landlord and moneylender for generation after generation, or the exploitation and dispossession of the tribals – is a dispiriting example of the overt and subterranean accommodations between British colonial capitalism and the feudal practices of domination in India. It may seem callous and unfeeling to suggest, as this book does in fact suggest, that the normed subject of the discourses of colonial labour is the political-military-economic labours of the indigenous elite in the colonized country.

Thus in the broadest sense this book is about the discourses of labour in colonial and postcolonial conditions. More specifically it investigates

the discourse of “colonial enterprise,” a term I borrow and expand from the text of Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719). I examine how the colonial administrators, officers, and historians represented their task of the colonial takeover of India and the ways in which the labour of the colonized populace was inserted into the official discourse of colonial enterprise. I argue that the binary half of colonial enterprise is the “expanded cultural critique,” a term I use to refer to the ways in which indigenous culture, work, and play practices were discursively mapped by colonial enterprise. I elaborate this term, which is critical to my work, fully in Chapter 1. Here I briefly note that it is a term that signifies the discursive devaluation of native labour and culture. This devaluation makes possible, among other things, the supra-valuation of colonial enterprise.

My interest has been in exploring how the male worker (elite as well as subaltern) is inserted into the discourse of capitalist colonialist enterprise. How this discursive formation is inherited and further reproduced and elaborated by the nation state and the discourse of nationalism. My interest lay in doing detailed analysis of how labour is characterized and/or stigmatized as productive and unproductive. How the cultural practices of a specific time in history – Bengal in 1793, and Awadh in 1856 – are recorded and memorialized in terms of valueless, primitive play versus useful nation-building work. In other words how culture is mapped onto the terrain of work under specific conditions of colonialism and in nationalist discourse.

One of my central arguments is that the discourse of enterprise is not merely a colonial phenomenon. The discourse of enterprise continues to be re-invented at disparate sites in our own times: in Hollywood films, American television serials, Indian films and literature, diaspora literature, and in children’s literature. Therefore any study or investigation of the continuing pervasiveness, persuasiveness, and relevance of the discourse of enterprise has to aggressively traverse disciplinary boundaries of film and literature, as well as national boundaries, and analyze texts across cultures and centuries, mapping the distance between “First” and “Third” world cultural production. The axis of this work is centre and the periphery, colonial and indigenous, and elite as well as subaltern discourses of labour. The proper subject of the discourse of enterprise is the straight, white man of property and the proper subject of the expanded cultural critique is the elite, brown man of property. I have deliberately refrained from including woman as a kind of supplemental category with a chapter devoted to the subject. Women are either absent from the discourse of enterprise (note the aggressive

exclusion of women in Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*) or make their token appearance as proof of an argument. The discourses of colonial women's labour would generate a booklength argument, which I hope to work on in the future.

My thesis about colonial enterprise and the expanded cultural critique would not be adequate if I did not engage with the question of how historians, scholars, and cultural workers (film makers) have resisted the totalizing impulse of colonial enterprise. Therefore approximately half of my book is devoted to the question of resistance, specifically cultural and discursive resistance. I investigate how historically Awadh and the culture of Awadh, folklore, and the popular oral history surrounding the annexation of Awadh resisted the broad characterizations of colonialist and nationalist discourses and offered a different understanding of the defeat of Awadh's values and culture. The question that haunts all historical and cultural writing about Awadh is: how could such an evolved, self-reflective, and vibrant culture be defeated and erased by the British and consigned to failure of excess by the nationalists? I do not explore the question of armed resistance that ensued in Awadh in 1857–1858 against British rule. The results of that moment of resistance are well known in terms of British massacre of the resistance fighters and the British campaign of violent suppression and erasure of the Muslim population and culture. Whereas in 1857–1858 Hindus and Muslims fought against the British together, a hundred years later Independence was inaugurated in the subcontinent with the partition of India and the horrific violence between Hindus and Muslims.

Far from generalizing and universalizing the indigenous elite male, I construct a bounded and delimited framework to examine colonialist and nationalist discourses that name and characterize elite male labour. In bracketing the indigenous elite male as the subject of the colonial discourse of the expanded cultural critique, I disavow the privileging of the indigenous elite. Often postcolonial theory falls prey to the tendency to generalize from the perspective of the postcolonial metropolitan elite. There is a hegemonizing tendency in this impulse. The metropolitan elite may claim to speak on behalf of the rest of the population, but that claim is suspect. By foregrounding the indigenous elite male and the discourses that map his abilities and his right to govern, I confront the discourses and cultural texts that were most seductive and emotionally compelling for me as a postcolonial subject, namely the discourses and literary tropes of Indian nationalism.

The fragmentation of Ray's *The Chess Players* in different chapters of the book requires explanation. This structural device began as a necessity:

there were levels and levels of historical explanation required to make the film intelligible. In the process I found that this device allowed me to suggest that I was not invested in the blind admiration of Satyajit Ray, or the fetishizing of the film text. The theoretical argument took precedence over textual interpretation. I also asked myself why I had chosen this particular Ray film, *The Chess Players*. The reason is that this is the only film of Ray that demonstrates that he was not simply a regionalist intellectual. There is a popular nativist critical approach to Satyajit Ray's cinema that tends to make him Bengal-centric. The implicit theory of this approach is that the normative postcolonial cultural worker is one who is close to his regional culture, and has an organic relation to his language, his people, and his homeland. The telos of this critical approach is to suggest that only the Bengali movie viewer truly understands the inflexions and nuances of a Ray film. There is no doubt that Ray lived and breathed his regional culture in a way that enriched his art. But Ray's political vision was freed of regionalist associations when he travelled out of Bengal and dared to make a film about a place that was not his birthplace, in a Hindi-Urdu language that was not as familiar to him as the Bengali language, in tribute to a writer (Premchand) who was not part of the Bengali intelligentsia. Ray could make this cultural bridge because he approached another provincial culture with love, and he understood that culture with love and appreciation. It seems to me that there is a parable for cultural work in postcolonial India here.

In the present climate of racism and Hindu fundamentalism in postcolonial India where the Indian Muslims are being targeted and marginalized by the hegemonic Hindu fundamentalist discourses, critical engagement with an older Hindu and Muslim assimilative culture is called for. Uttar Pradesh, the state of which Lucknow is the capital, has long been viewed as part of the Hindi-Urdu belt, other states included in this are Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan. This region has been seen as a formidable zone of power in Indian politics and has defined the socio-political agenda of the country for many decades. The agitation against the Mandal Commission, and the destruction of Babri Masjid (which took place in Ayodhya, a few miles from Lucknow) are just two of the most recent divisive events that have taken place in this region and that have defined the political climate of the country. My work tries to evoke, remember, and re-enact the synthesis of Hindu and Muslim cultures in nineteenth-century Awadh and work against the amnesia about the Hindu-Muslim past in postcolonial India.

I wish to thank Jonathan Arac for his support, encouragement, and warm friendship, and his critical engagement with my work. I also owe thanks to John Beverley, Steve Carr, and James Knapp. Colin MacCabe has been a wonderful and generous reader, I greatly appreciate his help and support. I am grateful to Dilip Basu for his generosity and help in providing me with the film stills for this book and the Satyajit Ray Film & Study Collection at University of California, Santa Cruz and Sandip Ray for giving me permission to use his stills. I wish to express my gratitude and thanks to Rashmi Dube Bhatnagar for all her generous help and support. Renu Dube's warm and wonderful friendship is a continual source of joy and support, a life source for me, this work could not have been imagined and executed without her.

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