

2015

An Interview with Dilip K. Basu

Geoffrey Kain

Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, kaing@erau.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.erau.edu/publication>



Part of the [Film and Media Studies Commons](#), and the [Fine Arts Commons](#)

Scholarly Commons Citation

Kain, G. (2015). An Interview with Dilip K. Basu. *South Asian Review*, 36(1). Retrieved from <https://commons.erau.edu/publication/162>

Kain, G. (2015). Interview with Dilip K. Basu. *South Asian Review*, 36(1), 19-36.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Publications by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact commons@erau.edu.

An Interview with Dilip K. Basu

Geoffrey Kain

Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University

[Dr. Dilip K. Basu, professor emeritus of History at the University of California, Santa Cruz, is the founding director of the Satyajit Ray Film and Study Center, now located in Crown College on the UCSC campus. He and his wife, Dayani Kowshik-Basu, who serves as curator for the Center, continue to maintain, direct, and develop the Ray archival collection and oversee the continuing restoration efforts of a range of Satyajit Ray materials. Dilip Basu has played one of the most vital roles, worldwide, in the recovery and restoration of Satyajit Ray's films. In 1992, when the Motion Picture Academy, with Audrey Hepburn at the microphone, presented Satyajit Ray with an Academy Award for Lifetime Achievement, it was Dilip Basu who had brought the Oscar from California to Calcutta to personally present it to Ray and who (just off camera) assisted the critically ill Ray to hold the award in his hands as he addressed the Academy and mass television audience via satellite link from his Calcutta hospital bed.]

Professor Dilip Basu was interviewed by Professor Geoffrey Kain, the guesteditor of the Satyajit Ray Issue.

In the following interview conducted in May 2014 in Santa Cruz, California, Dilip Basu reflects on the journey that has been the restoration effort of his personal association with Satyajit Ray, of Ray's connectedness to his cultural/historical context, and of some of Ray's achievements as an artist of international stature.

Geoffrey Kain: When and how did the idea of developing the Ray archival project begin?

Dilip Basu: In the 1980s, I became interested in teaching a class at UC Santa Cruz on modern Indian history (19th and 20th centuries). Looking over the available textbooks on modern South Asian history, I was rather disappointed. They seemed dull, uninteresting, and arranged in a way that was not consistent with how I imagined offering a class along these lines, in my own way, focusing on original Indian texts. Then the idea occurred to me that one way to get my students interested in the subject matter would be, along with some texts, to show Ray films, which are period films—for instance, I wanted to begin the class with the Sepoy mutiny and wanted to show *The Chess Players* to begin with.

Then, for 1880, I thought it would be interesting to show *Charulata*, which of course is based on a Tagore novel (*Nastanir* [*The Broken Nest*]). It is focused precisely on 1880.

The political side of the film *Charulata* is focused on the reform movement, the moderate nationalism of that time, but there is the other side of the film, which is focused on the interior of the life of educated, upper-middle-class Bengal, and here we have to know something about contemporary Bengal history.

GK: So the history, in conjunction with Ray, . . .

DB: The Ray films can beautifully illuminate the history, and we can also better understand Ray and his films, and the Bengali context, through the developments of this history. *Charulata* is a case in point, maybe the best example.

GK: Why?

DB: The Bengali reform movement began with the great man Ram Mohan Roy in the 1820s, early 1830s. Roy fought for and won the right to abolish *sati*, and he forcefully raised the women's question, women's education, . . . the liberation of women. Ram Mohan Roy was pretty much a product of the European enlightenment, and he became a publisher, a writer, and he wrote profusely, borrowing from the European enlightenment but relating some of the key ideas to the Indian and the Bengali tradition and creating a modernism in Bengal that spoke for human rights, rights of equal citizenship with the British. In a way, he sort of believed in the Empire. He thought that Indians and the British should be equal partners in the Empire and that Indians should be equal citizens in the Empire.

This was also a time in England of a liberal movement. The British intellectuals were prone to that kind of idea of equal citizenship. So Ram Mohan was not a very firm critic of British rule. He wanted to live with British rule and get all citizenship rights for Indians. At the same

time, he wanted to reform Indian society from within—raising the women’s question, abolishing *sati*, educating women, and also introducing western education. There was a debate at this time among the British who ruled India. They argued that they may have at a moment of “absent mindedness” won over Bengal accidentally and now faced the question of *how* to rule Bengal, and their point of view became that they must rule Bengal according to Indian tradition, that they needed to follow Indian customs and Indian rules. These are the people who came to be known as Orientalists. They had a romantic vision of the orient, and they included India in this. They believed that the Orient must follow its own age-old traditions. These at least were the romantic Orientalists. Opposed to them were British utilitarians like John Stuart Mill, Jeremy Bentham, Macaulay, who believed in Britishism and the English mission to bring about a modern world. They were in favor of bringing English education to India, and, on that principle, Hindu College was established in India in 1817.

Interestingly, Hindu College was not established by the English Occidentalists (as opposed to the Orientalists), it was established at the initiative of local Indians, wealthy, new middle-class Indians, the *comprador bourgeoisie* as they are called in Marxist terms, the new moneyed class who made their money thanks to the opening of India to international trade, and Calcutta had become a very important port city and window on to that western world. A new class of merchants, known as the “Banyan merchants,” had made their wealth through trade. Their sons were now the promoters of western education, believing that in order to become modern, India truly needed western education. In order to have a truly western education, India needed a western-type college.

So some of them worked together, put together some of their own money, and established Hindu College, along with a corresponding Hindu School. They had strong support from contemporary English gentlemen who came forward to support their cause. So Hindu College was established with a western medium, with a contemporary western curriculum, with a focus both on the classics and on modern studies, with courses in philosophy, history, literature. The students were taught by Englishmen except for one or two Indian teachers who taught Sanskrit and Bengali.

This school produced a bunch of angry young men who were known as Young Bengal. They were complete believers in Western enlightenment, in deism, rationalism. They were fired by Reason, by the Age of Enlightenment, and they wanted to have something similar in their curriculum, in their education. They were all totally immersed in western philosophy, political texts and history, they read them all, imbibed them all.

They became a kind of deracinated Bengalis. They made fun of anything Bengali. They would not speak Bengali; they would speak and write only in English; they wrote poetry in English; they wrote prose and fiction in English. They would go, for instance, to the temple of the goddess Kali, forced to go there by their parents, to prostrate themselves before the goddess, but instead of prostrating themselves they would stand there and say, "Good morning, Madam." They also ate beef, and after they ate it they would throw the bones to Brahmins and caste Hindus to make fun of them. These were the angry young men, and that was a very important intellectual tradition which had important followers, mostly young men, all sons of wealthy banyans who made money through British trade. Their fathers were very upset by their flouting of the traditions.

It is in that context that the Indian enlightenment was born.

But Ram Mohan Roy was more thoughtful; he was equally attentive to ancient Indian tradition, and he found the best in ancient Indian tradition combined with the West and came up with some kind of a synthesis which he presented as "Bengal Modern."

GK: So do you think that tension between the traditional and the modern that we see repeatedly in Ray's films is . . . ?

DB: Actually in *Charulata* there is a celebratory party when somebody proposes a toast: "On this special occasion we have to remember one person: Ram Mohan Roy, the father of modern India." And that is a reference to the western side, the rationalist side of *Charulata*.

GK: Where do you feel Ray comes down on that question? ...in a lot of cases, as in *Devi*, for example, it seems, to me at least, that there is an ambivalence toward tradition just as there is an ambivalence toward the modern. Or for example in *Jalsagar* when the truck intrudes on the scene with the elephant in the background, or when the loud, recorded music overwhelms the acoustic music? Do you agree that there is this ambivalence?

DB: Yes, I think I would agree with that. This is the historical link. Ray was basically a modernist in the best sense of the term. As you pointed out, the vulgar side of the modern, the mercantile side, he didn't like. But he was very much a modern person, Bengali modern. He was very much a product of this Ram Mohan Roy tradition I have sketched for you. [at 21:04] Ram Mohan Roy is also the first person to call for a certain form of Hinduism. He raised a clarion cry against Hindu idolatry. He pointed out that Hinduism is not just idol worshipping. Idols are just symbols. In the final analysis, Hinduism, as enshrined in the *Upanishads*, which emphasizes the Brahman, the ultimate soul, is not iconic. Brahman is a spirit. It cannot be accurately

or fully represented in an icon. It is the ultimate reality, the ultimate essence. From that Brahman Roy derived the term Brahmo, and he organized a society called Brahmo Sabha. He did not live long enough to fully establish it, but his close friend and successor was Dwarkanath Tagore, Rabindranath Tagore's grandfather. And then his son Dabendranath Tagore (Rabindranath's father) also picked up the clarion call from Ram Mohan Roy and established something called Brahmo Samaj, which is a reformed Hindu society which did not believe in idol worshiping. They denounced idol worshiping and emphasized Brahman.

Now, of course, Satyajit Ray...actually Satyajit's grandfather well before him...became Brahmo. So in that sense they were akin to the Tagores, and there is a clear line of philosophical connectedness from Ray back to Ram Mohan Roy. Satyajit's grandfather Upendrakishore Ray was a very close friend of Dabendranath Tagore. Satyajit's father Sukumar Ray, a very popular nonsense verse writer who died young, was someone of whom Rabindranath Tagore was very, very fond. Tagore was greatly saddened when Sukumar died so young, and he eulogized him.

Tagore was a very modern man, and he at the same time believed in and was very learned in the Upanishadic tradition. He knew all the ancient Indian Sanskrit texts, was a Sanskrit scholar. He combined Ram Mohan Roy's philosophy of modernism and ancient Indian tradition of Brahmanism and created his own version of modernism which was, in the final analysis, very Bengali. I've called that a Bengali Enlightenment. It is a brilliant intellectual tradition created by these brilliant intellectuals of the nineteenth century, post-Ram Mohan Roy. The greatest of them was Tagore.

So it is possible to talk about a Bengal Modern or a Calcutta Modern that was very much a product of this Ram Mohan Roy tradition.

GK: And this is the torch that is passed to Ray.

DB: It went through various moments or stages of changes, challenges, and reforms. Somehow, the ultimate message of modernism stayed on. For instance, in the 1890s there was a kind of revival of Hinduism, in a modern way, not in the ancient way. The greatest exponent of this modern Hinduism was Swami Vivekananda, who brought the message of modern Hinduism, which he defined as *Vedanta* to the West, and that is a modern, reformed Hinduism which actually appealed greatly to the West. Swami Vivekananda was overnight celebrated as a great speaker, reformer, champion, philosopher in the West, especially in England and America. He was very popular in America and established the Vedanta Society, which still flourishes in America as well as in

Europe. So that was a very different kind of Hinduism; you can say it was a revived Hinduism but a modern Hinduism. But it also had its conservative side, its reactionary side. That came into a clash in 1905, which is the background of the film made by Ray, *Home and the World* (again from Tagore).

GK: So as you were teaching the South Asian history course you alluded to, this is the thread you were developing?

DB: Yes, I began with *The Chess Players*, offered *Charulata* for 1880 and turned to *Home and the World* for 1905, tracing this line of development and including Ray in that. These are a couple of examples.

GK: So did certain difficulties obtaining those films at that time lead you to begin developing the Ray Center here...?

DB: Exactly. To return directly to that question, at that time Macmillan-Brandon was distributing old Ray films. 16mm films, 35mm films, and later on they started to make videos. This was the 1970s, 1980s. So I borrowed 35mm films from Macmillan-Brandon, and we had a projector here at UCSC that was donated by a friend of mine, and we started to project those films. I was horrified by their condition. They were so bad that I was embarrassed to show them to my students. They had cuts and scratches ... they were all old loan-out prints that went back to the 50s and 60s, shown many many times, and they had never cared to buy a new print. They kept sending the same old print. There was nothing else available. People interested in Ray films would see them, write articles, some even wrote books. The condition of the films in India was equally bad. In India there are no good prints of Ray films. The producers never bothered to get new prints made. They kept sending out the old prints.

Pune National Film Archive was established in the 1960s, and they had none at that time. And then in 1968 a great archivist named P.K. Nair became director of the Pune National Film Archive, and he got a whole bunch of Ray films, original negatives, and made prints from them. They were reasonable, and you could see them. They were bad, but you could actually watch them.

I brought some of them here. They are not that good, either. P.K. Nair retired, and those films disappeared. They burned in a great film fire. They don't exist anymore. So Ray films in the 1970s, 1980s, original classic films had disappeared.

Original negatives burned in the Pune National Film Archive, no good prints are available, and DVDs or tapes that were made were not viewable, so I couldn't show anything to my students that I was proud

of. So I went back to Calcutta and told Mr. Ray, “You know, this is the condition of your films in America.”

GK: Did you know him before this time? When did you first meet?

DB: I knew him quite well, quite closely in the 1980s. I first met him face to face in 1977 at Pacific Film Archive in Berkeley. He had come there with *The Chess Players*, just made, to show the film that he was traveling with. He was also in 1977 honored by UC Berkeley with the Berkeley Award, which is Berkeley’s highest academic honor for non-academics, and it is rarely given. So I was present on that occasion. There was a cocktail reception at a Berkeley museum. Ray held a glass of sherry, but he never drank. No alcohol. It was a family tradition. I noticed that and I said, “Aren’t you going to have a sip?” That started our conversation. He was very charming, very elegant, dressed in a suit. He spoke as nicely and elegantly then as you have probably seen him speak on camera, giving a lecture or interview. Honestly, I’ve never heard anyone speak so elegantly in both Bengali and English. He spoke with perfect diction in Bengali, just as in English.

Another wonderful thing about him is that even after his heart attack [in 1983], if you rang his doorbell, which sounded in his study, a very famous study, he would take a walk through his study, and open the front door himself to invite you in. If you called him, he’d pick up the phone himself. As you’d leave his home, he would always stand up and walk you to the door.

His entire family was very courteous, polite, cultivated, and he maintained that tradition. Sandip still does that, too. He will not only walk me to the door, he will walk me to the staircase, to the lift. They live on the third floor of a British colonial apartment building where Ray moved in 1970.

GK: Not the expansive home one might expect of an international film celebrity?

DB: Very nice, comfortable, but it was never about the money for Satyajit Ray. He provided well, owned an Ambassador car, loved his home, his study, ... and he had that enormous collection of classical records, a passion of his. But no, it wasn’t about money for him. He said, why worry about the producer? If the producer has to make money, and the film itself becomes expensive, what then? He lived a middle, upper-middle class life. He was fine with that. He was not interested in money for money’s sake, in accumulating personal wealth.

GK: Well, to return to your narrative regarding access to good prints of the films

DB: Yes. I went to him then, in 1988. He was not well. He was confined to his house after suffering two heart attacks in 1983 and 1984. Doctors would not allow him to make any films, and he was kind of depressed, but he was writing a lot. He wrote many books, science fiction, Feluda books, essays, ... I told him ... I used to call him *Manekda* (Manek was his family name, pet name, and Dada for “older brother”) ... I said, “*Manekda*, the condition of your films in America is terrible. They are not viewable, I tried to show them to my students. I am very shocked. Something has to be done.” Frankly, he heard me, but he was not all that interested in his old films. He was much more interested in what he was doing then. He said, “The Library of Congress must have some good prints. And Channel 4 in London had a festival of my films, and they looked pretty good. Channel 4 may have them.” That was the lead that he gave me. But as I said, he was interested in talking about his new projects, especially *Enemy of the People*, which he was making in 1988.

He said then that [paraphrasing] “I really cannot make films in the old way, shooting outdoors, or even working in studios. It’s very hard. I am confined to a chair, so I have to shoot from a chair, so I can only make family dramas, so I have made this family drama based on Ibsen’s *Enemy of the People* but making it a contemporary themed film.”

GK: So those kinds of settings, such as we see in *Agantuk (The Stranger)* were really driven by his inability to move?

DB: Exactly. And he said that now he was trying to do a new kind of film, films which were basically plays. They are based on plays, written as plays, but made into films. He approached these as a fusion of film and play. And he let me know that after 1984 [paraphrasing Ray], “even though in 1984 in *Home and the World* I was very disturbed by the rise of Hindu nationalism in India and this kind of fanaticism, I have been very bothered by the environmental problems in India, the pollution; and the third thing that bothers me is the prevalence of the black market.” That alternative market in India was as prosperous if not more prosperous than the mainstream market. There’s a kind of fake rupee called “Number Two rupee” which people had stashed and were using in the market. That was very common at that time. It wasn’t how much legitimate money you had, but how much you had in Number Two rupees. That’s how wealth was calculated. As a matter of fact, in *Shakha Prashakha (Branches of the Tree)*, his second-to-last film, just after *Enemy of the People*, the little boy—in all of his films there’s a little boy, you know—the grandson, tells the grandfather, “I know about a new kind of rupee ... Number Two rupee. Have you heard about that?” So the grandfather hears from his little grandson about the

black market money, and he was very shocked. That it has reached these very small children was very bad.

And that is what Ray late in his life wanted to send a message about, that he was very bothered by (a) environmental problems, (b) the rise of Hindu fundamentalism, and now (c) the prevalence of black market money and corruption ... and lack of trust. Like the sons in *Shakha Prashakha*, they didn't really trust anybody. One is a successful entrepreneur, yes, but he never really trusted anybody, whereas the old man, their father, who made money as a merchant, as a trader, also as an entrepreneur, believed that honesty was the best policy. But these people reversed that policy, and they believed that dishonesty was the best policy.

And that's what bothered Ray. In the 80s he not only saw the ugly rise of Hindu fundamentalism and environmental pollution, but now the black market as well. So Ray said to me [paraphrasing here], "In my new films, I speak very vocally. I make my voice heard to the audience. I say very explicitly what I want to say, unlike my early films where my messages were very implicit. The audience could make up its own mind what to think about the film, but now I want to give my messages very loudly and clearly. I want to speak against fundamentalism, environmental pollution, and the black market. And I want to make films on them. These films carry my messages, my own personal messages."

GK: I don't see any of those three themes in *The Stranger*. Do you think that cynicism and suspicion would go along with the late themes you have highlighted? Even within and among family or extended family?

DB: Lack of trust, yes, but ultimately that is resolved in the film.



[Figure 1. Production still from *Agantuk (The Stranger)*, 1991. Courtesy of Styajit Ray Film and Study Center, University of California, Santa Cruz.]

GK: As Ray was going forward with these films and cultivating those themes, you mentioned that he dropped Channel 4 into your ear, did you trace that lead?

DB: I went to the Library of Congress, saw their prints, and I went to the Museum of Modern Art in New York; they had a few films. One of them was viewable. I discovered, much to my dismay, that there were no viewable negatives or prints of Ray films in this country. Then I went to England. I had a Ford Foundation grant that had travel money as part of it. I went to London, Paris, Zurich to search for lost Ray prints. I made connections with the film people. In London, I had meetings with British Film Institute people, and I went to Channel 4. They also told me that they were not very happy with the prints that they have, that there must be something better. If there is not something better, then something has to be done.

So that's how the idea of Ray restoration occurred to me. I returned here and wrote to the Academy (of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences), which has a grants committee for academics. They gave me the largest grant. They normally give something like \$3000 to \$5000; they give me \$15,000. They gave it to me three times. I call myself a three time Academy Award winner [chuckles]. They have not given that to anyone else. I used that money to travel, to do research, and I went to Belgium, to the FIAF (International Federation of Film Archives). So I commissioned them to make a worldwide search for existing Ray prints. They found nothing that was any better. They didn't exist anywhere. But then I found out that the FIAF search was

not complete. With that FIAF report, I went to the Academy. They were persuaded then that something ought to be done.

And then a gentleman wrote me a letter that said, “My name is Daniel Taradash. I am a member of the Academy’s governing board. I am a past president of the Academy.” Actually, I didn’t know the name. So I looked him up. He was a frightfully distinguished man. He was probably Hollywood’s most famous classical screenwriter. He wrote 1950s classic films like *From Here to Eternity* ... these kinds of films. So many of them. A Harvard-educated lawyer, actually, turned screenwriter, and he became Hollywood’s leading screenwriter of classic films for a while. Importantly, he knew all about Ray and was a big Ray fan. Through Mr. Taradash and that grants committee, I received three grants, as I said, and that was my entire resource at that time.

At UCSC at that time, the dean of Arts and the dean of Humanities each gave me \$3000 and that’s how I decided to start, in 1991, a Ray program here, basically to collect best available prints of Ray films. I was very naïve; I didn’t know what it took to collect those prints. I found many bad ones, but I had the money to go in search of good ones.

GK: Once you got the Ray Center going, did you expect it to get to the size it is now?

DB: No, originally, as I described, I thought I’d just need a few thousand dollars to get copies of Ray films that I could show to my classes. Then I realized that Ray films had to be restored before I could get any good, viewable prints. In 1991 I proposed to the executive vice chancellor of UCSC that we have a possibility of having a collection here. It turned out that he was a computer science professor, but he had seen Ray films and he liked them. He was very enthusiastic, very supportive of my proposal. He welcomed it as a function of our university.

So from our own personal collection we put up some pictures of Ray films and our copies of Ray books—our first Ray exhibition. It was very well attended. The Ambassador of India in Washington attended, who happened to be a sort of friend of mine, going back many years—I met him as a graduate student at UC Berkeley. It was an important occasion, noted by the entire campus—chancellor, vice chancellor, local media ... California media, as well. It was also picked up in India and published in some media there. But I truly had no idea what I was getting into. I realized that in order to do a proper archive of Ray’s films and a thorough collection, Ray films had to be restored first. After they were restored, then maybe we would have copies, have prints.

Now, who would restore them? As I said, I had the Academy grant. I traveled all over this country, from Los Angeles to Boston and to New York, then to Europe, and basically I heard the same message: “It’s a wonderful project, someone has to do it, but we cannot do it.” Ultimately, I was convinced, as Audrey Hepburn told me on the phone, “If you don’t do it, nobody else will do it.” The vice chancellor said, well, that’s great—then do it. He also didn’t really have any idea of what that meant. In order to do it properly, as Audrey Hepburn also told me, “You should also have a non-profit society in India cover the India end of the restoration project, and also since you live in California, at a university in California, you should have one on your campus from where you can work. You should have two societies.” So I wrote a proposal.

The question was who would fund it. I sent a copy of the proposal to the Ford Foundation. Really, it is all coincidence, happy coincidence. At that time, the director of the India end of the Ford Foundation’s programs in New York was a man who loved Satyajit Ray films. Not only that, he was a Bangladesh and India *wallah*. He was posted as a Ford representative in Dhakha, Bangladesh; then he was Ford’s representative in New Delhi, then he was head of the South Asian division or maybe something larger than that at the Ford Foundation in New York. So he was very pleased to give me a grant of \$150,000.

Then he said, you know, there’s always politics involved. If I give you a grant for this India-related project, Indian project, we have an office in Delhi. They will be under pressure from the Government of India to fund India. So he was generous and smart enough that he gave another \$150,000 to my sister society that I established in Calcutta, called the Satyajit Ray Film Preservation Society, also known simply as the Ray Society. I established that in 1993, along with the Ray Center here—same time, same year.

I went to Calcutta with a proposal, and at that time West Bengal and Calcutta had a Marxist government. They had a Marxist government for thirty years or something like that. At that time, the Minister of Culture in the government was a hard core Marxist. He was absolutely determined to stop my project. I went to the Cultural Institute of Calcutta, of which he was the director, called Nandan. It actually had a very nice film auditorium, designed by Satyajit Ray himself. It was inaugurated in his honor. I went to that auditorium many times with him to watch many old Hollywood films, as well as his own films. So I went to Nandan, to its film director, about establishing a Ray Society in India. He took the proposal and said, “I’ll be in touch with you.”

I went to the Ray family and spoke to Mrs. Ray, also Sandip Ray. Satyajit Ray was gone by then. She told me that if nothing is done in

America to restore Manek's films, nothing will be done here. They don't have the money, don't have the expertise, they don't really know what restoration means, and there really are no experts here. So I went back to the government people and told them that the Ford Foundation is interested in supporting this project ... and they are also interested in giving you money, in order to join with me in restoring Ray films. They said again, "Well, we'll get back to you." The third time I went, a man very rudely told me (and I am quite sure he had been told how to respond by the Marxist minister, a contemporary of mine in college, a very hardcore America hater), "You are an American. You came from America. We don't want your dirty money. Satyajit Ray is *our* man. He is from here. He made his films here. We don't need any American help. Go away." With those words, I was turned away.

I went to the Ray family and reported what had happened. Mrs. Ray told me then that if I did not do anything in America, nothing will happen. It will mean that all of Manek's films will be destroyed, will all be gone in time. Mrs. Ray's advice to me then was to write to Mrs. Sonia Gandhi in New Delhi. By this time, Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated. Sonia Gandhi had just started the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation. I thought, well, that's an interesting idea. So I wrote to her, saying that I had met Mrs. [Indira] Gandhi a few times, when I was a young man, a foreign student in America. She also met me at Harvard when I was a student there. Satyajit Ray was a contemporary of Indira Gandhi in Santiniketan, they knew each other, and Ray's association with the Nehru family goes back to Nehru himself. In fact, when *Pather Panchali* was made, there was a big uproar because it showed India in a bad light, exposing poverty, so they actually wanted to ban the film. So Ray wanted to see the film, in Calcutta at the Lighthouse Cinema. Ray writes about it. Ray, Nehru, and then at that time the chief minister of Bengal, Dr. P.C. Roy, who played an important role in funding the film. The three of them watched the film together, without subtitles. Nehru understood some Bengali, but he didn't *know* Bengali. Ray tried to translate for him, but he said that no translation was necessary.

After the film was over, a teary-eyed Nehru turned to Ray and said, "You have made a beautiful film, but I am curious to know what happens to this little boy and his parents after this film. Is there another story?" And Ray told him that, yes, there is a longer epic novel that is the story following this, picking up when the family moves to Benares. And Nehru said that he would like to see a film on that. That gave Ray the idea of making the Apu Trilogy.

So when the opposition to the film emerged, Nehru put it down and said that the film should be sent abroad, wherever Ray wanted. No one could say no. And Ray, of course, became famous, winning the

Cannes award and other subsequent awards. He became an international film maker. I remember as a youngster seeing a photo of him returning to India with the Venice trophy, for *Aparajito*, in his hand. It won against *Eight and a Half* by Fellini and Kurosawa's *Throne of Black*. Ray himself was very surprised; he didn't think that he could possibly win with Fellini and Kurosawa as competition, but the jury gave the award to *Aparajito*. Later on, critics said that among the three Trilogy films, *Aparajito* is probably the most mature film.

Anyway, in 1993 Sonia Gandhi sent me a letter, after she'd read my letter, and she asked whether I could come to see her in seven days. So I went to see her at the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation, and I met a number of VVIP people, including some of India's wealthiest capitalists. The secretary to the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation agreed with the idea that, as I have mentioned, a second Ray Center be set up in India, and the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation would fund it. So I was delighted.

So for the Satyajit Ray Society in Calcutta Sandip Ray was named member secretary, and I was its international coordinator. I persuaded the leader of the opposition in parliament in New Delhi at that time, a wonderful man named Somnath Chatterjee. He actually belonged to the CPM [Communist Party of India (Marxist)], but he was a very educated, enlightened barrister, unlike this hardcore CPM Marxist who was adamantly opposed to our efforts. He met me at the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation, and he asked me to see him in Calcutta. He took me directly to Mr. Jyoti Basu, who was at that time the chief minister of West Bengal ... a very important octogenarian statesman, old time Marxist, and a very nice man. English-educated barrister, highly respected. He encouraged me to ignore any threats that I had heard and to go ahead and do the work—that I had his support.

With Somnath Chatterjee on my side and Jyoti Basu having said yes, I was emboldened. So I set up the Society in Calcutta. But the Society needed a president. Sandip Ray agreed to be its member secretary, but we needed a president. So I turned to Somnath Chatterjee. He was very reluctant. But then I prevailed upon him. We had a long talk about how if he didn't agree to serve, the Ray films may never be restored. And he was a great Ray fan. He agreed to be president.

So the Ray Society in Calcutta began with Somnath Chatterjee as its president, Sandip Ray as its member secretary, and me in California as its international coordinator.

GK: And this then began the successful Ray film restoration efforts?

DB: Still, the persistent question remained of *how* to restore the Ray films. Daniel Taradash of the Academy, when he gave me the second or third grant, told me that there is a man he knew who was a member of the Academy who was an expert in restoring old films. He had restored *Nanook of the North* and he had restored Charlie Chaplin. His name was David Shepard. [35:06] With the Academy grant we took Mr. Shepard to India, and he looked at the original negatives of 18 of Ray's 36 films. That's all he had time for then. He filed an extensive report, which we have [in the Ray archive], in which he said unless Ray films are restored in the immediate future, future generations will be deprived of seeing them. The condition of the original negatives is precarious; all of the films are in tatters.

So with that report in hand, I went around and showed it to the Academy here, took it to West Bengal, showed it to Somnath Chatterjee, sent a copy to Sonya Gandhi, the Ford Foundation Then in 1994 the Academy began a film archive. They didn't have one before. They appointed a film archivist, a young man named Michael Friend. I took him to India, where he met with a number of film producers who were reluctant to give up any films, largely because of a complicating factor.

That complication had inadvertently been created by Ismail Merchant. He was from Bombay, and was a great Ray fan. He and James Ivory went to India with an idea to make a film; Merchant had these connections in Bombay. He knew Ruth Praver Jabhwala, and he went to her. She said she would write the screenplay for him, and they produced the film *Shakespeare Wallah* [1965]. After that film was made, Merchant went to Satyajit Ray and told him that they would like him to do the music for the film. By that time, they knew that Ray could score music. He wrote the music for *Charulata*, of all films. So Satyajit Ray was kind of stunned by the proposal, challenged. And he asked how much time he had. He told me this story himself. Merchant said you have only seven days. And Ray said to me, much later, that he worked for seven days and seven nights to score the music for that film. And he did the music recording with Merchant-Ivory in Calcutta. He told me that he was quite pleased with it, and they were ecstatic. Of course, *Shakespeare Wallah* became quite a well-known film.

So I told Satyajit Ray in 1991 that Ismail Merchant had come to Berkeley and asked me to see him, and I went to see him at Pacific Film Archive; he told me then, "Tell Manek-da that I will restore his films. I owe that to Satyajit Ray." I was ecstatic that he offered to help. *Room with a View* had been released, had become a very popular hit, and I felt that if anyone could help right now with our restoration project, Ismail Merchant can do it. So I said to him, How can I help you? Well, meet me in India and persuade producers of these six Ray

films (he had mentioned *Devi*, *The Music Room*, *Three Daughters* [which became *Two Daughters* in Merchant's film production]). So Sandip Ray and I went to see him and have coffee, and he said that if I could get him the rights to these six films, he would restore all of them. I felt that if anybody could do it ... raise the money and help restore the films ... then Ismail can do it. So Sandip and I, and Somanth Chatterjee, we all spoke to the producers and persuaded them to lend the negatives of the six films. Then Ismail indicated that he wanted three more films, also. So he got *Mahanagar* [*The Big City*], *Charulata*, and *Jana Aranya* [*The Middleman*] ... nine films.

He took the negatives to London in 1993 and left them at the Henderson Lab, which was a government owned and operated film lab. It was in a very sorry condition. The nine Ray films were there, along with over 200 classic Hollywood and European films. Well, they all burned in a suspicious fire at the film lab in 1993. So now the original negatives of these nine Ray films were gone.

I learned about this when I went to London in the fall of 1993, and I was told about it by the BFI [British Film Institute]. They actually gave me a pot of the charred remains of these Ray films. I was stunned. So I called Sandip and told him the terrible news. We weren't sure what to do, but I was fearful what it would mean for future restoration efforts and support. Then in 1994 when I went to India, none of the producers would cooperate. Why should they cooperate, they wanted to know, when I may take them, as Ismail did, and then they burn? We'd rather have them here, our own old copies, and keep them ... rather than release them and see them burn.

So Ray restoration effort *ipso facto* stopped in 1994.

GK: So when we see these films now ... *Devi* and the rest ... what are we looking at?

DB: Well, Ismail Merchant would not give up. He later told me that he went to the Pune National Archive and urged the director there, and they had some internegatives made by the famous P.K. Nair after 1968. They are not great, but they are internegatives. He managed to transport these internegatives to LA, to the Academy, and gave them to Mr. Michael Friend. Michael Friend came to Ismail Merchant and told him that he wanted to show these nine films in North America. There was no time, not enough money to *properly* restore them. So they were nicely cleaned, scratches removed, not truly properly restored, and they were released in North America under the banner of Merchant Ivory, and Ray films could be seen here after a lapse of 25 years. People could then realize what a great film maker Ray was, and that's how they revived an interest in Ray films. You may have seen these nine Merchant Ivory Ray films, and they say "Restored by Merchant Ivory

Films.” They are *now* much more truly restored than they were then. That has been done by the present generation of Academy Film Archive restorers. They have done the nine films, more or less restored.

Right now the total number of restored Ray films is 22, including those nine films. This fall, the Academy assured me that they will continue with and complete restorations of the remaining Ray films, so I am comforted and gratified by that.

GK: So having gotten to this point through such travails, what do you see the mission of the Ray Center to be now?

DB: Well, yes, it has been a lot of work, a long story. In 1996, I believe it was, Michael Friend left the Academy and they hired his two younger assistants, and we continued to work with them. Dayani [Kowshik-Basu] and I have also worked with them in translating new subtitles for *Abhijan*, at first, and subsequently we did translations of twelve Ray films. One reason Ray films are not completely understood is that the subtitles are often incomplete and they are, in fact, often wrong.

These new translations, new subtitles, have been added to the new restorations of Ray films. They are not in India. They are all at the Academy, and we also have them [at the UCSC Ray Center]. We are also not finished with scanning newspaper clippings, articles, a number of items on paper that are quickly deteriorating, and that needs to be done.

We have so many things for Ray scholars and others who may be interested: so many books, the films, drawings, posters, notebooks, nearly 4500 stills. Whether for visiting scholars or helping with Ray materials for courses, or screenings, teaching the public about Ray.... There are many Ray screenings ... somewhere almost every month, every week in the world there is a Ray screening. I don't know about other filmmakers such as Fellini, Kurosawa, Antonioni, Bergman ... they must have their screenings, also, but these Ray screenings were not there twenty years ago. They are now happening everywhere. Every other day we get inquiries about this film or that film.

We also have our own prints of certain films ... many films, actually. Films that have not been restored, for instance. We have negatives and prints of all Ray films. I spent the entire \$150,000 grant to collect critical material. At that time, the director of the NFDC, the National Film Development Corporation in Delhi, was a friend of mine, a fellow Bengali. I asked him to help me to get negative prints and prints from Pune National Archive or any film they had, no matter the quality, and I bought all of them. Those prints or negatives are now used by the Academy; they are at the Academy, for restoring, or they are sometimes used for showing. All these films that I got through this man at NFDC went into a massive Ray retrospective in 2001 or 2002 at

the Smithsonian National Gallery of Art in Washington that I helped to curate. I invited Martin Scorsese to come and inaugurate it, and he came. He then became a member of our Ray Center advisory committee, actually—he is a great Ray fan. I believe he has seen all of Ray's work.

Also, we cannot speak or write about Ray restoration without emphasizing the great contribution of a man named Cuthbert Lethbridge, an Anglo-Indian gentleman, born in India but who lives in Australia, who has made a tremendous contribution to our Ray Center. Mr. Lethbridge became a huge Ray fan in the 1980s and then began worldwide searches for all kinds of materials by Ray, on Ray And this huge and invaluable collection he has donated to us. We have catalogued this major contribution, exclusively, as the Lethbridge Collection. You can view that on our web site also.

GK: So the work goes on.

DB: Yes, the work goes on, definitely.

We have a lot here.