

SELECTED LETTERS OF SUKUMAR RAY*

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Sukumar Ray: An Introduction

It is difficult to do justice to Sukumar Ray in only an article, especially one in English, rather than Bengali. The first reason is immediately obvious: his nonsense writing in Bengali, which is his chief claim to immortality, must be in the least translatable of literary forms. The second is the very catholicity of influences working within him. While this is true of all the great figures of nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Bengal, from Rammohun Roy onwards, Sukumar Ray's genius had an extra ingredient: a thorough grasp of scientific principles, which transformed his outlook on everything from printing, to Brahmoism and nonsense verse. Such a unified analytical and artistic mind is rarely found anywhere; in the history of Bengal it is unique to the Ray family - not even Rabindranath Tagore truly possessed it.

Born in 1887, in Calcutta, Sukumar Ray belongs to that period of reform created by Tagore, Sibnath Sastri,¹ and others; 'very powerful figures', as Satyajit Ray, Sukumar's son, describes them today, 'very demanding figures with lots of social fervour in them, the willingness, the ability and the eagerness to do good to society, to change society for the better'.² 'Perhaps there never was any period in the last two hundred years of the history of the Hindu middle class', wrote Nirad Chaudhuri in 1951, 'in which it showed greater probity in public and private affairs, attained greater happiness in family and personal life, saw greater fulfilment of cultural aspirations, and put forth greater creativity in every field, than the fifty years between 1860 and 1910 dominated by the moral ideals of Brahmo and new Hindu puritanism.'³

*1987 is the birth centenary year of Sukumar Ray. His son, Satyajit Ray has recently completed a documentary film about his father in Bengali.

His letters printed here were written to his family in Calcutta from London between October 1911 and August 1913, with the exception of Letter No.59, which was written to Prasantachandra Mahalanobis in Calcutta in 1920. They have been selected and translated from a larger collection of letters published in the Autumn 1982 and Summer 1984 issues of the Calcutta journal *EKSHAN*, along with Satyajit Ray's introduction to them, which appeared in the August 1982 issue. They are published here mostly in their full form; occasionally I have edited them to avoid repetition.

I should like to thank Satyajit Ray, Sukanta Chaudhuri and Nirmalya Acharya, the Editor of *EKSHAN* for their co-operation. Krishna Dutta has been of invaluable assistance with the translations and the compilation of the Notes.

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Sukumar's father, Upendrakisore Ray Chaudhuri,⁴ born in 1863, was in many ways even more remarkable than his son, and since it was he who created the atmosphere in which Sukumar could flower, it is necessary to understand his personality first.

He was the first in the Ray family to become a member of the Brahmo Samaj, encouraged by a fellow pupil at the Mymensingh Zila school in East Bengal where he spent his early years. They had to meet in the woods in secret, with a flute as signal, because Upendrakisore's adopted father, Harikisore,⁵ a zamindar of orthodox bent, was decidedly unsympathetic to Brahmoism. He did not, however, resort to physical coercion or disinheritance, as happened in many divided families in mid-nineteenth-century Bengal, which was typical of the Ray family of the time as a whole; of Upendrakisore's four natural brothers, the eldest and the next younger to him remained orthodox Hindus, while the youngest two became Brahmos⁶ - but they all remained close, their differences lying in external ritual and details of behaviour, such as whether their wives wore *sindur*⁷ in their partings or not. 'Despite such differences we did not feel different from them', Satyajit Ray recalls of his childhood together (though they did not share the same dwelling).

A love of drawing and music, particularly the violin (evident too in both Sukumar and Satyajit Ray), made an early appearance in Upendrakisore. When the Governor of Bengal paid a visit to his school in Mymensingh (some time in the early 1870s), he spotted the boy Upendrakisore in the class drawing intently in his book with a pencil. Picking it up he saw an excellent sketch of himself. The teachers were worried as to how the sahib would react. They need not have been; he patted Upendrakisore on the back and told him, in English of course, 'You must not let this skill disappear. When you grow up you should follow this line'.⁸ For those who know Satyajit Ray's Apu Trilogy, the scene in *Aparajito* in which the young Apu recites *Bangla Des* (Satyendranath Datta's poem 'Land of Bengal' to the spellbound inspector of a country school, may spring to mind. Although the circumstances differ greatly, the spirit of the scene is similar.

Like Apu, Upendrakisore received a scholarship to study in Calcutta. He took science subjects at Presidency College, in the same class as Asutos Mukherji⁹ (who used to ask him to look after his notes to keep them out of other eager hands), and passed his BA. Unlike his son Sukumar, but like his grandson Satyajit, he cared more at college for painting and music than for scholarship. He practised classical singing with some fine *ustads*, and began composing some of the Brahmosangeet hymns¹⁰ that are still sung. He was in constant demand to sing at all kinds of social and religious gatherings, and apparently he never turned anyone down, however humble. The houses he lived in would always be full of music of all kinds; Sukumar and his brothers and sisters remembered falling asleep to the sound of singing, organ and violin, and the painter Benod Behari

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Mukherji¹¹ recalled that in his childhood (around 1910) people in Calcutta would stand outside Upendrakisore's house just to hear him playing his violin.

Around the time he left college (in 1884), he had also begun to write stories and produce illustrations for them. The poor standards of reproduction available then encouraged his interest in printing. It soon became an obsession, which was passed on to Sukumar, who went to England in 1911 as a student of printing technology, and thence to Satyajit, who is keenly interested in good design and typefaces, both in English and in Bengali.

Rather as Bhupati does in Satyajit Ray's film *Charulata*, set in 1879-80, Upendrakisore decided to set up his own press. He ordered machinery he had seen in books from Europe, and began single-handedly to apply his scientific talents to the improvement of half-tone reproduction. By the turn of the century, U. Ray and Sons, Printers and Blockmakers, had become a printer of international quality, the first such to be established by an Indian. That alone, if Upendrakisore had done nothing else, would have been a great achievement, especially when one realises that he would have had no help from the British business community of the time, who generally did their best to stifle Indian business enterprises.

From 1897 onwards, writing under the name U. Ray (he had dropped the Chaudhuri as a sign of his having abandoned the zamindari ethos), he produced a series of articles in the most famous British printing journal of the time, the *Penrose Annual*, based on his researches.¹² Their titles, though technical, are self-explanatory: 'Focusing the Screen' (1897), 'The Theory of the Half-tone Dot' (1898), 'The Half-tone Theory Graphically Explained' (1899), 'Automatic Adjustment of the Half-tone Screen' (1901), 'Diffraction in Half-tone' (1902-3), 'More about the Half-tone Theory' (1903-4), 'The 60° Cross-line Screen' (1905-6), 'Multiple Stops' (1911-12).

Upendrakisore had arrived on the printing scene at the beginning of a revolution in half-tone methods, and he dedicated his mind to the application of the scientific theory governing the transmission of light to making a very inexact craft as comprehensible and predictable as feasible, aided (probably unconsciously) by a family tradition of scholarship in the subtleties of the ancient Sanskrit texts. The prose he wrote was a model of clarity that would put most scientists writing in English today to shame:

One writer has said that the effect of diffraction is to make the half-tone dot smaller than it otherwise would be. Another has said it makes it larger. And this has very naturally provoked the remark that "both can hardly be right".

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Yet, strange as it may at first sound, both these contradictory statements are true. The writers in question looked at the subject from different points of view, and were thus, in each case rightly, led to opposite conclusions.¹³

This particular article, of 1903, concludes with some remarks that bear a very striking resemblance to the attitude of the writer's grandson Satyajit Ray in many articles he has written about the making of films, rather than half-tones, more than half a century later:

...when we have to do our very best with a job (and if that job is worth the trouble), by all means let us call in as many aids as we know of. Call in diffraction, call in pin holes, call in umbrae, penumbrae, normal distances, abnormal distances, everything, in fact, that can help us, so long as we have our wits about us and remain masters of the situation. Failing in this last essential, a multiplicity of resources may only help us to get swamped, like the sentry who had his sword in one hand, and his shield in the other, and so failed to catch the thief as soon as he ran past him.

Upendrakisore's subsequent articles betray an undertow of irritation at what he obviously sensed to be the sloppiness of most technical writing in the field, an intransigent refusal to give theory its due, coupled to some unscrupulousness about taking credit for others' work and ideas. This was an attitude that Sukumar Ray encountered at first hand in his training in England in 1911-13, of which he complains, occasionally with vehemence, in his letters to his father in Calcutta. In the last article Upendrakisore wrote for the *Penrose Annual*, 'Multiple Stops', we find him observing with a touch of asperity, 'The mathematical principles involved in making such stops were explained in the Process Year Book for 1898. It is not proposed to repeat them here, as this article is intended for practical people who, I am afraid, do not like to be bothered with formulae'.

Not long after this appeared in distant London, Upendrakisore moved his printing press, and the many members of his extended family, to a new house in North Calcutta he had designed himself, at 100 Garpar Road.¹⁴ He also, in May 1913, published the first issue of a unique magazine for children, *Sandesh*,¹⁵ to which Sukumar contributed some illustrations for a nonsense story, sent from England (and which Satyajit Ray now edits). Much of the rest of the issue, and of subsequent ones until his death in December 1915, was written or drawn by Upendrakisore himself. Looking at them today, with a revolution in sophisti-

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cation in children's book illustration intervening, one can see they retain an originality and simplicity that has not dated; these, and Upendrakisore's stories for young children (one of which Satyajit Ray has filmed) remain beyond Satyajit's reach as a writer and illustrator today, or indeed that of Sukumar in his time, as Satyajit freely confesses.

His summation of his grandfather's talents is probably unbeatable. 'We find in Upendrakisore', he has written, 'a rare combination of science and the arts, the east and the west. He played the *pakhwaj* as well as the violin; wrote devotional songs while carrying out research in printing methods; viewed the stars through a telescope from his own rooftop; wrote old legends and folk tales anew for children in his inimitably lucid and graceful style, and illustrated them in oils, water-colours and pen-and-ink, using truly European techniques. His skill and versatility as an illustrator remain unmatched by any Indian.'¹⁶

But the personality that lay behind this efflorescence is best caught in a moment described by his daughter Punyalata, Sukumar's younger sister. In 1898, when she was about nine (and he about eleven) they were present the day that their formidable grandfather Dwarkanath Gangopadhyay, lay dying. Her parents had been keeping watch over him all day. Suddenly, in the middle of the night, their old Muslim servant Saqat Ali arrived breathless from Grandfather's house, tears rolling down his cheeks. He told Upendrakisore, 'Baba, he is gone'. To which Upendrakisore slowly replied, 'The will of Allah be done'. 'We realised', said Punyalata, 'that Grandfather was no more'. It is truly moving - a situation conceivable only in Bengal with its strange mixture of languages - to think that at such an emotional moment a Brahma gentleman should be so sensitive to the feelings of his servant that he would invoke the name of the Muslim God, rather than his own.¹⁷

Sukumar Ray was Upendrakisore's eldest son and his second child. He nicknamed him, and his eldest daughter, Sukhalata, after two characters in a Tagore novel that had just been published, in honour of his friend.¹⁸ Punyalata was the second of his daughters, and it is her book *Chhelebelar Dinguli* ('Those Childhood Days') that has preserved the fullest picture of Sukumar's first twenty years or so. Its vividness gives substance to Sukumar's later comment, when asked what his ideal was by the very upright (not to mention stuffy) head of the Sadharan Brahma Samaj, Heramba Chandra Maitra; he replied at once, and in English, 'serious interest in life'.¹⁹ His comment is reminiscent of Satyajit Ray's reaction in 1982 when I asked him a similar question: 'The important thing is to keep one's senses alert and keep working'.

As a boy Sukumar was both serious and lively. On one occasion, early on, he was spotted by an uncle just before he disappeared through a hole in a wall surrounding the roof of the vast family house at 13 Cornwallis Street opposite the Brahma

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Samaj temple. Simply out of curiosity, he was attempting to climb onto a cornice outside above the street. On another occasion, he showed surprising courage in a boy of six when he confronted a man with bloody hands carrying a long bloody knife on the stone steps of the ghat near their house; as it turned out, he had slaughtered some goats and was on his way to wash his hands in the pond.

At the same time, Sukumar was becoming known as a brilliant story-teller. He would show his brothers and sisters pictures of the weird and wonderful animals drawn by their father and make up stories about them. He also invented his own strange creatures - the corpulent 'Bhanbandola' which stumped and swayed around, the 'Mantu Payen' which had a very thin neck capable of tying itself into a twisty knot, and the round-faced, bulgy-eyed 'Kompu', which lived in a corner of the verandah and hung from a nail on the wall. These are recognisable as early prototypes of the drawings and verse that every educated Bengali now grows up with.

He invented a novel way of relieving frustration too, known as 'Fake Anger'. If one felt angry with someone but couldn't get back at him, Sukumar would say, 'Alright, let's fake some anger!' Then he began spinning strange stories about that person, with everyone else competing. 'There was no hatred or malice in them', Punyalata recalled, 'we only imagined the person in a funny situation. We had to think of all the possible ways of making that person look foolish and of all the embarrassing positions he could get into. It soon reduced you to stitches. I think that's how Dada's [Sukumar's] books *Ha-Ja-Ba-Ra-La* and *Hiji-Bij-Bij* began - with the phrase "just imagine"...The peculiar thing was that in the course of all this giggling the anger just evaporated, leaving one's mind feeling light and happy.'

But even at the age of thirteen or fourteen, at the time of the Boer War, Sukumar was capable of more mature and sombre reflections. Punyalata was unthinkingly pro-British, and so one day, when she read in the newspaper of a big British victory, she spread the news enthusiastically. Her brother put her in her place with a forceful rhymed couplet, here translated: 'When we ourselves are beat, can you laugh at another's defeat?'

He was no puritan though (but he did share the reticence of the time about sexual matters, which never appear in his drawings or writings). When a teacher at his school expatiated on the harmful effects of seeing the Bioscope - a favourite bugbear of Brahmos, along with the theatre, alcohol and smoking - and then asked Sukumar for his opinion, he announced that among all the trashy pictures were some good ones. Not content with that, he persuaded the master to go and see one with him (*Les Miserables*). His persistence was rewarded when the master afterwards announced, 'You have disabused me of a wrong notion. I had no idea there were such good Bioscope pictures'.

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By then he had already started taking successful photographs, and winning prizes for funny ones in British magazines like *Boys Own Paper*. He photographed the ladies in neighbouring households who were too shy to visit a shop like Bourne and Shepherd, and he also took photos of E.B. Havell, the Principal of the Calcutta School of Art and a pioneer of Indian art appreciation, and of Rabindranath Tagore - a famous portrait as a *swadeshi* leader, taken in 1905.²⁰ The year before he died, he was made a Fellow of the Royal Photographic Society, the second Indian to be so honoured.

1905 was also the year he wrote his first play, a satire on the behaviour of an Indian sahib, and composed his first songs of a nationalist nature.²¹ The following year, after graduating from Presidency College with Honours in Physics and Chemistry, he started a Nonsense Club and wrote two plays for it; simultaneously he began producing a hand-written magazine called *Sare Batris Bhaja*, literally '32½ Delicacies' - the cry used in those days by street-sellers who sold thirty-two varieties of savouries, and half a chili. According to Punyalata, 'there was no sarcasm in it, only a spirit of pure, effortless wit'. One copy survives with Satyajit Ray.

Regarding the two plays, Satyajit Ray has written that the second is the better. Its title is *Lakshmaner Saktisel* ('Lakshman and the Wonder Weapon'). 'Characters out of the Ramayana descend in it from the epic heights to the world of spoof and horseplay. Unpoetic matters easily find place here... Hanuman eats sugar-puffs, the Messenger of Death finds his salary in arrears.'²²

Around this time Sukumar began to make his mark as a critic - in 1911 he wrote a piece for *Prabasi*²³ titled 'Photography as an Art'. He became secretary of the youth wing of the Brahma Samaj too, and the latter's affairs would become a major preoccupation of his after his return from Britain in late 1913, until he withdrew in disgust in 1920.

When he sailed for Britain in late 1911 in order to study certain printing and photographic techniques, we can therefore picture a young energetic man of few prejudices, wide learning and even wider interests, high-spirited but modest (and perhaps a shade over-sheltered), who was determined to learn as much about printing as he possibly could, before anything else.

Once there, he seems to have lived in two worlds which seldom overlapped; but neither did they conflict. One was that of a specialised craft, notorious for its inward looking instincts, first at the London School of Photo Engraving and Lithography just north of Fleet Street (which merged rather later into the London School of Printing), later at the School of Technology in Manchester,²⁴ then the country's second city after London. The other was his artistic and social life, visiting galleries and museums and meeting artistic, literary and other figures with a sympathy for things Indian, especially after the arrival of

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Sukumar's mentor Tagore in June 1912, on his third, historic visit to London.²⁵

Two articles he wrote in this period epitomise these two worlds; it is hard to believe that the same person could have been responsible for both. The first is titled 'Half-tone Facts Summarised', and appeared in the *Penrose Annual* along with a second section titled 'Standardising the Original';²⁶ the second, 'The Spirit of Rabindranath Tagore', began as a lecture and then appeared in a well-known religious journal of the day, *The Quest*.²⁷

The first is a lucid *tour d'horizon* of existing knowledge in the field, followed by some recommendations for practical methods to reduce the element of luck in half-tone printing. It begins combatively, taking up where Upendrakisore left off, so to speak - one can almost hear other printers sucking dubiously on their teeth at the audacity of this young pup:

"Theories", said a practical operator, "don't pay. There are no end of half-tone theories; but, for my part, I prefer to be guided by experience" - as if there can be any theory worth the name, without practical experience - without well-observed facts to build them upon.

Further on we find the author building on this thought:

Now judgment is no doubt a very desirable and necessary commodity, for it represents the well-assimilated experience of the past; but it surely has nothing to lose by being supplied with some definite data for its guidance. In this article I propose to make a few suggestions for rendering some "delightful uncertainties" of half-tone work a little less delightful.

Sukumar's other article is equally lucid. It is also noteworthy as the first critique of Tagore published in the West. On both counts it has been unaccountably passed over by scholars to date. Although its translations of Tagore's poetry have dated (despite being revised by Tagore himself - an early example of what he later came to regard as falsification), the rest of the article has not.

Besides insight into Tagore, it offers some unique glimpses into the writer's mind at this time, of which there are only a few hints in his letters home, if that. It is easily possible to discern in it Sukumar's future clash and disenchantment with the Brahma Samaj, and even the beginnings of his frightening loss of faith in life evident in his long letter, the last in the collection printed here.

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'In the midst of all our work and all our pleasures', he begins,

we are often unconscious that we are ever carrying with us the burden of an eternal question. Very few of us indeed have anything more than a vague consciousness of its existence, and most of us are satisfied with an occasional mild intellectual interest in the problem. But in some lives - and these lives alone are truly great - the question has assumed an imperative form, and whenever the demand for an answer has been thus insistent, we have had one of those contributions to human thought that leaves a definite impression on the ever-changing ideals of humanity.

In order to avoid such serious speculation, Sukumar goes on, men 'have proposed to solve the problem of life without any reference to ultimate realities' by inventing instead such conceptions as the 'welfare of society', 'the progress of humanity', the 'greatest good of the greatest number'. But when they try to apply these ideas to life the same questions as before raise their heads: 'What is good? What is progress? What is welfare? And deep down at the bottom of all such queries we find a haunting shadow of the questions we have always tried to suppress: who am I? What is this life? What is the purpose of my existence?'

It is clear from Sukumar's comments on Tagore's life and work that he doubts if organised religion has any answers to the above questions.

The whole history of Rabindranath Tagore's poetical career has been, consciously or unconsciously, a crusade against the ever-recurring bondage and tyranny of forms and conventions and sophisticated creeds that hamper the growth of the spirit and deny the self its proper fulfilment in the unfettered attainment of truth.

The two centuries in Bengal prior to the rise of modern Bengali literature around the 1840s further provoke Sukumar to a demonstration of nineteenth-century reformer's scorn, worthy of his robust grandfather Dwarkanath Gangopadhyay who used to have bare-fisted fights with oppressive tea-plantation owners, and rescue Kulin Brahmin girls from forced immorality single-handedly. 'It was one of those periods in a nation's life when its faculties are dulled by a false feeling of self-satisfaction, when its life is divorced from the ideal, when indolence of thought displaces the genuine toleration of true understanding, when morbid sentimentalism masquerades under the garb of

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The nice contented cow will doubtless get a frightful shock
On finding that its lower limbs belong to a fighting cock.
It's obvious that the Whalephant is not a happy notion:
The head goes for the jungle, while the tail turns to the
ocean.

The lion's lack of horns distressed him greatly so
He teamed up with a deer - now watch his antlers grow!

Another verse, 'The Sons of Rangaroo', again in Satyajit
Ray's 'translation',²⁹ must surely have been inspired, at least
partly, by the solemnity of many Brahmos who surrounded Sukumar
in the Samaj:

To the sons of Rangaroo
Laughter is taboo
A funny tale will make them wail:
'We're not amused, boo-hoo!'

They live in constant fear
Of chuckles far and near
And start and bound at every sound
That brings a breath of cheer.

Their peace of mind forfeiting
They sit and keep repeating:
'We believe in only grieving;
Happiness is fleeting'.

They shun the summer breeze
That whispers through the trees
For fear the stir of leaf and bur
Their funnybones should tease.

They keep a wary eye
On the autumn sky
For signs of mirth above the earth
In foaming cumuli.

The darkness of the night
Brings them no respite
As fireflies extemporise
Their dances of delight.

Those who're jolly
And feel to woe is folly
Must not refuse the Rangaroos
Their right to melancholy.

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The Rangaroosian lair
Bereft of sun and air
Is doomed to be a monastery
Of permanent despair.

Many of the verses have a keener satirical edge. There is Professor Nidhiram, for instance, who has invented a cup that can drink, which Sukumar may have based on his younger brother Subimal's obsessive search for *swadeshi* items to use, including cups that were so absorbent that all the liquid inside them leaked away. Then there is a man whose waking hours are spent creeping upon shadows and entrapping them in a large basket: again this is probably a reference to the *swadeshi*-hunters and the Brahmos trying to capture life in their dogmas. There is 'Doctor Deadly' too, who has been practising his surgical arts on paper and plaster patients and now wants to get on to some live ones: perhaps Sukumar's dig at those Bengalis who pooh-poohed³⁰ allopathic medicine. The verse called 'The Missing Whiskers' is worth quoting in full (in Satyajit's translation); in it Sukumar has epitomised the timid mentality of the clerks working for the sahibs at that time - the junior ranks of whom Nirad Chaudhuri has described in his recent autobiography, *Thy Hand, Great Anarch!* as regarding their Sunday to be well spent if they had washed their dhotis.

They always knew the Boss Babu
To be a gentle fellow,
What happens if he in a jiffy
Turns all blue and yellow?

He was seated in his chair
Relaxed and free from care,
Indulging in his post-meridian nap,
When, without a warning,
In the middle of his yawning,
Something right inside him seemed to snap.

With muffled cries he rolled his eyes,
And threw his arms about,
'Alas, I'm sick. Come save me quick',
Was what he sputtered out.

They heard him and they all began
To cluster round the stricken man
And pondered on the safest plan
To bring him to his senses.
'Call the police!' 'No - the vet.'
His partner said, 'He seems upset'.
'But careful - he might bite yet',
Said his amanuensis.

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But Boss Babu - his face all red and swollen -
Now declared, 'My moustache has been stolen'.
'Stolen whiskers?' they all cried,
'The Babu must be pacified.'
And so they held a mirror to his face.
'There, sir', they said, 'You see
Your whiskers where they used to be?
Who would dare to put you in disgrace?'

Babu now began to scream:
'You dunderhead, I wouldn't dream
Of ever wearing whiskers so outrageous.
They make me look like a shaggy butcher.
Know this - in the near future
I ought to - no, I must reduce your wages'.
This he did. And then at random
He composed a memorandum.
Herewith quoted (minus appendages):

'If you think your employees
Deserve your love - correction, please:
They don't. They're fools. No common sense.
They're full of crass incompetence.
The ones in my establishment
Deserve the highest punishment.

They show their cheek in not believing
Whiskers lend themselves to thieving.
Their moustaches, I predict,
Will soon be mercilessly picked:
And when that happens they will know
What Man is to Moustachio:
Man is slave, Moustache is master,
Losing which Man meets disaster.

Finally, as an example of pure nonsense, there is the chant written by sukumar for Visvakarma in his play *Sabdalkalpadruma*. In 1957 Satyajit Ray put some of this in the mouth of the jumped-up clerk played so wonderfully by Tulsi Chakrabarty in his comic film *The Philosopher's Stone*; there it is supposed to be a secret Sanskrit formula to make the stone that turneth all to gold. Here it is, in Sukanta Chaudhuri's 'translation':⁵¹

A green and gold orang-outang,
Rocks and stones that jolt and bang,
A smelly skunk and izzy-tizzy,
No admission, very busy.
Ghost and ghoul, do re mi fa
And half a loaf is better far.

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Coughs and colds and peanut plants,
Pussies are the tiger's aunts,
Trouble-shooters, blotted blobs,
City centre vacant jobs.

The nuclei of some of these verses, plays and stories, may have formed at the club that Sukumar had started as a successor to the Nonsense Club. Known as the Monday Club, after the day it met, it soon became known as the Manda Club, after its tendency to indulge in feasts ('manda' meaning 'sticky sweet' in Bengali). Led by Sukumar it also discussed subjects as diverse as the jute industry, Vivekananda, Bengali dialects, Strindberg, Turgenev, and Plato. Its members included some of the best and brightest of young Bengal: Ajitkumar Chakrabarty,³² Suniti Kumar Chattopadhyay,³³ Atulprasad Sen,³⁴ Kalidas Nag,³⁵ Prasantachandra Mahalanobis,³⁶ and Nirmalkumar Siddhanta.³⁷ A note from the 'Third Annual Meeting' of the Club indicates that it poked fun at itself too: 'Datta Das Babu to move that "In the interests of plain living, high thinking, tea and biscuits" - ' .³⁸

Discussions apart, the Club also created a group of like-minded young Brahmos with a passion to reform the Samaj in the period from 1914 onwards. The burning issue came to be whether or not Rabindranath Tagore was fit to be an honorary member of the Sadharan Brahma Samaj, as a result of his view, first expressed as far back as 1891 in reply to a census question from government, that Brahmos were Unitarian Hindus. This had deeply upset many of them, who regarded themselves almost as a separate caste. Not only that, Tagore was opposed to the missionary spirit of the Brahmos, and was said to favour the subordination of women, to the extent of marrying off his daughter below the acceptable age; he had also written love songs and the novel *Gora*, which many Brahmos felt to be in questionable taste. Worst of all, he had made it clear that he had no real desire to be part of any group, whatever its beliefs.³⁹ A memorial citation for Mahalanobis, written in 1972, summarises a common perception of Tagore thus: 'Despite the fact that the hymn-book of the Brahma Samaj comprises a very large number of Rabindranath's devotional songs, as a spiritual figure Rabindranath was looked at askance by many members of the Brahma community. To these people he appeared in comparison with his father not merely a much lesser but as a somewhat frivolous person'.⁴⁰

In January 1917, Sukumar Ray and Mahalanobis jointly demanded that Tagore be admitted as an honorary member and set out their reasons in the *Tattvakoumudi*, the Brahma newspaper that Sukumar had read so assiduously while in England a few years previously. They must have made a formidable team. 'Sukumar Ray was the dynamo that powered the youth movement of the Samaj', according to the above citation, 'while Prasantachandra was its dialectician and strategist.'

Things came finally to a head in early 1921 with the publi-

cation of a 'pungently-worded' pamphlet by Mahalanobis, supported by Sukumar Ray, entitled *Kena Rabindranathke Chai* ('Why we want Rabindranath'), which set out how Tagore's values could be seen to be those of Rammohun Roy, which the Sadharan Brahma Samaj had originally pledged to uphold when it separated from the group around Keshub Chandra Sen. In March a referendum was held and 496 voted to admit Tagore, while 232 were against admission.

Against this background of rancorous Bengali factionalism, the extraordinary letter (No.59) written by Sukumar Ray to Mahalanobis in August 1920 makes more sense. In it, besides making reference to his distaste for further squabbles and bandying of words within the Samaj, he seems to have had profound doubts about the reality of all the joyful, positive values he praised in Tagore's poetry in his 1912 article; a tremendous tension inside him, the result of twenty-five years of being good-humoured without any release, except obliquely, through his writings and drawings, seemed suddenly to snap, releasing a flood of pessimism. Perhaps, as his own remarks suggest, such a sensitive man did receive some kind of premonition of the fatal illness that was to strike him six months later; a seance held in Santiniketan around 1928 (discovered by Satyajit Ray in 1959/60 when researching his documentary film on Tagore), supports this possibility. According to the record left behind, Tagore had managed to contact Sukumar, who informed him, amongst other things, that the unorthodox painting he had just started (at the age of 67) would be appreciated - 'abroad at first'.⁴¹

Sukumar's letter, which was of course originally confidential, was apparently read out by Prasantachandra Mahalanobis at the first memorial meeting for Sukumar in Calcutta. Its President was Tagore; one wonders what thoughts passed through his mind as he listened to its charged contents.⁴²

To all the bitterness and division of that period Sukumar responded characteristically: by writing a comic play, *Chalachittachanchari*, in which factionalists get their come-uppance. 'It is chiefly a vehicle for ideas; even its conflicts are conflicts of ideas', Satyajit has written. 'But their chief attraction lies in the sparkling comic dialogue. This play and *Sabdakalpadruma* are the finest examples of the sociable, conversational genius of Sukumar...'⁴³

He was able to transcend politics, just as Satyajit has had to in Calcutta in the last forty years or so. A friend who stayed with Sukumar for a week in a sanatorium in Darjeeling in May 1921 - the month Satyajit was born - recalled that neither of them once mentioned the controversy in the Samaj;⁴⁴ instead, Sukumar read out his latest poems from *Abol Tabol*, the collection he began in 1914 and which has since become his best-known work.

'As far as his writing and drawing goes, nearly all his best work belongs to his last two-and-a-half years',⁴⁵ Satyajit Ray has written - that is, after he contracted blackwater fever. It includes *Ha-Ja-Ba-Ra-La* (inadequately rendered as 'A Topsy-

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Turvy Tale (with many similarities to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, but yet infused with quintessentially Bengali humour; the prehistoric animals of *Hesoram Husiarer Diary* which 'only Sukumar knows about, and only he could have named, in matchless compounds of Latin and Bengali';⁴⁶ and *Sri Sri Barnamalatattva* ('Holy Alphabotology'), an unfinished attempt to introduce each letter of the Bengali alphabet through long poems using traditional alliterative techniques.

Although he was very ill, Sukumar worked up to the very last days of his life; it appears that he had periods of lucidity right up to the end, and relapses. 'The dummy for *Abol Tabol* was laid out by him', says Satyajit. 'He was composing little tailpieces where there was room left at the bottom: filling this up with two-liners and four-liners. That was done straight into the dummy itself.⁴⁷ That's the only place where you can find these tailpieces.'

In fact he never saw the finished book; it was published by U. Ray and Sons nine days after his death on 10 September 1923. The last poem in it, 'Dream Song', which appears here in Sukanta Chaudhuri's translation, was also his last composition:⁴⁸

On hazy nights, among the clouds,
Through moonlit veils and rainbow shroud
With crazy rhyme and puckish note
I sing my song with open throat.
There isn't any menace here,
No rule or ban or threat or fear.
Here underneath the starry beams
The breezes rock my nest of dreams.
Here leaps the spring of music-madness,
Sky-flowers toss their heads in gladness,
Light the sky and light the soul -
At every flash the wonders roll.
Today, my friend, before I go,
I'll sing you everything I know.
What if it seems to make no sense?
What if it quite confounds the dense?
My moonstruck soul I now decide
To launch upon the whimsy tide:
So who can stem my wave of song?
Or halt my thoughts that bound along?
My fancy hears, from near and far,
Trumpets sounding tantara,
And words fly up with eager bounce
All other words to trip and trounce.
The darkness lifts as moonshine wells,
Its scent adream with tinkling bells.
The heart sends out its harbingers
To greet the moonbeams' messengers.

Robinson

The spirits dance in cloudy vaults
Where elephants turn somersaults
While flying steeds their wings unfold,
And 'naughty boys turn good as gold.
A keen primordial lunar chill,
The nightmare's nest with bunchy frill -
My drowsy brain such glimpses steep,
And all my singing ends in sleep.

'I do not know of any other humourist', his son has written, 'who could jest in this spirit at the meeting-point of life and death.'⁴⁹ Tagore, whom Sukumar had requested to sing some of his songs at his bedside not long before, said simply, 'I have recently learned of the death of my youthful friend Sukumar Ray. I loved him no less than my own family'.

NOTES

Robinson, Notes to Introduction to 'Selected Letters of Sukumar Ray'

1. See Note 69 (letters)
2. Personal communication to the writer.
3. Nirad C. Chaudhuri, *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* (London, 1951), p.221.
4. See Note 9 (letters).
5. See Note 54 (letters).
6. Saradaranjan Ray and Muktidaranjan Ray remained orthodox Hindus. Kuladaranjan and Pramadaranjan Ray became Brahmos, like Upendrakisore, whose name at birth was Kamadaranjan. See Notes 16, 34 and 54 (letters).
7. *Sindur* - the vermilion mark that a married Hindu woman wears in the parting of her hair.
8. This information, and other references in the Introduction to the early life of Upendrakisore and Sukumar, are all taken from the book by Sukumar's sister, Punyalata Chakrabarty, *Chhelebelar Dinguli* ('Those Childhood Days') (Calcutta, 1957). I have translated it myself.
9. See Note 35 (Letters).
10. See Note 73 (Letters).
11. This information appears in an interview with Benod Bihari Mukherji by Satyajit Ray in his collection of writings on film, *Bisoy Chhalachitra* (Calcutta, 1982).
12. See Note 10 (Letters).
13. 'Diffraction in Half-tone', *Penrose Annual*, 1902-3.
14. See Note 17 (Letters).
15. See Note 4 (Letters).
16. Sukanta Chaudhuri (ed.), *The Select Nonsense of Sukumar* (Calcutta, 1987) (from Batyajit Ray's introduction).
17. *Chhelebelar Dinguli*, *op.cit.*
18. See Note 18 (Letters).
19. Abhra Ghosh in a special issue devoted to Sukumar Ray of *Prastuti Parba* (Calcutta, October 1982).
20. See Note 7 (Letters).
21. The play was called *Ramadhan Badh*. It was staged by Sukumar and friends; a description appears in *Chhelebelar Dinguli*.
22. *The Select Nonsense of Sukumar Ray*, *op.cit.*
23. See Note 8 (Letters).
24. See Note 24 (Letters).
25. See Note 5 (Letters).
26. *Penrose Annual*, 1913-14.
27. *The Quest*, October 1913.
28. Sukumar Ray, *Nonsense Rhymes*, translated in Satyajit Ray (Calcutta, 1970).
29. *Ibid.*
30. *Ibid.*

Notes to Robinson, Introduction to 'Selected Letters of
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31. *Select Nonsense of Sukumar Ray, op.cit.*
32. See Note 86 (Letters).
33. Philologist, author of *Origin and Development of the Bengali Language* (1926).
34. See Note 29 (Letters).
35. Historian and literary critic, instrumental in the setting up of Visva Bharati.
36. See Note 1 (Letters).
37. Educationist, Vice-Chancellor of Calcutta University.
38. Illustration in a special issue devoted to Sukumar Ray of *Prastuti Parba* (Calcutta, October, 1982).
39. Abhra Ghosh, in *Prastuti Parba, op.cit.*
40. The memorial citation is in Bengali and English, entitled 'Prasantachandra Mahalanobis', published by the Sadharan Brahma Samaj in Calcutta, 1972.
41. Andrew Robinson, *London Magazine*, October 1982, p.88.
42. This information, which appears to contradict that of Satyajit Ray in his introduction to the letters, is taken from Subimal Ray's collected writings, mentioned by Abhra Ghosh in *Prastuti Parba, op.cit.*
43. *Select Nonsense of Sukumar Ray, op.cit.*
44. Gusebhan Sarkar mentions this in an interview in *Prastuti Parba, op.cit.*
45. *Select Nonsense of Sukumar Ray, op.cit.*
46. *Ibid.*
47. Personal communication to the writer.
48. *Select Nonsense of Sukumar Ray, op.cit.*
49. *Ibid.*