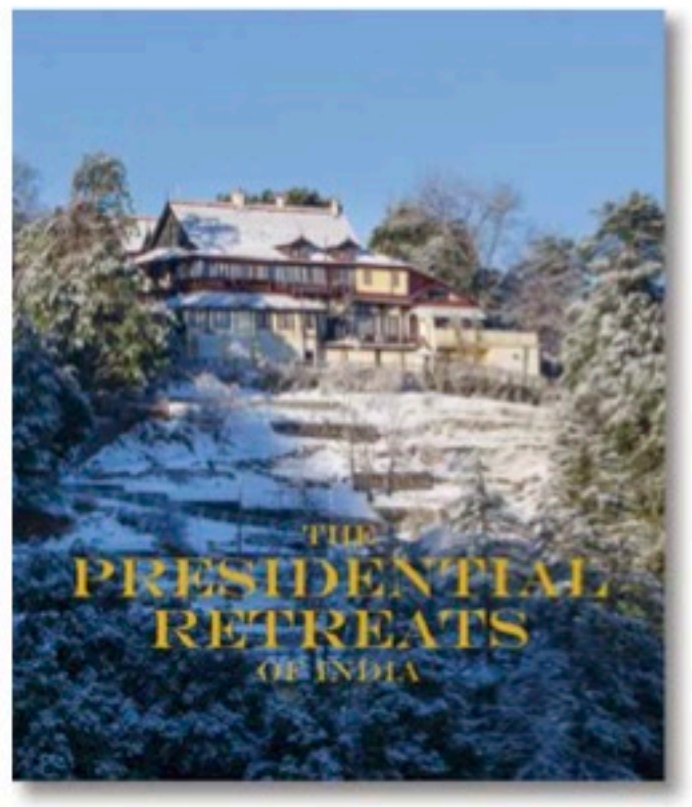
Legacies of the Raj



The Presidential Retreats of India

Edited by Gillian Wright
Photography by André Jeanpierre Fanthome
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260 pp., Rs 2200 (HB)
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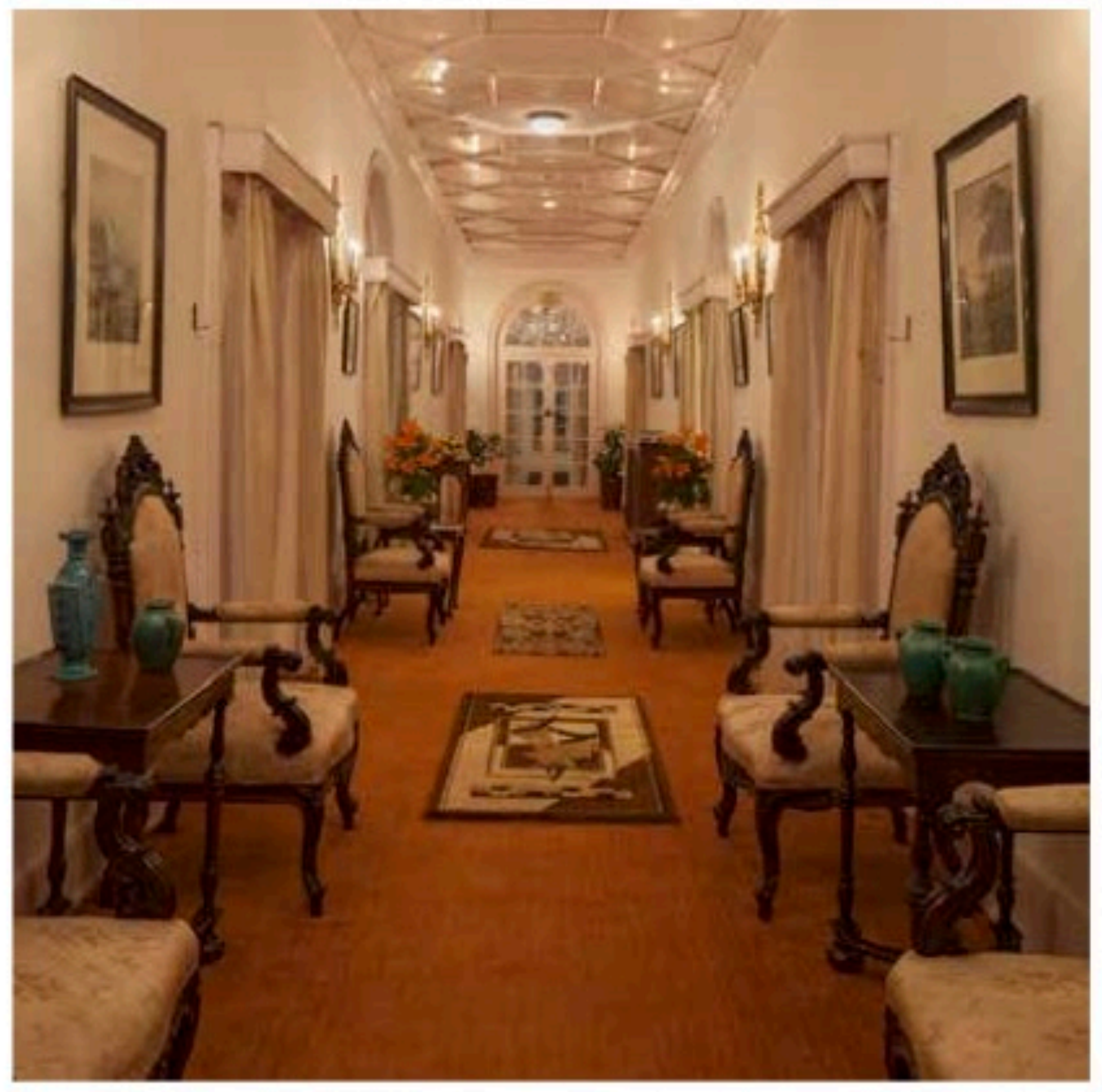
With encouragement from President Pranab Mukherjee, the Publications Division of the Government of India, in collaboration with the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA) and Sahapedia, is bringing out a number of well-produced volumes documenting various aspects of the rich bounty of the President's Estate: its architecture and landscape, gardens, flora and fauna, arts and interiors and much else. *The Presidential Retreats of India* comprises nine essays on different aspects of what were the two retreats of the Governor General and are now a part of the President's Estate. The background to these homes is situated neatly in appropriate historical contexts while technical details on site plans, choice of location and building materials are embellished with extracts from interviews and memoirs of those associated with these grand homes, both in the past as well as in the post-Independence phase of their lives. Each chapter has several very well-reproduced photographs taken by André Jeanpierre Fanthome, some quite exceptional in their angles and composition. At significant points, these are juxtaposed with archival images – photographs and aquatints – gleaned from a number of sources.

Architectural experimentation and replication was an integral part of the colonial enterprise in India. And nothing allowed greater freedom for fantasy and ebullience than the resplendent official residences of the Governor General and Governors. As Calcutta and then Delhi were unbearably hot for several months in the year, the need for a refuge or retreat in the hills became essential. In "From Hugli to the Himalaya", Gillian Wright introduces the reader to the buildings with which these retreats were linked. Lord Wellesley's Government House (now Raj Bhavan) in Calcutta was ideally suited to pomp and circumstance with its Doric pillars, opulent staircases, Throne Room and banquet hall. However, the oppression of office and the weather led to the development of Barrackpore as an option, the "jungly ground" outside the compound much more appealing to Charlotte Canning. Her artist's brushes and camera found much to record in this safe haven during the tumultuous days of 1857 Uprising when the rest of India was burning. This was before Simla became the chosen town for the Governor General's summer office and nearby Mashobra its accompanying retreat.

Among many other things, 1857 had made the British rulers even more anxious about their lives in India, their health and the "pestilential" character of Calcutta's climate. It was left to the Dufferins to inaugurate Viceregal Lodge in Simla in 1888. This extraordinary building that combined styles ranging from Elizabethan and Scottish baronial to Gothic, with a few Indian adaptations, was indeed a fitting metaphor for the Raj. It became the reference point for the development of Simla, soon awash with private homes, a bustling Mall with fashionable shops and even a play house named appropriately Gaiety Theatre. Yashaswini Chandra, in "The Colonial Backdrop to the Western Himalaya", explores this fascination with what she rather mistakenly refers to as "the highlands" (the Himalaya can hardly be compared to the Scottish Highlands), pointing out that the discovery of the lower reaches made them fitting locales for second homes for many Anglo-Indians. In Simla, church-going, weekend picnics, dances, horse shows and gardens ablaze with hydrangeas and fuchsias represented a style of life that was actively encouraged by the Governor General and his entourage. It was also an even more racially closed society than that of Calcutta or smaller mofussil towns.

The pace of life was much gentler and quieter, writes Deepak Gahlowt, at the modest and unassuming The Retreat, an elegantly gabled property situated at Mashobra, about 10 kilometres from Simla, on a ridge about 450 metres higher than Viceregal Lodge. Those of us who cherish memories of childhood hill holidays will also remember hot cases and the occasional *aga* (iron stove) — both these "relics from the culinary past" have been preserved in this property made for the Governor General's weekend comfort. Its environment was a haven for serious walkers like Lord Elgin, garden enthusiasts and, of course, hunters. Birders and butterfly watchers would also have had a field day as is evident from the present-day documentation in "Butterflies of the Retreat" by Peter Smetacek and Rajashree Bhuyan, who have recorded 41 species of butterflies and 64 species of moths on the estate. Kept rustic and old fashioned, The Retreat had only oil lamps and candles and no hot water in the bathrooms. Yet, writes Gillian Wright, Alice Reading "had a box of novels by her bed, her favourite biscuits, ice-cold milk from her special cow and even Malvern spring water imported from England". Those who ran the Raj had little to complain about — when they felt the heat, they escaped to a mock Surrey climate and continued to rule the vast country.



Interior of The Retreat at Mashobra

After Independence, both the Viceregal Lodge (renamed Rashtrapati Niwas) and The Retreat continued to play a role in governance and political negotiation: in the summer of 1972, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi chose to stay at The Retreat whilst having crucial meetings with Pakistani president, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. The Simla Agreement was in fact signed at The Retreat rather than the much more imposing Rashtrapati Niwas. In the 1960s, President Radhakrishnan decided to convert the magisterial Rashtrapati Niwas into a centre of higher learning and the Indian Institute of Advanced Studies was formally inaugurated by him in 1965.

A different architectural style is presented at Rashtrapati Nilayam, the southern residence of the President of India. A part of Secunderabad cantonment, Bolarum was originally known as Residency House. Though located only 60 feet higher than the cantonment, the area was cooler and hence favoured by the British. Anuradha Naik traces the history of the building and points out that the British Residents preferred to live here rather than in the more opulent Hyderabad Residency. The latter became a "sort of rest-house or cloak room" used by the Resident and his family on their way to and from Bolarum. The single-storied bungalow built of local material and brick is set in a walled compound that covers almost a hundred acres. The simplicity of its exterior was amply compensated for by the ostentatious interiors, their décor, effects and furnishings almost rivalling those of the owner of the property, the Nizam of Hyderabad. While describing the twin Tuscan-style colonnade that "holds up the verandah", Naik points out that this was built by Hyderabadi craftsmen "who probably had little idea of this style of architecture". (p 203)

As one comes to the end of this interesting addition to Raj memorabilia, Naik's observation is worth reflecting on: public schools, bungalows, clubs, railway stations such as Victoria Terminus (now Chhatrapati Shivaji Station) and many other institutions were built, maintained and run by Indians who often had little idea of the originals of which these were adaptations. Building plans were meticulously executed, norms of etiquette learnt and the middle and upper classes took enthusiastically to Western education. That these Presidential retreats continue to maintain some aspects of the panoply of the Raj is brought home in this well-researched volume. Visually pleasing, one has to commend the pains taken to source appropriate archival images. However, one misses an introduction to the contributors, a glossary and an index. At certain points, I needed to consult my copy of *Hobson-Jobson*, particularly when staff designations appear only in their 'native' forms. Nor is there always consistency on italicisation — 'abdar' appears in roman on page 119 and then on page 146, it is in italics. For one addicted to looking at endnotes, it wasn't difficult to spot that Notes for Chapter IV are inconsistent with the text. And surely Gillian Wright ("Life at Mashobra") meant that, if lucky, in a Mashobra winter, the President could spot a leopard's pug marks and not footprints in the snow! ■

The family and the city

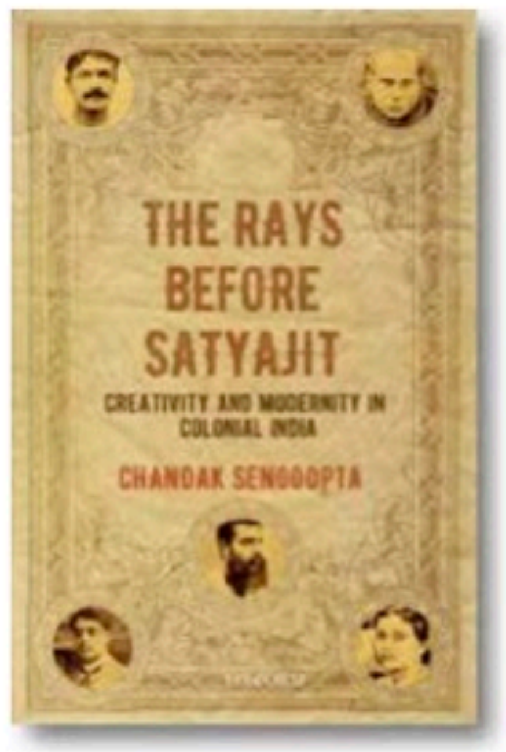
The Rays Before Satyajit: Creativity and Modernity in Colonial India

By Chandak Sengoopta
Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2016, 418 pp., Rs 995
ISBN 0-19-946475-8

SAYANDEB CHOWDHURY

Chandak Sengoopta has had a less-than-conventional training. He studied to be a medical doctor in Calcutta, did his doctoral research in the US on the history of medicine and is now a historian of colonial and postcolonial India in Birkbeck College, London. His first book was a study of the notorious Viennese philosopher Otto Weininger's controversial work on identity, while his next two books – *Imprint of the Raj: How Fingerprinting was Born in Colonial India* (Macmillan, 2003) and *The Most Secret Quintessence of Life: Sex, Glands and Hormones, 1850-1950* (University of Chicago Press, 2006) – were on the biopolitics of identification technologies. Within this sphere of interest, his new book, *The Rays Before Satyajit: Creativity and Modernity in Colonial India*, seems like an apparent oddity. However, on close scrutiny, it is not. This book was spun out of Sengoopta's major new project to write a capacious biography of Satyajit Ray — pioneering Indian filmmaker, illustrator and author. But while doing his research, Sengoopta came to appreciate that Ray, in spite of his talismanic presence in modern Indian culture, was not a lone ranger in the pursuit of his craft but an exceptional product of a modernity that his family had keenly imbibed and embodied. His father and grandfather were much-admired authors in Bengali literature and members of his extended family had their share of lovable, creative quirks. This is the known bit, at least for those who are versed in the cultural history of Bengal. But what is pertinent is that the Rays had shaped and were in turn shaped by the deeply-felt materiality of modernity in colonial India, with Calcutta being the fulcrum of this vibrant sensorium. To that end, the *real* story of Satyajit begins much earlier, in the mid-19th century. What perhaps drew the science historian in Sengoopta is that Ray's illustrious predecessors, unlike their equally illustrious peers in what has been –with substantive deterrents – called the Bengal Renaissance, took a decisive role in the proliferation of *technological* modernity, in inventions and their applications, in forming a line of *active* reformists whose discontent with the old was not just social and cultural, but also industrial. Hence this book not only finds continuity with Sengoopta's previous work but also manages to break into new grounds as far as the history of Bengal's 19th century dominions of culture and thought are concerned, an area otherwise overwrought with institutionalised historiographies.

Sengoopta's subject – the Ray family – is an unusual historical subject because history is often smitten by either trailblazing individuals or by larger social forces, conditions and claims. A family is indeed the mettle for storytellers—Joseph Roth's *The Redetzky March*, Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks* and Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* being some of the supreme examples of this genre that I know of. Second, the story of the Rays is also in many ways the story of Calcutta between the mid-19th to mid-20th century – a city of scrupulous contradictions – full of the verve and enthusiasm of a metropolis in the throes of far-fetched change, of intrepid reform and rebellion, of science and invention and also vocal, inglorious orthodoxy. The city is in itself a character in this narrative and it flows in and out of the Ray household as effortlessly as the winds of change that had been shaking up every house those days which cared to keep its windows open. Hence the comparison to a family saga in which members are caught in the whirlwind of indefensible transformation is not presumptuous but actual. Like a fine storyteller, Sengoopta's task was to bring the two – the colourful family and the protrusive city – within one overarching narrative without in any way compromising on the demands of attentive, threadbare historiography. Sengoopta manages this feat with wonderful clarity, never losing sight of the historical in his search for the familial. The experience of reading the book is hence immersive, its narrative reads like a novel full of arresting characters and pregnant moments while its exhaustive annotations keep us grounded in real time and in touch with the historian's uncompromising craft.



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More than half of the book is about Upendrakishore Raychaudhuri, Satyajit's grandfather (1863-1915). The first parts reads like part-*bildungsroman*, part Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*. From his days at the Brahmo shop in Mymensingh to Calcutta's Cornwalis Street where he settled after marriage, Upendrakishore's life was, to an extent, endemic of the age. Zealous young people, attracted by the teachings of iconoclastic reformists, were regularly taking to Brahmoism, seeking to make a decisive contribution to the climate of reform that was sweeping much of Calcutta's middle classes. The Turgenev bit solicits attention when we learn that almost all of them, from the sprightly Upendrakishore to the frail Pramadacharan Sen were renounced by their orthodox Hindu fathers for taking to Brahmoism. It was a generational conflict as much as it was a conflict between an assertive, deeply patriarchal and decadent religious orthodoxy that was being challenged by a new liberal doctrine that had put the education of women and the spiritual release from the portals of idolatry at the heart of their rebellion. Upendrakishore embraced the new faith, married the daughter of a radical Brahmo figure and settled among Calcutta's hoary gentlemen community. He took to writing books for children, established the seminal literary magazine *Sandesh*, played music, continued his role in the Brahmo movement and made pioneering contributions to the emerging technology of halftone photography. By the time he established U. Ray & Sons, his printing workshop, the transformation of Upendrakishore from a confounded young adult to polymathic reformer, musician, literateur and trailblazing innovator was complete. He also dropped 'Chaudhuri' (the elite zamindari suffix) from his family name as he took to the new faith, signalling a semantic break with the past as much as it was an ontological dissociation. The first of the Ray moderns was born.

Sengoopta highlights Upendrakishore's amazing experiments with photography and the passage below hints at not only his self-tutored brilliance but also keenness to be part of a global discourse on how best to print photography. Sengoopta writes: "When Upendrakishore began his investigations into the half-tone process in mid-1980s, the technology was fairly new everywhere but in extensive demand... Despite his location in colonial Calcutta and his lack of an academic scientific identity, he became a significant figure in the global history of half-tone research within only a few years of commencing his entirely solitary exploration of the technology, winning praise in Britain for displaying 'not only a clear grasp of the subject' but for suggesting 'new methods of work'." (p 209) *This* is the crux of this book: that unless one understands the industrious side of the Rays' encounter with modernity, one is not in a position to fully comprehend either the narrative of modernity in India or the crucial role that being part of global technological breakthroughs finally played in that embrace of modernity.

The span of Upendrakishore's life is also the most glorious period for both reformist Brahmoism and Calcutta's piquant cosmopolitanism. By the time Sukumar (1887-1923), Upendra's eldest son and Satyajit's father came back from London to take over the family business, the national climate had altered significantly and many of the older questions of colonial rule were now finding newer addresses. Sukumar was no ordinary go-getter but a radical wit, a *bon viveur*, organiser, printer, technologist, illustrator and above all an extraordinary writer. Upendrakishore bequeathed to Sukumar the love for the new and the untested and the ability to take to new heights what was *merely* children's literature. What was not really on Sukumar's side was years and his early death plunged the family into financial wreck and scientific forbearance.

Starting with Upendrakishore, the Rays gradually moved away from any uncritical reception of the eastern systems of thought, so much so that Satyajit found himself immersed primarily in western art, music and cinema when he was a young man in the 1940s. However, in his cinema ten years later, Ray would return to probe the *Indian* life with more rigour than anyone had ever done on celluloid. This was the lasting inheritance from the two towering Rays before him — a deeply imbibed western modernity that was pushed to the limits of representation – in paper or in image – through the lived reality of being South Asian. Ray's cinema is well known but it is through his graphic art and illustration, his literature for young adults and in *Sandesh*, which he continued to edit intermittently, that he carried his father and grandfather along.

Sengoopta's cast of characters and their time is much wider and more interesting than this review can hope to talk of. Perhaps an eon like that produces figures of such generosity of spirit and with such love for the unknown charms of life, the sciences and the nation in general. The Ray biography is well worth the wait, but this book should find a much wider acclaim and readership than is usually reserved for an imprint of a university press. ■