Article

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The White Outline of Light: A Sign of Liberation

On **7** October 2023**,** the bombing of the Gaza Strip began. Since then, the world has been flooded with photographs of people wounded by war—faces, bodies, streets, all bearing the marks of devastation. Beside this reflection stands one such image, taken by the photographer Samar Abu Elouf. The photograph trembles with a quiet, internal grief.

But why does the sorrow feel so intense?

Because the people in the frame are not outlined with a protective border of white light. There is no visual separation that lifts them gently away from the wreckage around them. Without that luminous edge, the wounded figures dissolve into the ruined landscape. They seem inseparable from the broken walls, the dust, the silence of the aftermath. And because they blend so completely with the devastated environment, the image whispers a cruel suggestion—that perhaps there is no escape from this endless war.

Samar Abu Elouf

Now turn, for a moment, to cinema.

When Satyajit Ray and the cinematographer Soumendu Roy photographed the army of Halla in the film ‘Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne’ (The Adventures of Goopy & Bagha), did they follow the same visual philosophy? Did they allow the soldiers of Halla to merge with their surroundings in the same way? Or did they do the opposite—did they isolate the soldiers from the environment with a deliberate design of light?

Behind the fortress of Halla lies a field filled with the graves of countless dead soldiers. It is there that Goopy walks slowly, singing:

"Ore baba, dekho cheye—koto sena choleche somore!" (Oh dear, just look — how many soldiers are on the march to war!)

Beside him, Bagha keeps rhythm on the drum.

In the field stands the minister. But where is the king?

As Goopy Gyne and Bagha Byne hold the army in place with their song and music, the morning sunlight glows on their right cheeks.

Does the king hear Goopy's song? Does the beat of Bagha's drum reach his ears? If it does, the spell clouding his brain will break. And if the spell breaks, the king will finally be free.

But can he hear it?

This is the riddle.

And it is a difficult one—because the answer must be given only through light**.** The lighting must be designed so carefully that the audience understands whether the king hears the music or not. Why depend entirely on light?

Because the king is still trapped in a trance. He cannot speak. No dialogue can guide us. So, Ray and Roy decided on something extraordinary: the mystery would be solved only through illumination**.**

But how?

How did these two magicians of cinema design light to answer such a question? That is the path of inquiry we begin today.

II

The army of the King of Halla is advancing toward the kingdom of Shundi. Behind the fortress, across a field of graves, the soldiers march forward. The ground is uneven, broken into rough geometric shapes by the presence of the tombs. Sunlight falls sharply on each grave, as though the earth itself has been cut into luminous fragments.

This burial ground had once captivated Satyajit Ray so deeply that he mentioned a similar landscape in his novel 'Sonar Kella' (The Golden Fortress):

"All around, the air feels tense and still. If you look behind, far away on the hilltop stands the fort of Jaisalmer. Across the road, the mountain rises steeply. And at its very foot lies a vast open ground filled with rows of yellow stones planted into the earth—like grinding stones set upright. Feluda whispers, 'The graves of warriors."

Yet an interesting transformation occurred when the novel later became the film 'Sonar Kella'. Although Ray had written about these warriors' graves with such vividness, he ultimately chose not to show them in the cinematic version.

But in 'Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne', the graveyard scene unfolds with striking visual intention.

The first thing that catches the eye is the square stones embedded into the sand and soil. They stand like blunt markers in a landscape that is real, rough, and uneven. Across this irregular terrain a trolley shot is executed. The camera moves forward against the light coming from the east, gliding through the field of graves.

As it advances, the feet of Goopy and Bagha repeatedly disappear behind the stones and then emerge again into view.

Concealment. Revelation.

The rhythm of being covered and uncovered begins to pulse through the frame. It becomes almost musical—like a visual meter accompanying the song itself.

This is unmistakably Ray's style.

Light, human form, and architecture combine here to create a living composition. The graves are not merely part of the setting; they structure the movement of the image. With every step, the landscape interrupts and releases the bodies of the characters, turning the terrain itself into a participant in the cinematic rhythm.

A clear echo of this stylistic device appears in the veranda sequence of 'Charulata' (The Lonely Wife). There, in a delicate trolley shot, Charu walks slowly along the long veranda. At moments she disappears behind the pillars; a second later she re-emerges from their shadow. The pillars function almost like veils across her emotional landscape. Just as Charu's inner world trembles between concealment and revelation, the movement of the camera follows the same rhythm—now hiding, now revealing.

The buried stones in the graveyard of 'Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne' seem to play a similar role. Goopy and Bagha move from one side to another—sometimes hidden behind the stones,

sometimes visible in the open. Their presence in the frame is slightly interrupted, yet never broken. It flows forward in a continuous rhythm.

One might rightly call such moments the director's personal signature. For the cadence of concealment and emergence, the transformation of architecture into an active visual element, and the weaving of light into movement—these are all hallmarks of the aesthetic imagination of Satyajit Ray.

After the song continues for a while, a subtle visual transformation occurs. A babla tree (Acacia nilotica) appears within the frame, and upon its rough bark falls a bright, almost radiant light. That same white light touches Goopy and Bagha—falling across their right cheeks and their right hands. Significantly, the very same light also falls upon the soldiers of Halla's army.

As Goopy and Bagha sing to halt the army of Halla, eastern sunlight falls on their right sides, separating them from the background—the same light touching the leaves of the babla tree.

In that instant, the soldiers seem to receive a fleeting touch of liberation. The oppressive political atmosphere of the kingdom of Halla—the suffocating pressure of authoritarian rule, the darkness of a fascistic command—momentarily loosens its grip. Against the dim environment, the white light forms a luminous outline around their bodies. Visually, they begin to separate from the darkness surrounding them.

It is as if they are stepping out of the shadow of tyranny and moving toward a new clarity.

Here, the white outline becomes a bearer of freedom—an image of transparent humanity set against the murky weight of dark politics. The light that falls upon the bodies of Goopy, Bagha, and the soldiers' carries within it a quiet, almost hidden moment of release.

This visual strategy—separating a character from the environment through a white outline—was not an accidental flourish. It was something Satyajit Ray had practiced for many

years. As early as 1943–44, Ray began experimenting with this idea in his illustrations and visual imagination. The use of white was not merely decorative; it carried meaning.

Let me offer another example of how white becomes a sign of liberation.

Illustration from Professor Shonku o Khoka, where Khoka is separated by white light.

In the story 'Professor Shonku o Khoka' from the adventures of Professor Shonku, the boy Khoka suddenly becomes a genius for reasons unknown. Through this transformation he manages to detach himself from the dull, oppressive routine of everyday life. To mark this sense of release, Ray surrounds Khoka—standing in the foreground—with a luminous white glow. The original illustration published in 'Sandesh' was printed in deep blue, and against that dense background the radiant white around Khoka's body appeared almost like a halo of light.

A similar device appears again in the illustrations of 'Sonar Kella', where characters are separated from their surroundings through the same white outlining.

What is particularly striking is the chronology. In 'Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne' we see this expressive use of light first within the language of cinema. Later, in 1971, the same visual idea reappears in Ray's illustrations for 'Sonar Kella'. In other words, the same signature of light echoes across different media—film and drawing.

One memorable image shows Mukul running forward, his eyes wide open with wonder. In the illustration, Mukul's left hand, left leg, and the left side of his shirt are edged with white. That white line separates him from the surrounding world.

Why?

Because Mukul does not quite belong to ordinary reality. He is already detached from the immediate present. In some mysterious way he has slipped away from the pressures and wounds of contemporary life. The white sunlight—rendered as a luminous outline—becomes the visual language of that freedom.

And for precisely the same reason, when Goopy and Bagha sing the song that stops the war in 'Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne', a bright white outline appears on their right hands and right cheeks. Light frees them from the surrounding darkness of the battlefield.

Mukul runs with eyes wide in wonder. The white light along the left side of his body lifts him away from the world around him—he seems detached from contemporary reality.

In that moment, illumination becomes more than lighting. It becomes a quiet gesture of release.

III

Let us return, once again, to the King of Halla.

During the song—*"Ore baba dekho cheye"*—how far away is the king from Goopy and Bagha? Could we, as viewers, ever truly measure that distance?

Inside the fortress he lies beside a window. The frame contains no other character. There is no dialogue. Only silence—soft, suspended—and through that silence the song drifts inward.

The image appears still, almost unmoving. Yet the atmosphere carries a hidden motion.

Within this quiet moment, Satyajit Ray and the cinematographer Soumendu Roy used light as a delicate dramatic signal.

A window to the east is implied—an imagined architectural opening that becomes the source of light within the fortress. From that direction the light falls upon the body of the King of Halla, touching particularly the right side of his costume.

This right-sided illumination is not accidental. It continues a visual logic already established earlier in the sequence.

For when Goopy and Bagha were singing in the graveyard in 'Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne', light had fallen on their bodies from the right side as well. Their faces had been lifted upward—toward the sky, toward something unseen, as if offered to an invisible force.

The king lies in a similar posture. His face too is turned upward.

And through this quiet parallel—a shared direction of light, an upward-turned face—a subtle bridge forms within the viewer's subconscious.

Goopy and Bagha are absent from the frame. Yet the language of light tells us what the image itself does not show: the king is not far away.

He is close enough.

The song reaches him.

Despite the visual separation, the continuity of illumination binds the two spaces together. The audience senses it almost instinctively—that however distant they may appear, in this moment the king and the singers exist under the same current of sound, the same invisible rhythm of light.

Inside the king's chamber, the brightness of the light is deliberately restrained. The light that enters through the window does not rush in boldly; it arrives softened, moderated, as though gently filtered by the stone of the fortress walls. Because of this, a faint veil of shadow settles over the king's face and costume. Compared to the stark brilliance of the graveyard outside, the illumination here is subdued.

The difference matters.

It suggests that the king is not yet fully free. He still lies within walls, within the architecture of power. The fortress holds him—not only physically, but politically. His position is still enclosed.

Most strikingly, there is no luminous outline around the king's head. No line of light separates his face from the surrounding darkness. Why?

Because the king remains under the spell of the enchanted sweets—still hypnotized, his mind not yet released. His thoughts remain captive. For this reason, his head is not given the freedom of light.

Here lies the masterful touch of the cinematographer Soumendu Roy. The absence of light around the head becomes a quiet declaration: the king's mind is still enslaved.

And yet something else has changed. Light does touch his clothing—especially near the chest, where the window's glow falls gently upon the fabric. If the mind remains bound, the heart has begun to awaken. In this delicate placement of light, the filmmakers reveal an early stirring of emancipation.

This is how Satyajit Ray expresses liberation through the language of cinema: not through speech, not through explanation, but through light itself.

There is another fascinating layer behind this moment. The outdoor sequences of 'Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne' and the interior scenes of the king's chamber were filmed seven to eight months apart. Yet the visual logic remained carefully planned. Ray and Roy had already decided which room would represent the king's chamber and what kind of window it

would contain. The lighting in the studio interiors was designed to match that earlier conception.

Imagining the king's bedroom as a chamber on the south-eastern corner of the second floor of a fortress seems entirely reasonable. An east-facing room would naturally receive the soft light of morning through its window and jharokha—sunlight entering at an angle, creating the subtle drama of shadow and illumination that Ray valued so deeply.

From this reasoning, one might even venture a speculation.

The King of Halla lies on his bed, light touching only his chest. Behind his head there is darkness—he is still enslaved by power.

Could the King of Halla have been imagined lying in a room within Salim Singh Ki Haveli?

For such an identification to work, four conditions would need to be satisfied:

First, the haveli must contain a *jharokha* or window that receives the morning sunlight from the east.

Second, there must be a row of several rooms aligned together.

Third, among them the king would occupy the two central chambers.

And fourth, the arrangement must be such that one cannot reach the king immediately upon climbing the stairs; the architecture itself creates a small distance before access.

If a haveli fulfils these four conditions, one could imagine it as the palace of the King of Halla.

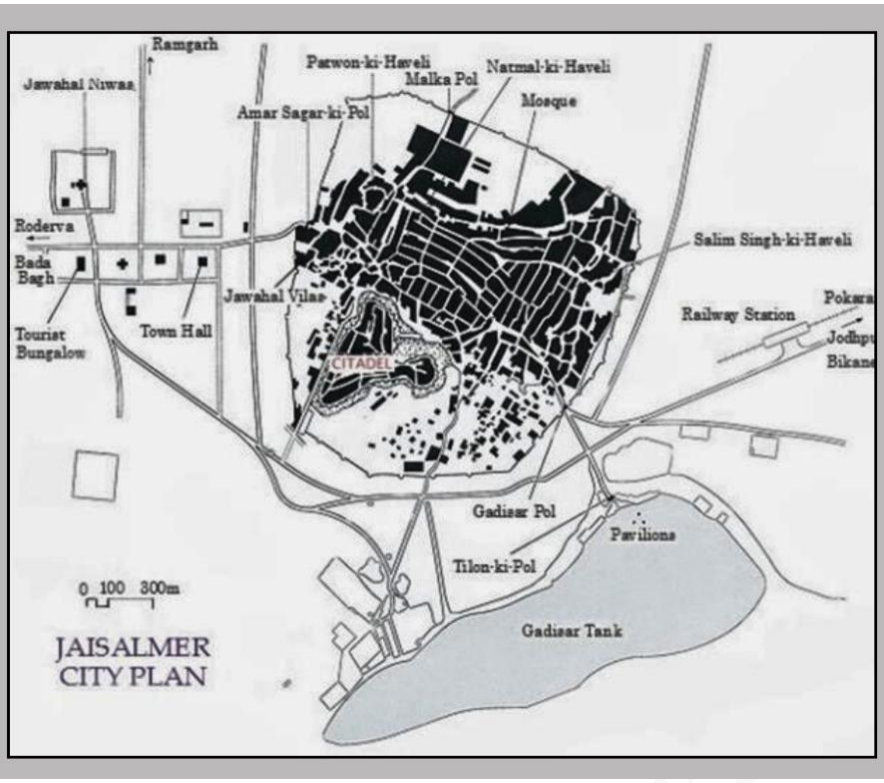
The question then arises: does Salim Singh's Haveli satisfy these conditions?

If it does, we may think of it as the architectural inspiration for the king's palace. Yet historically, no shooting took place inside that haveli. The interior scenes were filmed in a studio in Kolkata. The haveli therefore belongs not to the geography of the film's production, but to the imaginative geography through which Ray envisioned the king's world.

And in that imagined room—half-shadowed, half-awakened—the king lies listening, while somewhere beyond the walls the song continues to travel through light.

Why does the morning sunlight never enter the King of Halla's chamber directly?

The answer lies in the architecture.



The architectural plan of Jaisalmer and its fort reveals the very room where the King of Halla was lying.

In a room of this kind, the hanging balconies—those suspended stone verandas—play a crucial role in shaping the light of the scene. One brief moment in the film reveals this beautifully.

The King of Halla suddenly bursts into the royal court, shouting at the top of his voice—"War… war… war!" His cry seems powerful enough to crack the ceiling as he runs straight toward the throne. At that very instant, a flock of pigeons rises into the sky from the roof of the fortress.

But where did those pigeons take flight from?

They burst out from behind the shadows of several overhanging balconies.

These balconies are carved from stone, their surfaces pierced with small windows. The size of those openings immediately tells us something important: very little sunlight can enter the rooms of Halla directly. The architecture itself filters the light, breaking its strength before it reaches the interior.

When the lighting for the palace interiors of 'Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne' was designed, the cinematographer Soumendu Roy kept this architectural logic firmly in mind. And it is here that Roy's extraordinary sensitivity becomes visible.

Instead of flooding the room with direct light, large reflectors were positioned so that the light could bounce softly before entering the windows. What reached the interior was therefore a diffused glow—gentle, filtered, believable.

Inside the chamber, the light was kept deliberately low. The restraint allowed shadows to gather and stretch across the walls, creating a subtle dramatic tension.

Because of this careful balance—direct light outside, quiet shadow within—the illumination of the scene feels completely natural to the viewer. It seems less like something arranged by technicians and more like light that has simply found its own way through stone, balcony, and air.

There is yet another reason behind this style of lighting.

When a hanging balcony is carved with windows, and when those windows are crowned with arches, the structure acquires a special architectural name: the jharokha. These projecting balconies—half window, half stage—carry a deep historical resonance in the architecture of North India.

Rows of rooms, verandas, and jharokhas in Salim Singh Ki Haveli.

Satyajit Ray understood the cultural and symbolic weight of the jharokha, and that is why he gave it special importance in ‘Sonar Kella’.

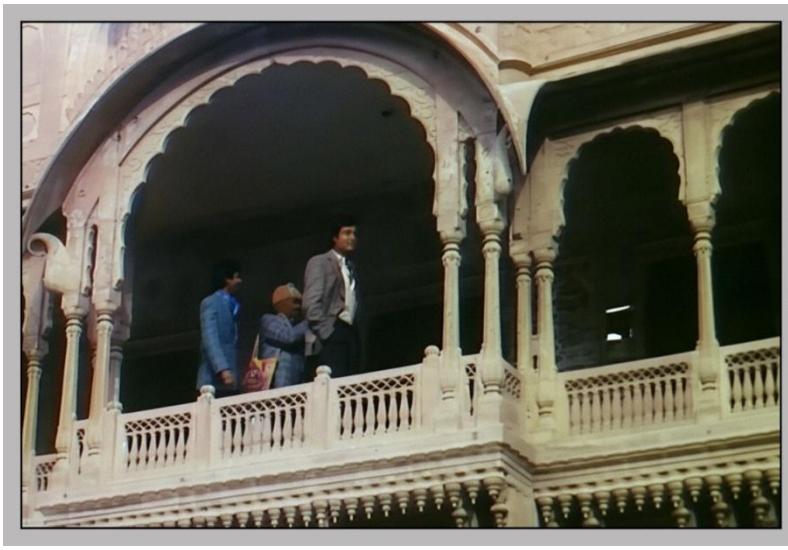
Consider one memorable scene.

Feluda, Topshe, Lalmohan Ganguly, and Mandar Bose are walking along a balcony of the Bikaner Fort. At precisely that moment, beneath the arch of a jharokha, Ray places a small but unforgettable line of dialogue.

Mandar Bose suddenly turns to Jatayu and says, with mock curiosity, “Had to read one of your books, sir! Do you happen to have a copy of Sahara-r Sita-Haran?” Jatayu freezes for a moment. Then he bursts into loud laughter. “Sita-Haran in the Sahara! My goodness, you’re a witty man!”

His laughter echoes through the balcony, and soon everyone joins in—Feluda included.

Because the line is spoken directly beneath the arch of the jharokha, the audience's attention instinctively gathers around it. The architecture frames the moment. The dialogue becomes memorable not only because of its humour, but because the space itself gives it emphasis. The *jharokha* acts almost like a theatrical proscenium.



Just after the line "Sitaharan in the Sahara," the four figures walk beneath the arches of the jharokhas, bursting into shared laughter.

Ray uses the same architectural device again in Joi Baba Felunath. In the secret hideout of Machhli Baba, Feluda suddenly slips behind a *jharokha* to avoid confronting the fake ascetic face-to-face. The structure becomes a place of concealment. Its deep recess and filtered light keep the brightness low, creating the shadows necessary for hiding.

A shaded balcony is perfect for disappearance.

But the larger question remains: why did Ray give such importance to the *jharokha*? There are many answers, but one lies deep in the history of North Indian architecture.

In the days of the Mughal Empire, certain emperors had to demonstrate, every single morning, that they were still alive. If rumours of the emperor's death spread, the empire could collapse into violent internal conflict. Rebellions might erupt across the land.

So how could the emperor reassure the people that he still lived?

Portrait of Jahangir — painted by Bishandas, the emperor's most favored portrait artist.

The answer appeared at dawn— not in a battlefield, not in a court decree, but quietly through a window in the palace wall.

There was, in truth, a simple solution.

Before dawn each morning, the emperor would step out and stand at a jharokha—one of those projecting palace windows that looked down upon the courtyard below. Beneath it, thousands of loyal subjects would gather, waiting in quiet expectation for a glimpse of their ruler.

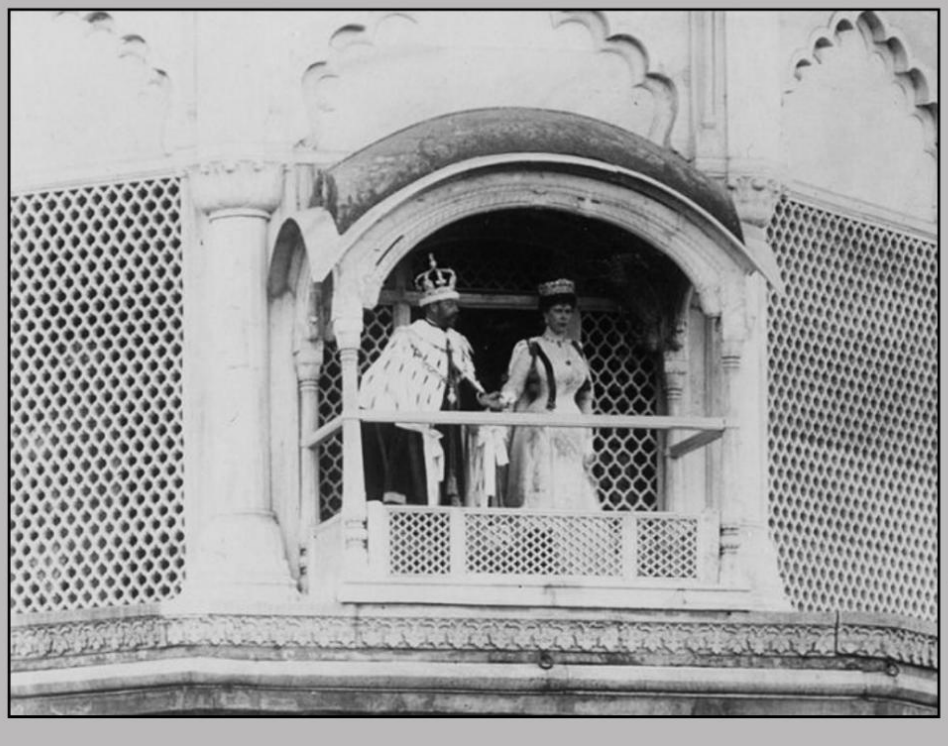
The great Mughal emperors—Akbar, Jahangir, and Shah Jahan—were all required to appear there during their reigns. The act was more than ceremonial. It was political reassurance. If rumours of the emperor's death spread across the land, the fragile balance of the empire could shatter overnight. Rivalries would ignite. Rebellions might rise.

So, the emperor showed himself.

Of them all, Jahangir seemed to relish the ritual most.

In the first light of morning, the soft orange glow of the rising sun would fall upon the delicate diamond suspended at the front of his turban. Strings of pearls hung on either side, catching the light in brief, trembling flashes. The emperor would lift his right hand toward the crowd below—sometimes greeting them, sometimes blessing them.

This daily moment of appearance came to be known as *Jharokha Darshan*.



Standing at the jharokha, George V and Queen Mary give a royal audience to the crowd below.

Centuries later, the echo of that ancient spectacle resurfaced in another empire. During the Delhi Durbar of 1911, George V arrived in Delhi to proclaim himself Emperor of India. In that moment, history seemed to circle back upon itself.

Standing high above the crowd, the British monarch raised his hand toward the gathered masses. Beside him stood Queen Mary. The jewels of the crown shimmered under the sun, and below them stretched a vast sea of faces—watching, waiting, absorbing the spectacle.

IV

Let us return again to the kingdom of Halla.

The *jharokha* in the king's palace is constructed in such a way that no one could climb up to it from below. The underside of the balcony projects outward from the wall, smooth and unreachable. Even if someone were to scale the fortress wall, the structure itself would prevent them from reaching the opening.

The king, therefore, remained secure behind architecture.

In modern architectural language, such a projecting structure is known as a cantilever balcony. The beams that extend outward from the fortress wall—holding the suspended veranda in place—are called cantilevers. They bear the weight of the balcony while remaining anchored invisibly within the masonry.

One can see a striking example of this design in Salim Singh's Haveli. Beneath its *jharokhas*, the cantilevers are carved and arranged so intricately that climbing past them toward the royal chambers would be nearly impossible. The ornate projections function not merely as decoration but as a silent barrier.

Architecture becomes defence.

In such havelis, the sculpted cantilevers stand like guardians beneath the balcony—beautiful, elaborate, and yet utterly forbidding. They transform the jharokha into a place that can be looked from, but never easily reached to.

At the house of Maganlal Meghraj in Varanasi, one enters through a green-painted door. Step past that door and into the courtyard, and the first thing that catches the eye is a continuous hanging balcony running above. Beneath that green veranda lie richly ornamented cantilevers—dense with carved detail, projecting outward from the wall like sculpted ribs.

Those cantilevers do more than decorate the building. They form a quiet defense. To cross them, climb up, and reach the balcony would be nearly impossible for an intruder. Any enemy hoping to attack Maganlal would find the architecture itself standing in the way.

In this sense, the King of Halla and Maganlal Meghraj share the same kind of protection: an architectural obstruction, a barrier built not only with stone but with design.

Now consider Salim Singh's Haveli. The haveli stands well outside the walls of the Jaisalmer Fort, and historically it had no connection with a royal palace. Yet we keep returning to it. Why?

Because the moment one looks at its projecting balconies, the answer becomes clear. Those suspended verandas explain why sunlight enters the rooms so sparingly. Their shadow stretches inward, softening and diminishing the light that reaches the interior.

The dim, shadowed chambers of Salim Singh's Haveli resemble—almost uncannily—the atmosphere imagined for the room of the King of Halla in 'Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne'. The density of shade, the muted glow entering through distant openings, the slow diffusion of sunlight—all these qualities echo the haveli's interior spaces.

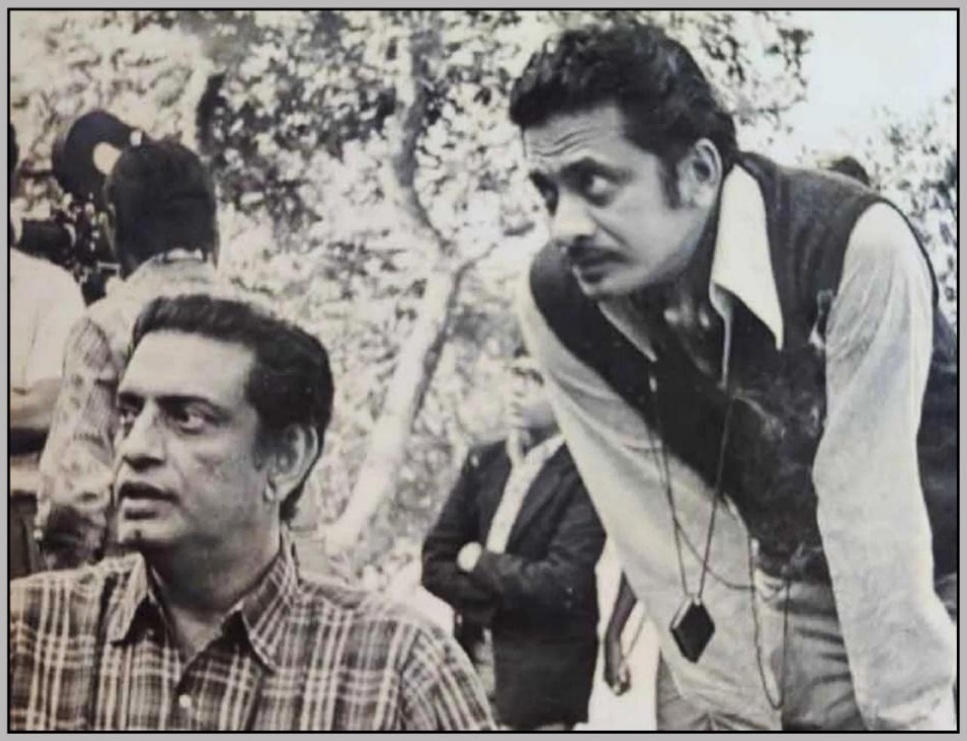
And so, although no filming took place there, the haveli became an ideal reference for Satyajit Ray and the cinematographer Soumendu Roy when they designed the lighting for the interiors of Halla's palace.

The fortress of Halla, after all, is imagined as a place filled with jharokhas. And jharokhas are masters at reducing light. Keeping this architectural truth in mind, Roy designed the lighting of every interior scene.

What emerges here is something deeply interdisciplinary. The lighting does not exist alone. It follows the logic of architecture. And architecture, in turn, serves the narrative.

Story, structure, and illumination—three separate streams of human knowledge—flow together within the frame.

Under Ray's conception, these seemingly different disciplines were brought into quiet harmony by Soumendu Roy.



Narrative, architecture, and light—three different languages of human knowledge—are woven together, design imagined by Satyajit Ray, cinematographer Soumendu Roy merges these contrasting elements with mastery.

Nearly two years before filming began, Ray and Roy had already visited the location and identified which kind of room could become the chamber of the King of Halla. In their minds they had mapped everything: the room, the window, the *jharokha*, the angle of the sun, the slow movement of shadow across the wall.

The image existed before the camera arrived.

This was their method—visual pre-composition—the shared modus operandi of two artists who understood that cinema begins long before the light touches the film.

In much the same way, during the making of 'Shatranj Ke Khilari', Satyajit Ray and the cinematographer Soumendu Roy had already visited the Lucknow Residency long before the cameras arrived.

There, within the long row of rooms once used by British officers, they carefully observed which chamber could plausibly belong to James Outram. That particular room had a vast window on its western wall. Outside the window lay a garden thick with large trees—broad canopies, layered leaves, shadows shifting slowly with the wind.

Ray and Roy noticed everything.

So, when the time came to recreate the interior, Roy was able to shape the light with remarkable precision. The afternoon light of Lucknow in February—around a quarter past four—was rebuilt with quiet fidelity inside the studio.

The garden beyond the western window became, in effect, a natural system of light modulation. The tall trees did not allow the sunlight to enter the room directly. They worked like living filters. Through the restless gaps in their leaves, light drifted inward in fragments, trembling slightly, carrying with it moving patterns of shadow.

From this interplay emerged a delicate atmosphere: a melancholic golden wash, soft and diffused. The light itself seemed to carry history within it—suggesting decline, memory, and the quiet sadness that permeates the world of the film.

In this sense, designing the lighting for the chamber of the King of Halla in 'Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne' and shaping the atmosphere of Lord Outram's room in 'Shatranj Ke Khilari' were equally challenging tasks.

For the cinematographer, the true difficulty lies here: to imagine a location that is no longer present before the camera, and yet to recreate its light faithfully inside an interior set. To build that invisible world with illumination alone— that is the quiet triumph of a master cinematographer.

The Light of Humanity and the Light of War

Every day, to remain alive, human beings must pass through small and large sorrows. Because of this, people—ordinary or extraordinary—remain tightly bound to their surroundings. In scenes shaped by realism, therefore, filmmakers usually avoid separating a character from the environment by placing bright light on the cheek or hair. The human figure remains embedded in the world around it.

But something different happens when the music begins.

As the hypnotic melody of Goopy's song drifts through the air, and the rhythmic pulse of Bagha's drum gathers momentum in 'Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne', the soldiers of Halla's army experience an unexpected sensation. For a fleeting moment, they taste freedom. The spell of war loosens. A new feeling passes through them—an awakening, sudden and fragile.

That moment of release is marked by light.

A new sun seems to rise within the frame. Light falls on the eastward-facing cheeks of Goopy and Bagha. The soldiers too receive it—their shoulders and cheeks edged with a slender outline of white.

Through that white line of illumination, they slip free from the weariness of ordinary life. The burdens that cling to daily existence seem to fall away. In artistic terms, the glow on the cheek and hair becomes the instrument of emancipation.

The task of the white light is simple yet profound: to mark the moment of liberation.

Light here is not used merely to make the image visible. It constructs meaning. Under the direction of Satyajit Ray and through the camera of Soumendu Roy, the bright white glow separates Goopy and Bagha from the surrounding environment. A narrow rim of light from behind traces the outline of their bodies against the darker, mist-like background.

Because of that edge, the figures become unmistakably clear.

They begin to resemble something more than characters. They become symbols—figures who stand apart even while remaining inside the scene. The white light creates a subtle heroic distance. Though they are part of the unfolding event, they also seem to rise above it.

In that thin border of brightness, the human imagination glimpses a possibility: that even within the shadow of war, the light of humanity may still find a way to appear.

Let us look, for a moment, at the visual language of modern war photography.

The central character is not separated from the environment by bright white light.

The Palestinian photographer Samar Abu Elouf, who works extensively for The New York Times, has documented the devastation of the Gaza Strip during the recent conflicts, especially in the images she captured amid the war conditions of 2025.

In many of these photographs, she consciously avoids placing a bright rim of light behind the heads of her subjects. There is no luminous outline that would separate a human figure from its surroundings. The absence is deliberate.

Because of it, the people in her images never detach themselves from the environment around them.

Instead, they remain fused with it—merged with the rubble, the drifting dust, the smoke, the fractured slabs of concrete. Human bodies and broken architecture share the same light, the same air. They belong to the same field of destruction.

The lack of a glowing outline behind the head does not make these photographs aesthetically weaker. On the contrary, it makes them more severe, more unflinchingly honest. Without visual separation, the person in the image becomes part of the war's aftermath itself—one fragment among many.

They appear almost like the last remaining bodies still breathing within a battlefield already claimed by ruin.

The characters are not separated from their surroundings by light; they become one with the ruins, dust, smoke, and shattered concrete.

It is a vision of reality where human life and devastation occupy the same surface. Both are covered by the same dust, lit by the same exhausted light.

And in such a world, ordinary people cannot detach themselves from what surrounds them. There is no visual distance, no symbolic escape.

In that landscape of war, the light of liberation would feel like a false promise.

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Note:

1: Goopy Gyne and Bagha Byne — Two young men who quietly embody the life philosophy of Satyajit Ray. Ray believed that art could deepen international understanding and thereby reduce the possibility of conflict. Through these two characters, that belief takes a vivid and playful form.

But who are they?

They are two youths from poor rural families in Bengal. Goopy loves to sing, and Bagha loves to play the drum. Neither of them ever had a teacher. Because of this, they never realized that one sang off-key and the other played out of rhythm.

One early morning, Goopy's tuneless singing broke the king's peaceful sleep. For this offense he was banished from his village. Wandering along the road, he met a drummer in a bamboo grove—his name was Bagha.

Together they entered the forest. To overcome their fear of tigers, the two began singing and drumming, lost in their own music.

But that forest had another inhabitant—the King of Ghosts, who lived there with his spectral companions. Hearing their wildly off-key performance, the ghostly king was delighted. Amused and charmed, he granted them three magical boons.

Because of these gifts, Goopy's voice suddenly became sweet and melodious, and the rhythms of Bagha's drum grew lively and enchanting. The third boon carried a strange power: whenever they performed together, anyone who heard their music would stand frozen like a stone statue.

Around the same time, the army of a kingdom called Halla had set out for war. Who could stop them?

Goopy and Bagha stood before the advancing soldiers and began to sing and play. Instantly, under the spell of the Ghost King's boon, the entire army froze in place like a row of statues.

And so, the war came to a halt.

2: Halla —Halla is a land worn thin by famine. Crops have failed, and hunger moves quietly through the lives of its people. Yet the kingdom is not truly ruled by its king. Behind the throne stands a minister—cruel, calculating, and deeply corrupt—who governs by deception.

In the neighbouring country the fields are heavy with harvest. The minister sees abundance across the border and imagines conquest. If he can seize that fertile land, he believes, the hunger of his own country may be solved. And war, he hopes, will also bring him more soldiers, more power, more control.

3: The King of Halla — An alchemist has prepared a mysterious potion. The minister feeds it to the king.

Slowly, the king's awareness dissolves. His senses blur; his judgment fades. Thought itself becomes distant, like a sound heard from another room. And so the ruler of Halla lives in a kind of waking trance, drifting through the palace without clarity, without will.

4: Why will the King of Halla be freed when he hears the song of Goopy and Bagha?
It is an enchantment—an unseen force that holds the king's brain captive. Under its spell he cannot choose wisely, cannot act freely.

But there is one sound capable of breaking it.

When the song of Goopy reaches his ears, the spell begins to loosen. The fog lifts. In that brief awakening, the king can finally see his own imprisonment—and in that moment, he might run, escape the fortress that has quietly become his cage.

5: Barfi –Barfi is the alchemist employed by the minister of Halla—a man who works in shadows and sealed rooms, among bottles, powders, and quiet experiments.

In his laboratory the mysterious potion was born. After drinking it, the king's awareness vanishes, and with it his humanity. The gentle ruler becomes harsh, almost unrecognizable. When famine-stricken peasants fail to pay their taxes, he orders their heads to be cut off—commands spoken by a man who no longer remembers how to see suffering.

6: Shundi –Shundi, the neighboring kingdom, lives differently.

The land is fertile, and the harvests are generous. Its king loves music more than power. He does not frighten his people into paying taxes. Instead, in village fairs, the air fills with the soft, wandering notes of flutes played by the villagers themselves.

Music moves through the fields like wind.

And because of that music—because fear does not rule the land—the people of Shundi are often seen smiling.

7: Sonar Kella –At the north-western edge of India stands a fortress made of yellow limestone. The stone carries the deep glow of burnished gold, especially when the desert sun leans against its walls. Because of that colour, Satyajit Ray gave the fortress a name that feels almost like a spell: the Golden Fort—a fort made of gold.

With that name he wrote a novel that would become immensely beloved. Later he turned the story into a film that audiences could not forget. Since then, the once-quiet desert town has changed. What was once sparse and wind-swept is now alive with visitors—travellers drawn by the promise of that golden citadel rising out of the sands.

8: Mukul —Mukul is only five and a half years old. Yet memories—seven hundred and fifty years old—seem to visit him again and again. They arrive like fragments of another life. He says that where he was born, there stands a golden fort.

In his memories there is also war. He has seen armies moving toward those golden walls, because long ago Alauddin Khalji marched across the desert and attacked that sun-coloured fortress.

9: Feluda —Feluda is a private detective who was born not in the world but in the imagination of Satyajit Ray. He first appeared in novels written for young readers. But the stories never belonged only to them.

Teenagers read them breathlessly. So do their parents, their grandparents, anyone who loves the quiet thrill of a mystery unfolding. Over the past sixty years, no detective has taken

root in Bengali literature the way Feluda has—his adventures lingering in the minds of readers long after the last page is turned.

10: Topshe –Feluda has a younger cousin whose nickname is Topshe. Because the detective grew up without parents, he was raised within the household of this cousin's family.

Topshe is still a schoolboy. Yet when the journey of *'Sonar Kella'* begins, he steps naturally into the role of assistant—observing, remembering, and recording the unfolding mystery beside his brilliant cousin.

11: Jatayu –On the long train journey toward north-western India, the detective and his young companion meet a curious fellow traveller.

His name, or at least the name he prefers to use, is Jatayu. It is only a pseudonym. His real name is Lalmohan Ganguly.

Before joining the adventure of 'Sonar Kella', he has already written twenty-seven wildly popular mystery and adventure novels. He is, by all accounts, a famous man.

Yet fame has not left even the faintest trace of arrogance in him. Instead, he carries a bright, almost childlike curiosity about the world. There is no cynicism in his character—only wonder. In that sense, he becomes something more than a friend. In the film, he quietly reflects the boyish imagination that lives inside Satyajit Ray himself. The boyish imagination and sense of wonder stayed with Satyajit Ray until the very final weeks of his life. His final two novels—Swarnaparni and Nayan Rahasya—bear witness to it.

12: Maganlal Meghraj –Maganlal Meghraj is a man who has built his fortune in the shadows. An unscrupulous businessman, he smuggles India's traditional art and antiquities across borders, sending fragments of the country's heritage into foreign markets where they are traded for enormous profit.

Prison once interrupted his career, but not for long. After his release, he returned to the world of deception—this time through another trade: the business of counterfeit medicines. In Maganlal's world, even healing can be falsified.

13: Sandesh —Until the first decade of the twentieth century, Bengali children's literature was largely didactic. It functioned mainly as a vehicle for instruction, often delivered in a dry and moralizing tone. As a result, young readers seldom felt drawn to the children's literature of their own time.

This absence was deeply felt by the artist, writer, and musician Upendrakishore Ray Chowdhury—the grandfather of Satyajit Ray. To fill this gap, he launched a new monthly magazine for children called Sandesh.

In the pages of this magazine, sermons were replaced by stories and poems filled with joy and imagination. The magazine was also richly illustrated with numerous black-and-white and colour images—visual companions to the stories and verses.

The first issue of Sandesh appeared in 1913—the same year that Rabindranath Tagore received the Nobel Prize in Literature.

The founding editor, Upendrakishore, was followed by his son Sukumar Ray and later by his grandson Satyajit Ray—both extraordinary creative figures. Bengalis often speak of their talents with a mixture of admiration and affection, almost as if they were magical.

As editors of Sandesh, Sukumar and Satyajit extended the ideals established by Upendrakishore. They continued to publish poems filled with laughter and delight, along with stories and novels of mystery, wonder, and adventure. If, through these narratives, young readers happened to develop an interest in science, literature, or any branch of knowledge, that would simply be an added reward.

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