

The rays before Satyajit: creativity and modernity in colonial India

Sengoopta, Chandak, author

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Abstrak

Although the filmmaker Satyajit Ray is well known across the world, few outside Bengal know much about the diverse contributions of his forebears to printing technology, nationalism, childrens literature, feminism, advertising, entrepreneurialism, and religious reform. Indeed, even within Bengal, the earlier Rays are often very inadequately known and associated exclusively with childrens literature. The first study in English of the multifarious interests and accomplishments of the Ray family and its collateral branches, *The Rays before Satyajit* reconstructs the multidimensional Ray saga and interweaves it with the larger history of Indian modernity. While eager to learn from the West and rarely drawn to simple-minded nationalism, the Rays, at their best, shunned mere imitation and sought to create forms of the modern that were thoroughly Indian and enthusiastically cosmopolitan. Some of the outcomes of this quest, such as Upendrakishore Rays innovations in half-tone photography and block-making, were admired in the West, though the metropolitan careers of colonial innovators, the book shows, were inevitably constrained by forces beyond their control. Within India and Bengal, however, many of the Rays innovations were of enduring significance, and when situated in their contexts, they help us understand the tensions and contradictions of the pursuit of modernity in an economy that was neither capitalistic nor politically autonomous. Ranging across the history of religion, literature, science, technology, and entrepreneurial culture, *The Rays before Satyajit* is not only the first collective biography of an extraordinary family but also a book that illuminates the history of Indian modernity from a new perspective.