

## **Pather Panchali (Song of the Road) (1929)**

**Story** *Pather Panchali*, written in Bengali by Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay, was originally serialised in a Calcutta literary magazine in 1928 and published as a single book in 1929. It tells the story of the Roy family, beginning with their life in the Bengal countryside. The household has four people: the father; his wife; Durga, their baby daughter; and Indir, an elderly aunt. Harihar is a local priest, whose livelihood depends on the fees given to him when he performs ceremonies. In lieu of cash, most people give him food and sweets. The family also own a small plot of land, which produced food. The wife resents the elderly aunt and regularly mocks her, although the baby daughter often brings them together again. Soon, a son is born and named Apu, the main character in the novel. This happy event is undercut, however, when the aunt gets fed up with the wife, leaves the house and dies shortly thereafter.

The two children, Durga and Apu, live a carefree life of climbing trees and splashing in rivers, although their rich cousins look down on them for their poverty. Durga is protective of her little brother, who has a rich imagination and sometimes gets in trouble. After Apu hears the story of the Mahabharata, he completely identifies with one of the heroes (Karna) and he entertains himself by playacting as him. At school, Apu shows himself to be bright, learns to read quickly and gets lost in the stories told by the teacher.

His imagination is also fired by a visit to one of his father's clients in a distant place. On his first trip beyond his village, Apu marvels at the railway and the client's house and food, which he wishes he could share with his sister and mother. Back home, Apu's dream world is enriched by seeing a travelling drama troupe perform. Then his childhood idyll is ruined when his father fails to earn enough to feed the family. They eat only what Apu and Durga forage from the jungle, and their mother is too proud to ask for help from her rich relatives. Their misfortune becomes tragedy when little Durga dies of pneumonia, and Harihar decides to leave the village and seek his fortune in Benares.

Apu's tearful departure from the village is the final, moving scene. He doesn't want to leave because he loves the beauty of the countryside and because he feels that he is deserting his now-dead sister. He is not excited to see the train this time because he had promised her that he would show it to her.

### **Characters**

*Harihar* Harihar is the father of the little family. As a village Brahmin priest, he is a quiet, unpretentious man, and as a father he is devoted to his family. He is also something of a dreamer and unable to feed his family, which forces them to seek a new life in the city.

*Sarbajaya* Sarbajaya, his wife, is equally devoted to her family, though she is more practical and keeps the family together. She is also, however, proud and quarrelsome. She argues with the elderly aunt in the house and ultimately drives her to her death. Although her family suffers, she refuses to 'beg' for help from her rich relatives.

*Durga* Durga is the first-born, a daughter, who becomes her little brother's playmate. In some ways, she is like her mother, protective and pragmatic. She is also quickly moulded by gender expectations, working hard and deferring to males.

*Apu* Apu, her younger brother, takes after their father. He has a rich imagination, loves to read and (even more) to hear his mother tell stories from Hindu mythology.

### **Themes**

*Innocence* The main theme of the novel is the innocence of childhood and nature. The young siblings, Apu and Durga, delight in the sounds and shapes that they find in the forest and fields surrounding their isolated village. Brother and sister are very affectionate with each other, protective and sympathetic whenever one is in trouble.

*Imagination* That innocence is enriched by the imagination of Apu, the young boy, who is able to turn something as simple as a piece of wood into a complex symbol of many things. The value of the imagination is also evident in the pleasure that Apu has in listening to storytelling.

*Time* As with Proust's great masterpiece, this novel reflects on the ephemeral nature of time. In one beautiful scene, Apu returns from listening to his teacher tell stories with a few flowers he picks on the way. He buries his face in the flowers on his bed and delights in the memories their fragrance holds for him, but then he is sad that those happy memories are only that, just things from the past.

*Tragedy* The dream-world of children revelling in nature cannot sustain a novel, however, and the author undercuts the optimistic worldview he has built up with a few blows to the heart. The first is the death of the elderly aunt, who is hounded out of the house by the otherwise likable Sarbajaya, the mother. With nowhere to go, the old woman gets ill and dies. Then, Durga, the daughter of the family, dies of pneumonia contracted during a wild storm. And finally, when the dreams of the father do not produce food on the table, the family is forced to leave bountiful nature and take their chances in the cut-throat society of the big city.