

SONG OF THE ROAD

Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay

Pather Panchali (Song of the Road) (1929)

Story

Pather Panchali, written in Bengali by Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay, 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.

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.

Characters

Harihar Harihar is the father of the little family. As a village Brahmin priest, he is a quiet, unprejudiced 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.

MAJOR CHARACTER

APU (Imaginative)

Character Apu, a young boy, is the main character in this tender novel that tells the story of his family's uprooting from their rural home. Apu is the younger of two children, and as a boy he is indulged in a way that his sister is not. We have a glimpse of his character when he seeks to defend his sister from their mother's unfair accusations and demands that she do extra work. Apu is allowed to play freely and he explores the natural world around him, delighting in the flowers, animals and trees that surround his village in rural Bengal. His imagination needs little stimulus to operate, as when he picks up a small piece of wood and pretends it is a variety of objects he uses during play. He is also very bright, learns to read quickly and loves to listen to stories being told by his mother or his teacher. His relationship with his older sister brings out his essential goodness. He is pained when he sees that she, as a girl, is made to work harder than he is and that she is scolded for playing when she has household duties. His love for his sister and his imagination are entwined in his promise to show her a moving train, which he has seen on a trip with his father but which she has not (although they both saw a puff of smoke from a train). This desire to take his sister with him on his real or imagined journey runs through the second half of the book and provides a touching conclusion. After his sister dies of pneumonia, the family decide to leave and take a train. Apu would have taken great pleasure in this journey but not it only reminds him of his promise to his sister, a promise that cannot be fulfilled.

Activities Apu spends most of his time wandering around the countryside, exploring the beauty of nature, with or without his sister. He sits for hours listening to his mother tell stories, and at other times he reads the musty books his father keeps in an old trunk.

Illustrative moments

Imaginative After their mother scolds her, Apu follows his sister Durga when she runs out of the house and across the fields. Suddenly they stop and watch a huge grey cloud rise on the horizon and then realise it is a train. Apu is captivated. This is the thing that transcends his local world, the means by which he can travel to other worlds, the vehicle for him to realise his dreams. As the author

explains, 'Mere awareness of distance was enough to fill his little mind with a feeling of wonder and make him happy. [...] He could not explain what he felt, but whenever he thought of things or places that were a long way off he seemed to be lifted out of himself and transported to another world.'

Affectionate Apu's deep affection for his sister and mother is demonstrated in a scene when he accompanies his father to a distant village. When he sees the large house of his father's friend and the food they serve, his first thought is that he would like to bring some back to his sister and mother. He secretly saves some of the coconut sweet because they had never tasted it.

Reflective Apu is forced to reflect in a moment of shock toward the end of the story. His sister has died and the family are packing up to move when Apu finds a jar that his sister had hidden away. And inside he finds a necklace that she had stolen from a neighbour, the same necklace that she swore she had not taken when her mother scolded her and Apu defended her. Now Apu must reassess everything he had thought about his sister.

DURGA (Free-spirited)

Character Durga is the older sister of Apu, the little boy at the centre of this novel and its sequel. (Most people will know these books from their adaptation as the film, *Pather Panchali*.) Although she takes second billing, Durga is extremely significant in that she is the one who teaches Apu to appreciate the natural world, and appreciation lies at the heart of his character. Durga, moreover, is a strong character in her own right. She is free-spirited and kind, perhaps the only one of the family who truly cares for the ailing aunt. She often steals fruit for her from her neighbour's orchard. As a young girl, however, she suffers from the misogyny of rural Indian society. If both she and her brother get up to some mischief, she is the one who is punished. When she is caught stealing from the neighbour's orchard, she is beaten by her mother in public. Even while still a quite young girl, she is burdened with household tasks, whereas Apu is told to study his school books. Of course, as a girl, she is not sent to school. Despite these limitations, she is protective and pragmatic, almost assuming the role of a second mother in the family.

Activities Durga, if left on her own, would spend all her time exploring the forests around her family home. While other children in the village play together, she always goes off on her own. She has her favourite spots, including a river bank and a tall tree. On one occasion, she prepares a feast of forest food by the river. She knows where the sweetest berries and mangoes ripen and when to pick them.

Illustrative moments

Protective The protective instinct in Durga's character is illustrated by the attention she gives to her ailing aunt, Indir. Indir is in a pitiable state, hunchbacked and emaciated. While others in the family might be concerned, they seem too preoccupied with their own affairs to spend any time looking after their elderly relative. Durga shows her maturity, at such a young age, one morning when she hears that her aunt has suffered a setback and is running a high temperature. As soon as she is free from housework and her mother isn't looking, Durga sneaks outside and escapes into the forest, where she makes her way by a roundabout route to a neighbour's orchard. There, she climbs a tree and picks ripe mangoes, which she brings back and takes to her aunt. In this scene, we sense a strange rapport between the very young and the very old. The aunt has a rascally humour and speaks her mind without fear of opprobrium, not unlike the little dare-devil that is Durga. The mysterious bond between the two is also underlined by the fact that both will soon die.

Free-spirited Although weighed down by the family's poverty and the amount of housework she, as a young girl, is expected to complete, Durga remains an optimistic and free-spirited child. Her carefree attitude, however, can lead to carelessness, and in one incident it leads to her untimely death. It is the monsoon season, which means that the rains will pour down for an hour or two and then let up, off and on, all day long. In one of those unpredictable intervals, Durga goes on her usual expedition into the forest and comes to a pond. Apu, her younger brother, is with her. Suddenly the sky opens up and it begins to rain heavily. Apu urges Durga to return home with him, but she insists on playing in the pond, letting the rain drench her body. 'It's warm, it's so warm,' she cries in ecstasy. At home, though, she has a chill, then a fever and slowly dies.

HARIHAR (Dreamer)

Character Harihar is the father of Apu and Durga, who are the main characters in this story. Nevertheless, he is significant because of his influence on the children whose lives are narrated in this best-loved of Bengali novels. The author, Bandopadhyay, skilfully delineates Harihar's situation in the opening paragraph of the novel. 'Harihar Ray was a Brahmin. He lived in a small brick-built house in the village of Nishchindipur. It was the last house at the extreme northern end of the village. He was not well-to-do. All he had to live on was the meagre rent from a tiny plot of land he had inherited from his father and some fees paid to him by a few households he served as family priest.' We also soon learn that he dreams about being a writer, a poet, and that he is a meek, and often a weak, man, who cannot stand up for himself. He also dreams of sending his son to a good school, to make him an educated man. He wants to get his daughter, Durga, married. He wants to repair his crumbling, ancestral house. He would like to be free of the debts he has accumulated. However, whenever his practical-minded wife talks to him about what to do, Harihar falls back on the gods and fate.

Unable to achieve any of his goals in his ancestral village, Harihar takes to the road, as an itinerant scholar who earns money by performing house rituals, giving astrological advice and tutoring children in their home. When he returns and finds that his daughter has died, he uproots the family and moves to Benares. For all his good intentions and his knowledge of traditional Hindu religious texts, Harihar is an impractical man who cannot fulfil his duty to support his family. As a person caught up in his own dreams, he is similar to his children, Apu and Durga, who delight in playing in the forest. The crucial difference, of course, is that he is a man, a father and a husband.

Activities Harihar spends a lot of time reading Bengali literature, especially poetry, in the hope that some of it will rub off on him. He does, in fact, write poetry, but lacks the confidence to show it to anyone. As a Brahmin and one educated in traditional ritual texts, his works as a family priest for several families in the village. He conducts life-cycle rituals for them, such as the naming of a new-born child, the first cutting of hair and casting horoscopes.

Illustrative moments

Dreamer The poverty of Harihar's family stands as a sad witness to his dreams. The force of his unrealised dreams is illustrated in a poignant scene at the very end of the story, when he has taken the hard decision to leave his ancestral house and village. This is where he had imagined his dreams would come true—the marriage of his daughter, now dead, and the education of his son, the rebuilding of his house and the reclaiming of land from debt. Now, however, he is riding in a bullock cart with his wife and son, and their meagre possessions, on their way to another city far away. As the sun sets, he looks back and sees the land that his ancestors had tilled and the house that they had built. He wonders what will happen? Will the house collapse? Will the jungle swallow the land? As he thinks about these things, a light goes out in the house next to his and the village recedes into the dark. We sense that there will be no redemption.

Loving Whatever his shortcomings (and they are significant), Harihar does possess the quality of loving kindness. He may be too impractical to be able to earn enough to support his family, but he does love them all very much. This characteristic is illustrated in one of key moments in the book, when Durga, the daughter, has died. Harihar has been away, trying unsuccessfully to earn money as an itinerant priest, and he returns empty-handed. When he approaches the house, he hears his wife weeping softly inside and his throat goes dry with fear. Once he sees the little body lying lifeless on the bed, he is overcome with emotion but does not allow himself to cry because he knows he must console his wife, who appears to be on the verge of madness. With supreme effort, he wipes his cheeks, places an arm around his wife and slowly rocks her back and forth. He doesn't speak, he only holds her.