

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

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PATHER PANCHALI (THE SONG OF THE ROAD) 1955

Satyajit Ray

(Bengali language)

Contents (Overview – Plot – Themes – Characters)

OVERVIEW

Pather Panchali, the first part of the 'Apu Trilogy', was adapted by Ray from a Bengali novel published in 1929 by Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay. The second part of the trilogy, *Aparajito (The Unvanquished)*, is also adapted from that novel and its sequel, while the final part of the trilogy, *Apu Sansar (The World of Apu)*, is entirely Ray's invention. *Pather Panchali*, which was Ray's debut film, is often said to be the greatest film in Indian cinema and sometimes in world cinema. It tells the story of a poverty-stricken family in a Bengali village, focusing on the young boy, Apu. After the unsuccessful attempts by Apu's father to earn money and the death of Apu's older sister, the family is forced to leave home and seek their fortune in the large city of Benares.

CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

Pather Panchali marked a significant break with the previous history of film-making in India. In the 1950s, the newly-independent Indian government wanted to create a new kind of Indian cinema, one that reflected the social realities of the country. Ray sought to make a film that would depart from earlier films, which were shot in a studio and largely aped Hollywood techniques, although they mostly employed Indian themes taken from mythology and historical narratives. Ray's first film, which was beset by financial troubles and ironically opened in New York, was also inspired by the neorealism of contemporaneous Italian and French cinema. He shot it almost entirely in the Bengali countryside, used many non-professional actors and did not rely on a script. The cultural identity of the film is not only visual but also aural since the score was composed by Ravi Shankar, who himself went on to become an icon of Indian music on the international stage.

With the personal approval of Prime Minister Nehru, in 1956 the film was sent to the Cannes Film Festival to represent India. Its reception was modest at first, but by the end of the festival it had won a prize for 'Best Human Document.' Since then, its reputation has grown and it is now repeatedly ranked among the ten best films anywhere in the world. Ray went on to make 36 more films, but this is the one that stimulated other directors and writers to aspire to a new kind of artistry in their craft.

STORY

The family The film opens with a long sequence that introduces us to the Roy family, before the birth of Apu. Although Brahmins, they are very poor, relying on the meagre fees that the father, Harihar (or Hari for short), is given for performing household rituals in their village. Hari has dreams of becoming a famous writer, which his wife, Sarbojaya, considers to be 'castles in the air.' Their daughter, Durga, who is about seven or eight, runs about wild, stealing fruit from neighbours. The neighbours complain that Durga's mother hasn't brought her up properly, but Durga shrugs off this criticism and continues to take fruit to her elderly and ailing aunt, Indir.

Humiliation Then Apu is born and the story shifts forward about six years when he is in school. Durga still steals fruit to feed her aunt, but now she is accused of stealing jewels from the neighbours. Although Durga claims she is innocent, the accusation brings humiliation to her family in the rumour-filled village. Stung by the opprobrium, Sarbojaya, the mother, drags Durga out of the house by her hair and temporarily banishes her from the family.

Joy Not all is doom and gloom, however, as Apu and Durga enjoy days at a religious festival, watch folk drama performances and receive sweets from a street vendor. Hari teaches Apu to read and write, and Apu brings home sweets from a festival to give to his sister.

The 'train scene' Then comes a memorable scene, in which brother and sister run through the fields and see a train chugging away in the near-distance. This scene is inter-cut with another scene,

in which Sarbojaya harasses Indir, the frail aunt, saying she has again humiliated her by accepting a handout from a neighbour. Indir is cast out of the house, goes into the woods, lies down and dies. The children, returning home ecstatic from their sight of the locomotive, discover her lifeless body.

Hope Hope arrives in the form of employment for Hari: a distant relation requires someone to perform religious rituals and Hari undertakes a long journey to his house. Through a combination of Hari's incompetence and the relative's miserliness, Hari receives very little money and is forced to wander farther and farther in search of work. Back home, the family suffer terribly. There is no money, the house is falling apart and Sarbojaya has to sell some of her dowry, expensive knives and forks to feed her children. Then she receives a letter from Hari saying that he has made good money and will return soon.

Death It is also time for the monsoon, which will bring fertility and food. But disaster strikes in the midst of hope. Durga is drenched in a thunderstorm, develops high fever and never recovers. Hari arrives back the very next day, laden with presents for his children. The scene in which he learns that Durga has died is one of the most moving in Indian cinema.

Departure Hari decides that they must leave the village and begin a new life in Benares. As they prepare to leave, Apu finds the necklace that, it turns out, Durga really did steal. He throws it into a pond. In the final scene, the family climb into a bullock cart and ride away from the village toward a new life.

THEMES

Hope and loss From the rambling source-novel, Ray has constructed a film that ebbs and flows with the changes in the seasons and family fortunes. Whether consciously or not, the film juxtaposes moments of optimism with those of despair. All the characters dream of a better life, especially Hari who fantasises himself as a writer. Sarbojaya also wishes for a more secure life, while her children have their own imaginative worlds. The rhythm of hope and loss pulsates through the film: Hari will find work, he doesn't find it; the monsoon will come, the monsoon kills Durga. But the most dramatic example involves the iconic 'train scene', as it is known (see above). Apu and Durga scamper through a field of pampas grass, playing hide-and-seek. They stop to inspect a tall tower with power lines, one of Ray's favourite symbols of progress and hope. Hearing a strange sound, a train whistle, they spin around until they spot the huge black machine chugging along not far away. Apu runs up close to the tracks and gazes at its great size and power. This thrilling sight is followed by their discovery of their aunt's dead body. And in the penultimate scene, we watch a snake creep into the half-destroyed family house, followed by the final scene, in which the family leaves with both despair and expectation on their faces.

Childhood imagination Running alongside this realistic rhythm of life's ups and downs, is the theme of a child's wonder. This is the true nature of Ray's genius in this film: his ability to show us, without words or explanation, the sheer joy of being a young child. Whether it is Durga's unfettered freedom when she steals fruit or dances in the rain, or whether it is Apu's revelling in putting on a costume for a drama, this sense of wonderment lifts the film from documentary to psychological cinema, from social reality to aesthetic reality.

Village life One of the goals of Ray's film is to show Indian village life in a realistic setting. True to this aim, in the opening sequence we see Durga crouching in a bamboo grove, close to the ground and almost one with the earth. She is avoiding the gaze of a woman carrying a water pot on her hip, coming back from a pond to her house. Throughout the film, we understand how the setting, an isolated village, shapes the characters and influences events. There is no work, no money, only gossip and observed behaviour. The monsoon, the wind and the open countryside all have a role in the story. Ever since its appearance in 1955, critics have debated whether the village life in the film is authentic or idealised, but the majority accept that the life shown is realistic (or 'neo-realistic,' in cinematographic terms). Certainly, it is difficult to see how a story that includes destitution, death and dislocation can be idealistic. It is true that Apu and Durga revel in the beauty of the forest and fields, but that is more a reflection of Ray's vision of a child's imagination than of the daily experience of village life.

CHARACTERS

Apu Apu is the young son. We first encounter Apu as a young boy, about six or seven years old. As such, he represents youthful innocence, incorruptibility and purity. He loves his parents and admires his older sister, in whose footsteps he follows. He defends her against his mother's and the neighbour's unfair accusations of theft. Like his sister, he is fun-loving, full of energy and mischief. Unlike her, he seems to have a serious, more reflective side, even at such a young age.

Curious Apu has the curiosity of most children, but it is enhanced by his powerful imagination. A good example of this curiosity is shown in an early scene of quiet domesticity. Hari is apparently trying to write a poem, Sarbojaya is combing Durga's hair, Apu is struggling with maths and Indir is mending her sari. The silence is disturbed by the sudden sound of a whistle. A train is passing somewhere in the distance. While the others barely register the sound and resume their activity, Apu's eyes continue to gleam with excitement well after the sound disappears. We sense that this little boy has already made plans for a change in life.

Loyal One of Apu's endearing qualities is his fierce loyalty to his sister. Durga. As a young girl, she is expected to do household chores, while Apu is treated more leniently. Apu realises (although he doesn't articulate) this gender difference and instinctively seeks to protect Durga. A dramatic illustration of this protective loyalty occurs at the very end of the film. Durga has died and the family are scrapping together their meagre possession as they prepare to leave the village. Apu finds a hollowed-out coconut shell on top of a shelf, and in it he sees the necklace that Durga was accused of stealing. Durga said she had not taken it and Apu, believing her, defended her against their mother's cruel punishment. Now, he sees, that Durga had lied—she did steal the necklace—but he will not desert her, even in death. Rather than show the necklace to his parents, he throws it into a pond and watches as it sinks and the water becomes still again. He has chosen to forget her lie.

Durga Durga is Apu's daughter, about six years older than Apu. Durga is the central character in this first part of the trilogy named after her brother. Although Durga is a young girl, hemmed in by gender expectations in an isolated village, she has a spirit that defies norms. Some critics have suggested that she represents Mother Nature, but although Durga does represent freedom, she cannot escape social reality. She is very often seen in the forests and fields, but she is also intrigued by man-made objects such as the train and telegraph towers. As a mistreated girl, she has a natural sympathy for other marginalised figures, especially her aunt, Indir. Although mischievous, Durga is kind-hearted. She wakes Apu in the morning and helps him get ready for school, and she shows kindness to animals, especially cats.

Freedom The scene that best illustrates Durga's natural freedom occurs toward the end of the film. The monsoon is approaching and Durga begins to prepare for a festival in which young Bengali girls pray for the fertility that the rains represent. We see her gathering leaves for a ritual and singing a song about 'a pure maiden.' Above her, the sky darkens with rain-clouds. As the rain falls, she goes to a pond to bathe. Apu watches under the shelter of a tree, as Durga lets down her hair and dances around in the pouring rain and the lashing wind. She then goes to her brother and wraps the end of her sari around him to keep him warm.

Defiance Durga's defiance of social and family rules is displayed in an early scene when she steals fruits to give her aunt. When her neighbour shouts at her and her mother arrives, Durga hides in a bamboo grove and then runs to her aunt. There, the young girl feeds the old woman. We understand that they share the lowly status of being social out-castes and the objects of Sarbojaya's anger. In this scene, Durga ignores the social ostracism of her old, irascible aunt and lovingly holds out the luscious fruit for her to savour. It is, quite literally forbidden fruit, but her aunt enjoys it all the more for that reason. She too is a bit of a rebel. It is a tender scene of the young helping the old. In fact, Durga and Indir form a symmetrical pair throughout the film. She is very young, her aunt is very old, and both die in the film.

Harihar The father of the family, a 'jobbing' Brahmin priest who aspires to be a writer.

Sarbojaya Sarbojaya is Harihar's wife, a somewhat irascible and proud woman.

Mrs Mukherjee A neighbour, who scolds Sarbojaya for allowing her daughter to steal her fruit.

Indir Indir is Sarbojaya's older cousin, whom she perceives as a burden on the family.



(Apu and Durga)



(Hari tries to console Sarbojaya over the death of their daughter)



(Apu)



(Durga feeds fruit to her ailing aunt)



Satyajit Ray, left, and Ravi Shankar, right, viewing a cut of the film