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## The Cinema of Joy: Pather Panchali as an epiphany of childhood

**Sourabh Agarwal**

### Abstract

The Apu Trilogy is a series of three films made in India by Satyajit Ray between 1950 and 1959. The films tell the story of Apu, a boy born in Bengal in the 1920s. The first film of the series, Pather Panchali changed the course of Indian cinema as it showcased Ray's ability to turn that human essence into art. Apu and Durga, his elder sister are quintessence of the innocent joys of life. The film depicts the raw beauty of unadulterated life which has no sophistication involved. Thus, Pather Panchali, the first full length feature film of Satyajit Ray is an exceptional adaptation of the novel of the same name. The distinctiveness brought by Ray's cinematic treatment lies in his deftness of depicting the innocent childhood joys with deep empathy. This element of transcendental mirth elevates the movie from a simple maudlin melodrama to a perennial source of cinematic savoir faire.

**Keywords:** Childhood, joy, camera, apu, sibling

### Introduction

Human beings are obsessed with telling stories; stories about themselves, their surroundings, their past and even about those things and times that never existed. This obsession has been translated into various mediums like words, dance, paintbrush and also the movie camera. When one tells a story, one desires it to be shared by as many as possible readers. From this point of view, nothing is more effective medium than the ever-fascinating world of cinema. A moving image creates lasting impression on the psyche of the viewer. Sitting in a dark surrounding, the viewer experiences the unfolding of a drama mesmerized by the confluence of sound, image and action.

Indian cinema has always recognized for incorporating songs, dances and melodramatic dialogues. Few are exceptional. It was Ray's Pather Panchali, that change the course of Indian cinema. It changed the world's perspective towards our cinema. Ray's cinematic techniques of using long takes, realistic scenes and visual storytelling. These factors made his movies considerable for world cineastes.

Satyajit Ray's films have often been seen as humanistic, with a focus on individuals and their destinies, and a supposed distance from politics or ideology. However, this image of Ray as an apolitical artist is misleading, as his work was rooted in a specifically Indian version of modernist, cosmopolitan liberalism that goes back to the 19th century. Ray's films, such as the Apu Trilogy, portrayed a linear sense of progress and development, reflecting the progressive Brahmoism ideology he was influenced by. In his later films, Ray explored the moral and spiritual collapse of urban India, exposing the failings of the bourgeoisie and the decay of liberal values. Ray is known for his ability to authentically depict life and human emotions in his films. His works, such as Pather Panchali, Aparajito, and Apur Sansar, showcase a universal sympathy and compassion, transcending cultural differences. Ray's films are characterized by their contemplative nature and avoidance of conventional aesthetic beauty, focusing instead on the emotive properties of life. His ability to simulate behavior and capture the essence of everyday existence sets him apart as a master filmmaker.

Satyajit chose to make a movie based on Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's famous semi-autobiographical Bengali novel, Pather Panchali ("The Song of the Little Road", 1929). Ray's first feature covers the first part of the novel, and the next two of his subsequent films, Aparajito (1956) and Apur Sansar (the world of Apu, 1959) completed the account. Together all the three films on this subject are known as the Apu Trilogy.

The Apu Trilogy is a series of three films made in India by Satyajit Ray between 1950 and 1959 that swept top prizes at Cannes, Venice, and London and created a new era of cinema in India. The films tell the story of Apu, a boy born in a rural village in Bengal in the 1920s who goes on a journey from his ancestral village to the holy city of Benares and eventually to the bustling city of Calcutta. The trilogy captures the beauty and mystery of life in Bengal, portraying traditional rural life, the allure of the city, and the struggles of a young man trying to find his place in the world.

The films have a moody and dreamy quality, with a focus on the relationships between characters and the emotions they experience throughout their lives. As, Ray had an influence of Italian neo-realist movement movies. Like Di Sica's *Bicycle Thief* and it always glimpses through in his movies. It is clear that The Apu Trilogy was his admiration for this neo-realist movement cinema. This statement could be proven through analyzing *Pather Panchali*.

*Pather Panchali* (*Song of the Road*) is a vivid, moving and authentic portrayal of the life of a Brahmin house hold seen through the eyes of the two young children of the family, Apu and his elder sister Durga. Apu and Durga and their friends, are presented at home or out at play, with a natural realism unmarred by adult condescension. The whole journey of the movie is brought together through the innocent, untrained and unsophisticated eyes of childhood. This paper will try to highlight how Ray has upended the cinematic conventions by poeticizing the poverty and glorifying the adulterated guys of childhood.

In a ramshackle house in a village in Bengal lived Harihar-da, a poor temple priest with big dreams, his wife Sarbajayadi, their daughter Durga, son Apu and Harihar-da's elderly disabled cousin Indir-da. Harihar-da whose meager earnings was not enough for the family to subsist, was a man with dreams of making it big in the world of literature.

Stressed by the meager income, Di resented Indir-da, who had the habit of stealing the already scarce food in the house, and on one occasion taunted him, causing him to go and live in the house of another relative for a short time. Durga is however fond of Indir-da and once stole fruit from the wealthy neighbour's plot and gives it to Indir-da.

The neighbour accuses Durga of theft of their necklace and Durga denies the accusation. Durga is fond of her younger brother Apu and they share the simple joys of village life. One of their village joys was listening to the sounds of a distant train in the evenings or watching movies in the candy man's bioscope or watching a Jatra. Once as they return after an escapade to catch a glimpse of a real train, they find Indir-da dead.

Unable to make a good living as a temple priest, Harihar-da leaves for the city to meet his dreams promising Di that he will be back with enough money to repair the house. In his absence, things sink into greater poverty. The monsoons arrive and like Indir-da's death, indicate further turmoil. Durga plays a bit too long in the rains and in her father's absence, she falls sick with fever.

Harihar-da returns to his house with expensive gifts from the city and starts looking around the house for his daughter. Di falls at his feet crying. As the family packs for the city, Harihar-da discovers the stolen necklace. He throws it away into the pond and the family leaves for the city by oxcart.

To fully appreciate the movie we must understand the motives of the two child characters and their responses to the natural and social happenings around them. Durga steals

because she sees her family struggling and wants to help (and maybe also because she's a little jealous of the other girls). Apu is an innocent and playful child, though we see him become more serious at the end. He's fascinated with things like trains and bows and arrows, and when Durga dies he asks if she's just sleeping.

Durga, one of the most endearing characters in the Apu films, is a little thief who grows up to be a mindful, solemnly beautiful young lady. Even when she isn't present onscreen, her spirit lingers across the three films in this saga of poor but loving family. There are echoes of her behavior, impish, sweet and compassionate, everywhere in the film. From the very first scene of the movie there is a lyrical beauty of camera. The very opening scene of the movie presents a carefree little girl Durga playing gleefully without paying attention to the volley of sarcasm targeted at her by her neighboring aunt. She has a fond attachment for his widow aunt and goes to the extent of stealing fruits and other animals from her kitchen for this aunt one can see how the innocuous child is totally unaffected by the harsh conditions of the living.

Arguably the most visually told and aesthetic shot in the film history is the train scene. One of the most regarded scenes in *Pather Panchali*. The scene where Durga & Apu, escape their impoverished life to frolic about the Kaash grass. And exploring their natural surroundings. It has almost no dialogues. Durga is looking up at power lines which alone takes seventeen seconds. Already, even with no dialogue, the scene speaks volumes. Durga, to the viewer's knowledge, has no concept of power lines. The characters never appear to be on urbanised or civilised society. This portrays the division of Indian society in villages and urban lives. Or better to say poor and well-off -pay people.

And then Apu walks towards the power line pole and presses his face to it. It is Apu's childhood curiosity and sense of exploring. So, in a single shot, it occurs two important aspects of human life; Curiosity and Social Status. Durga and Apu continue to walk through the large Kaash grasses. The Kaash sways in front of the camera. And making the setting so visually pleasing to the viewer. The siblings continue to explore the grassy terrace.

Apu get hit by a sugar cane and finds his sister sitting under the tall grasses. These scene feels so natural as if there is no acting is involved. This single scene is long but it remains engaging. Ray includes the natural sound of the strong wind in the scene to make it more natural and alive. All of sudden Durga heard a whistling of a train.

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The two principal incidents in the life of Apu which left a deep impact in his life were first, the death of Durga, his sister and second, his family's decision to leave the village and for better living depart for Varanasi, which was as big a

loss as his sister's death. First was the loss of human love and second was the loss of his root, the place where he belonged. So, for Apu, life in astute poverty was still enjoyable as he was bonded to the love of his sister and to the nature with which his sister helped developing a bond.

But with these losses, he is endowed with deep experience of life which ultimately leads to the self-revelation on the part of Apu and he realizes that life moves on and there is no way going back. So, the story is not only a realistic portrayal of poverty of rural life but also a marvelous expression of human feelings and sentiments.

The novel is depicted from the point of view of child Apu, his perception of life around him, the strong bond he has with his elder sister Durga, how he learnt from sister to develop an involvement with the natural world and how he gets psychologically affected after the loss of her sister and departure from Nischindipur to Varansi. So, the movie also symbolizes the journey of Apu from innocence to experience.

The primary forces that shape Apu's life are essential to humanity whether they be as primal as hunger or as coveted as the love of family. Ray's ability to turn that human essence into art shouldn't be underrated. Children like Apu and Durga are often shot from above, eyes upward at adults and the brave new world that fascinates them. Adults, especially those outside of the family, are shot from below, visually giving people like Sarbajaya the towering power of a matriarch.

Thus, *Pather Panchali*, the first full length feature film of Satyajit Ray is an exceptional adaptation of the novel of the same name. The distinctiveness brought by Ray's cinematic treatment lies in his deftness of depicting the innocent childhood joys with unadulterated empathy. This element of transcendental mirth elevates the movie from a simple maudlin melodrama to a perennial source of cinematic *sav-oir faire*.

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