

Title of the Module:

Satyajit Ray: “Introduction” to Our Films Their Films and *Pather Panchali*

Satyajit Ray (1921—1992) was one of the finest auteurs from India in the cinemascapes of the world. Satyajit Ray was primarily responsible for giving Indian films literally an international breakthrough with his directorial debut, the Bengali film *Pather Panchali*, which was released in 1955. *Pather Panchali* means Song of the Little Road. In Film Studies, the word auteur has got larger semantic connotations. There is a whole complex of theories on auteur. To provide a very crisp explication to auteur is really a difficult task. An auteur director leaves a distinguishable signature cinematic idiom in his films by taking an almost absolute control over all aspects that go into the making of an essentially collaborative artistic medium, cinema. Satyajit Ray was an auteur in all sense of the term.

Learning Objectives of the Module:

To enable the learner to:

- a) familiarise with Satyajit Ray and his films
- b) comprehend the various influences that formed the filmmaker Satyajit Ray
- c) identify the major films of Satyajit Ray
- d) recognize the major auteurist features of Ray’s films
- e) comprehend Ray’s ideas on film in the context of the essay prescribed, and
- f) understand and critically respond to Ray’s movie, *Pather Panchali*

Satyajit Ray was born in 1921, in a well-known family of artists and litterateurs. His parents were Sukumar Ray and Suprabha. He studied Fine Arts at Visva-Bharati University in Santiniketan which was founded in 1921 by Rabindranath Tagore, another brilliant creative mind India has ever given birth to. Ray started his career as a graphic artist or visualizer with the British advertising company D. J. Keymer at Calcutta, now known as Kolkata. Ray was an all-rounder artist. He was a book cover designer, composer of music, song-writer, screen-playwright, film theoretician and above all an internationally reputed film director. According to his personal legend, right from childhood movies were his first love. To begin with, he relished the silent movies of Charlie Chaplin, Harold Lloyd, and Michael Keaton. When talkies arrived, his newfound passions were Laurel and Hardy. Gradually, it turned towards early Hollywood movie genres like Westerns, horror-pics, rom-coms and musicals etc. The next phase his movie-watching habit was to identify the characteristic features of movies produced by main Hollywood studios like Paramount, MGM, Warner’s and 20th Century Fox. In the final phase of his movie appreciation, he was able to differentiate the signature styles of Hollywood master filmmakers like Frank Capra, John Ford, William Wyler and George Stevens. With this amazing movie-watching experience, finally his interest in movies took a serious turn, as he says, “It had suddenly dawned on me that more than the studio, more than the stars, more than the story, it was the director who gave a distinguished film its mark of distinction” (4). This is perhaps the beginning of the making of an internationally acclaimed auteur of Indian cinema, Satyajit Ray.

From Ray’s autobiographical narratives it is revealed that it was in 1949 the real turning point in his life occurred. Jean Renoir, a master-celluloid-craftsman of the French New Wave films, visited Calcutta in search of locations for his film, *Le Fleuve (The River)*. Satyajit Ray met and befriended the iconic filmmaker Renoir and interviewed him and published an article on the

upcoming Renoir project in 1949. The Technicolor film, *The River*, was released in 1951. It was set in India, besides the banks of The Ganga. Life, love, and forsaken love unfolding in an English upper middle-class family of a Jute factory owner is the main thematic thread of *The River*. The film's Indian cultural and topographical ambiance is very remarkable though it was primarily in English language.

Another major milestone event that went into the making of Satyajit Ray, the auteur, happened in 1950 when he arrived in London, to work in his company's headquarters for six months. At that time, London theatres were still showing the Italian auteur Vittorio De Sica's classic Italian Neorealist film, *Lardi di Biciclette* (*Bicycle Thieves*) which was released two years before. *Bicycle Thieves* hooked young Ray forever. He recounts the unique experience of watching De Sica's masterpiece in the following words. "What the trip did in fact was to set the seal of doom on my advertising career. Within three days of arriving in London I saw *Bicycle Thieves*. I knew immediately that if I ever made *Pather Panchali*—and the idea had been at the back of my mind for some time—I would make it in the same way, using natural locations and unknown actors" (2).

Satyajit Ray's cinematic oeuvre has 29 feature films, 05 documentary films and 02 short-films. Satyajit Ray's first documentary film was released in 1961, and it was on Rabindranath Tagore. It was on the request of Jawaharlal Nehru, the then Prime Minister of India, Ray produced this film. *The Inner Eye* (1972) was another documentary film by Satyajit Ray. Benode Bihari Mukherjee, the blinded art teacher and Ray's guru at Visva-Bharati University at Shantiniketan, was the subject of this documentary. This 20-minute Eastmancolor film, written and directed by Ray, won the Best Informative Film in 1973 National Film Awards. Except two films, a Hindi/Urdu feature film *Shatranj ke Khiladi* (*Player of Chess*, 19...) and the English documentary film *Bala*, on the Bharatanatyam danseuse from Tamil Nadu, all films of Ray were in Bengali language. *Kanchenjunga*, released in 1962, was Satyajit Ray's first colour film, and it was his first film made with his own original script. His last film was titled *Agantuk* (*The Stranger*) and it was released in 1991, a year before his death. In 1991, an Honorary Oscar Award was also accorded on Satyajit Ray, "in recognition of his rare mastery of the art of motion pictures and for his profound humanitarian outlook, which he has had an indelible influence on filmmakers and audiences throughout the world." (Oscars.org). The Government of India accorded on Ray its highest civilian award, *Bharat Ratna*, in 1992.

Ray had always been a great cinephile, right from his teenage days. He believed in founding a healthy cinema culture in India. He was chiefly instrumental in founding the second film society in India, the Calcutta Film Society (CFS), established in 1947. The first film society in India was the Mumbai Film Society, which was established in 1946. The Calcutta Film Society got registered on 05 October 1947 and along with Satyajit Ray, Chidananda Dasgupta, Purnendu Narayan, Manojendu Majumdar also played key roles in establishing CFS. The film selected for CFS's inaugural screening was *The Great Waltz*, a 1938 American biographical drama directed by Julian Duvivier. The screening was held in the home of Ray's maternal uncle near Triangular Park, Calcutta. For screening the film CFS had to rent a 16mm projector also. Unfortunately, we don't have any information available on the Mumbai Film Society. Later on, CFS became an affiliate of Federation of Film Societies of India (FFSI).

“The weekly discussions of the film society members were many times pivoted around articles in the film journal Sight and Sound. An article that had come out in Sight and Sound was called ‘The Kid – Eisenstein’s evaluation of Charlie Chaplin’. This article later inspired Mrinal Sen to write a book on Chaplin in Bengali. Sen’s book Charlie Chaplin, was published by New Age Publishers in 1953. Mrinal Sen used to be a frequent visitor to the Calcutta Film Society sessions” (Mollick)

The Major influences on Satyajit Ray, the filmmaker include: Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyaya, Rabindranath Tagore, Vittorio De Sica, Jean Renoir, Akira Kurosawa. The Japanese filmmaker Akira Kurosawa has famously opined that, “Not to have seen the cinema of Ray means existing in the world without seeing the sun or the moon.” (Robinson, 96).

Satyajit Ray is basically a character creator. Stereotyping characters has never been his filmic method. Humanity caught in a web of intricate relationships amongst themselves at various times and various emotional phases represents most of Ray’s protagonists. The complex Indian extended family, its personal, casteist, social and cultural bondages and the process of modernization of a young nation in the making are shown with attention to minute details in Ray’s Apu Trilogy. The slow-paced, unhurried, natural unfolding of events in most of Ray’s film indicate the generally placid nature of Indian pre-modernist life pattern, especially in its villages. Ray’s frames and sequences are aesthetically perfect compositions, where his characters move totally disregarding the presence of the camera. Ray had a wonderful capability to handle and direct his child actors, as is revealed through the performance of Subir Banerjee (as Apu) and Uma Dasgupta (as Durga) in his directorial debut, Pather Panchali. Andrew Robinson commented that, “Ray’s filmmaking is the art that conceals art; by the greatest economy of means he creates films that are among the most life-like in the history of cinema. Effortlessness is the hallmark of all his best work” (91). Indianness in Ray’s films is something very explicit both in his compassionate portrayal of Indian rural poverty and in his critical portrayal of India’s urban middle-class, westernized life. The aesthetically perfect mise-en-scene of Ray in films like Charulata (The Lonely Wife, 1964) underlines his clinically flawless auteurship. Charulata is a filmic lyric composed by Satyajit Ray. Incidentally it has to be mentioned that the constant professional and personal companionship of cinematographer Subrata Mitra and editor Dulal Dutta had their contributions in the making of one of the greatest auteurs of Indian cinema like Satyajit Ray.

The Apu Trilogy of Satyajit Ray is comprised of Pather Panchali (Song of the Little Road, 1955), Aparajito (The Unvanquished, 1956) and Apur Sansar (The World of Apu, 1959). All these three are cinematic adaptations of the Bengali novelist Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay’s two novels: his first novel, Pather Panchali (1930) and its sequel Aparajito (1932). These fictional narratives belong to the literary genre, bildungsroman, or novels of formation, or stories that depict the growth and maturation of its protagonist from childhood into adulthood. “Pather Panchali, Aparajito, and The World of Apu are very different in their dominant moods and in the rewards they offer the viewer. They reflect the consciousness of Apu as it evolves from innocence, and this gives them a coherence that it is tempting to call musical. As a whole, the trilogy is reminiscent of the development of raga, the basic classical Indian melodic form, in which the music flows, sometimes meandering, through its prescribed phases towards its

emotional catharsis—from Apu’s introduction into the world to his reunion with his small abandoned son in the finale of *The World of Apu*” (Robinson 93).

Apart from Ray the auteur’s acute attention to *mise-en-scene* elements, the music score by sitarist Ravi Shankar, cinematography of Subrata Mitra and the editorial job of Dulal Dutta turned the auteur’s debut film *Pather Panchali* into a world classic, representing Indian films abroad for many more years to come after its premiere in August 1955.

After the title frames in Ray’s own Bengali calligraphy, the film opens with a dissolving-in, low angle mid-shot, with a mild background score of twittering of birds, showing a landlady, in colourful dress and jewelry, praying in front of a traditional tulasi or basil plant on the terrace of her big rural home. After the prayer, she turns back and looks down to her garden as if she felt someone is sneaking there. Then, uttering, “Look at her... That girl... She won’t leave us any fruit,” she hurries to the end of the terrace, to have a better view of the sneaker. The next is a high-angle long shot from the terrace, showing vaguely a little girl silently running out of the frame, from left b corner. The first low angle mid shot, which features the glimpses of a big house, enhances the domineering power of the rich lady, who has the power of words too. The second, high angle long shot, on the other hand, shows the little girl Durga’s vulnerability, indicates her poverty, and highlights her lack of words too. With these two initial shots Satyajit Ray was able to foreground the class question in rural India. The left-to-right long pan shot in which the exterior of Harihar’s (played by Kanu Banerjee) house is shown for the first time with its dangerously dilapidated compound walls indicates the impoverished condition of the family which compels Durga (played by Uma Dasgupta) to steal a fruit from her neighbour’s garden. When Durga’s mother, Sarbajaya (Played by Karuna Banerjee), was shown for the first time, she is shown in a long shot, from the perspective of Durga, fetching water in simple white saree walking along a village footpath. Before Sarbajaya was introduced, Ray had presented a half-clothed Durga running out of the garden holding a fruit in her hand. Indir Thakrun (played by Chunibala Devi), the grand-mother figure in the film, was introduced by showing a close-up shot of an old eating-bowl, with a few rice-balls and a very skinny fingers searching into the bowl. It is to be noted that, in about the first seven minutes of the film, Ray presents all the main female characters only, who represent at least three generations, highlighting the various hectic unpaid domestic chores Indian house-wives do in their everyday lives. Ray’s depiction of women’s domestic quarrel and their quarrel with the neighboring women also give these initial sequences a unique rural Indianness, probably with a little bit of misogyny from the part of Ray. Ray introduces the first male character of film only very late, about 12 minutes after the beginning of the film. Harihar, the male protagonist of the first of the trilogy, was introduced in a low angle mid-shot, in night, depicting him as walking very upset to and fro on the veranda of his house holding a portable hookah. Inside the house, his wife is in labour pain.

Ray’s Durga and Apu are nature’s children who communicate with flora and fauna around them and finds pleasure in exploring the secrets of nature in their own little ways. There are a number of sequences in the film, most of them in alternating long shots and close-ups, that underlines the perfect unison of the children and nature. Ray’s steady maintenance of long sequences without any artificial attempt to fasten them, the casting of unprofessional actors, the employment of inexperienced crew, shooting mostly on location with natural light, and the depiction of the real village life etc. take this film to the Italian Neorealist tradition of filmmaking.

Durga and Apu's casual visual encounter with instruments of modernity passing through their village pastoral landscape is captured with a telling effect by Satyajit Ray in the film *Pather Panchali*. At first the children were fascinated by the intricate web of metal telephone wires that decorated the sky, then they are perplexed by the humming sound coming out of the iron telephone posts, and finally, the steam powered train that swifts through the place put them into complete bewilderment. Though Apu had a very close look on the passing train, Durga had to satisfy herself with a long view, as she had fallen down while running towards the passing train. The train in *Pather Panchali* is a visual motif of modernity as well the travel awaiting the family very soon. "As the train thunders away, the desire for the modern is narratively set in motion. This scene marks a turning point in the film. Durga gets wet in the rain, catches a cold, and dies, but Apu does indeed embark on his journey out of the village and into the city and so gets his trilogy" (Sangita, 204)

Satyajit Ray carries over the train motif, which was presented first in *Pather Panchali* to the opening shot of the second film in the trilogy, *Aparajito*. Immediately after the title frames, there is a tight shot from inside the window of a fast moving train over the bridge across the river Ganga in the city of Varanasi, where Harihar (played by Kanu Banerjee), Sarbajaya (played by Karuna Banerjee) and the adolescent Apu (played by Pinaki Sen Gupta) have recently moved into from their village Nischindipur, shot in the Boral village in West Bengal. The train motif unifies the *Pather Panchali* and its sequel *Aparajito* in a seamless temporal movement of urban migration of rural folk in search of better living conditions. However, defeating their expectations, poverty and sickness follow the family. Sarbajaya is reduced to the social class of a house-maid, to cater to the family after the death of Harihar who dies of sickness. Soon, another inevitable replacement back to the village life is awaiting growing Apu and his poor mother.

Satyajit Ray extends the metaphor of train to the last film of the trilogy too. In the final part of the trilogy, *Apur Sansar*, Here, the recently married Apu (Played by Soumitra Chatterjee) and his wife Aparna (played by Sharmila Tagore) encounter the train from the terrace of the rented home in Calcutta. By now, the train motif translates from one that suggests modernity and wonderment in the first, from one that suggested a promising city life in the second film, to one that suggests restlessness, the siren of which is deafening, the smoke of which is polluting, and the presence of which suggests death in the third film. Aparna dies during the delivery of their baby boy, Kajal. Believing the new-born is responsible for Aparna's death, Apu abandons the child in the care of its maternal uncle. After a few years, Apu comes back, starts loving the growing boy, and finally they return to Calcutta to start a new life, as Harihar did in the first film *Pather Panchali*, completing the circle.

Our Films Their Films is an anthology of essays on various topics related to films, written at different times by Satyajit Ray. The anthology features essays on specific films, essays on master filmmakers, essays on film music, essays on film movements, essays on his personal experience as a filmmaker and so on. In the "Introduction" to the anthology, Satyajit Ray, focuses on the following major points: Why generally filmmakers do not write about their films, and at the same time why some other filmmakers find time to write about their films. He also mentions about the reverse phenomenon of film-writers becoming filmmakers in France

in the context of the film magazine, Cahiers du Cinema. In the Introduction, Ray says that, he is writing on cinema with the hope that his experiences somehow would be of some value to some people at some point of time?, What are the different stages of filmmaking?, what is the importance of collective effort in filmmaking?, how Ray got into the habit of watching films?, who were Ray's earlier screen-heroes?, to which type of films were he attracted initially?, who were his favourite Hollywood directors?, etc. are some other questions answered in the Introduction. Ray's entry into and the experience in Visva-Bharati University; his profession as a visualizer in a British company; his meeting with the French director, Jean Renoir; his experience of watching Vittorio De Sica's Bicycle Thieves in London and how it influenced in the making of Pather Panchali are also mentioned in brief in the Introduction. What is the difference between Indian films and western films is another part of the Introduction. And, at the end of the Introduction, Ray writes about film books and film magazines.

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Web Links:

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< <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Satyajit-Ray> >