

THROUGH THE LENS OF SATYAJIT RAY: AN EXPLORATORY INSIGHT INTO PATHER PANCHALI

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Abstract

Cinema is a powerful medium that provides valuable and entertaining information on a variety of cultures, history, socio-economic conditions, and the politics of our society. Filmmakers use this medium of mass communication to reach out to their audience through powerful plots and outstanding characters.

Ace filmmaker Satyajit Ray, well-acclaimed across the world for creating outstanding masterpieces, used Cinema to bring before the audience the native culture, traditions, and life in Bengal through his creations. His films resonate with unforgettable scenes where he demystifies Indian, particularly Bengali culture and presents the peculiarities of the life of an ordinary family. He portrays the Bengali family's grim struggle for existence and exhibits his mastery in projecting the beauty of Bengali culture and traditions in his maiden movie, Pather Panchali. Set in rural Bengal, the movie brings forth the difficulties the poor face in their lives. Ray films the emotional upheavals of human relationships through the delineation of his character's Harihar, Shorbojoya, Indir Thakrun and the other villagers in the movie. He also captures the daily inquisitive lives of little children by exploring the world through the eyes of Durga and Apu, the brother-sister duo. Within this paradigm, the paper highlights everyday culture, complex reality, and the struggle for survival in the masterpiece Pather Panchali.

Keywords: Culture, Indian culture, Bengali cinema, Poverty, Customs and traditions

Cinema is an art form that captures the essence of movies and creates a massive impact on people worldwide. For a long time now, it has not only been a part of the entertainment industry but has also been helpful in the rejuvenation of the mind. Filmmakers use the platform to reflect what goes on in society and introduce various art forms and different cultures from around the globe to the audience. It also acts as a link between the director and the viewers, and the audience gets to see plots and characters unfold before them from the director's perspective. It tends to significantly influence society as it is also used as a wide-reaching tool for creating public awareness. Through Cinema, one witnesses global landmark and historical events through carefully woven plots and watches stories from imaginary new lands. It also manages to tickle a few bones and create an environment of horror, thrill and adventure on occasions. As Partha Chatterjee remarks, "Cinema, it is said, usually a fair indicator of a nation's psyche, which may possibly be responsible for its (current) state of being, and which, in turn, may be affected by the turn of historical, political and economic events in a given frame of time." [Chatterjee, 1] As technology advanced, Cinema also witnessed many changes. Directors now get to use the latest tools to capture and record beautiful locales and powerful emotions. They keep experimenting with newer themes and highlighting and emphasising aspects of everyday life in a wide variety of ways. Although a director has the main role to play, the efforts of his team, including the scriptwriter, the cast, the technicians, music directors and many more, cannot go unnoticed. As observed by Sonia Ghalian, "Its nature is that of collective enterprise comprising of studio ownership, multiple creative minds like the - director, scriptwriter, cinematographer, and actors, having heterogeneous modes of production." [Ghalian, 186]

Indian filmmakers have been well acclaimed across the globe for creating some compelling movies in several languages. Of all movies produced, Hindi movies take centre stage since the reach of Bollywood is in all corners of the world primarily because some extra-ordinary Hindi movies that transcend linguistic and regional barriers have been made and also because of Indians, who generally understand Hindi are now settled in all parts of the world. Within the paradigm of Cinema, Bengali Cinema acts as a tool for accentuating life's social, cultural, political, and economic elements. It acts as a platform that depicts the culture and traditions of the Bengali community in their true essence. Some exceptional Bengali movies have been made that highlight the richness of Bengali culture and focus on the everyday life of individuals through interesting themes based on entertaining and intense plots. Some of the notable filmmakers who have reflected their perception of Bengali culture and depict the socio-cultural milieu of the state through their characters and storyline include Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen, Tarun Majumdar, Rituparno Ghosh, Aparna Sen, and Ritwik Ghatak.

The metropolitan city of Kolkata is the birthplace of several prominent filmmakers. Filmmakers like Mrinal Sen, Ritwik Ghatak, Aparna Sen, and Satyajit Ray have celebrated the city's socio-political past, architecture, and

narrow alleys in their works. They have made several movies keeping them in focus and have explored the different attractions of the city- both people and places in their films. The movies of these filmmakers are set during the 19th century, the most disputed and disturbing era in India's social-political history. During the social-economic turmoil at that point, the city was governed by the Congress party and Naxalism was brewing in the corners of the city. During that era, the movies of these filmmakers revolved around the various incidents that reflected the social-political conditions of Bengal. Calcutta, the face of Bengal, has been chosen by several filmmakers as the destination to project their stories. Many films have also depicted the city as an emblem of Bengali culture and the distinct lifestyle of Bengali households. Renowned filmmaker Mrinal Sen has projected the city of Calcutta, (now Kolkata) majorly in his movies. As noted by Kanika Katyal "His films, from *Punascha* to *Mahaprithvi*, portrayed the city's past, present and coming of age through its people, the streets, their value systems, class differences and so on." (Katyal, 2018) He is an artist who makes films with pragmatic and sensitive women characters trying to make a place for themselves in society. Another famous Bengali filmmaker of that era, Ritwik Ghatak has captured the day-to-day struggle of men and women in his works. His movies *Subarnarekha* and *Nagarik* focus on the struggles and sufferings of people during the partition of India. Among these famous filmmakers, Satyajit Ray, known as the master of world cinema, has directed numerous movies in which he depicts the city exquisitely. Ray highlights Bengali narratives in a unique form of storytelling and is famous for featuring films in a realistic model. His works have a broad spectrum and range with themes like the portrayal of village life, description of the Naxalite years in Bengal, depiction of prominent aspects of urban life, conflicts within families and many more. His works exhibit all dimensions of human suffering, thereby making his movies unique. Poverty is a subject that has been dealt with extensively in his works. Besides Satyajit Ray, several other great filmmakers of Bengali cinema have also dealt with the same theme in their movies. Mrinal Sen, in his film *Akaler Sandhane* presents the situation of rural Bengal during the great Bengal famine where he documents the struggles of the hugely impacted village-women. He captures the turmoil in their lives and the emotional upheaval the characters go through. Ritwik Ghatak's *Partition Trilogy* captures the trauma and destitution of East Bengali refugees. Though Ghatak, Sen, and Ray portray rural Bengal, all three differ substantially in their treatment of poverty in rural Bengal. Many of Ray's movies are set in rural Bengal, and the representation of the lives of the poor is one of the common threads in his movies. Ray was the first to direct his movie depicting the theme in *Pather Panchali*, and subsequently, other directors continued creating more magnificent movies reflecting the situation of rural Bengal.

The present paper attempts to highlight Bengals' culture, analyse the characters' complex reality and struggle, and scrutinise how the multifaceted reality constructs an impact on an individual by critically analysing the movie- *Pather Panchali* directed by Satyajit Ray. India's most celebrated and prominent director Ray is widely known for the popularity of Bengali cinema. In the world of Cinema, Ray is a familiar name known for directing films, short stories, and documentaries. He is well acclaimed as a fiction writer, music composer, graphic designer, publisher, and illustrator. As Shreya Katkar observes, Satyajit Ray's name is linked with changing Indian Cinema, where Ray has produced many great masterworks of cinematic beauty. He has played a significant role in 'revolutionising' Indian cinema. [Katkar, 2020] He has left an indelible mark on Indian Cinema by dealing with subjects from rural areas to those living in the city. His widely appreciated creations include *The Apu Trilogy*, *Agantuk*, *Charulata*, *Jalsaghar*, *Days and Nights in the Forest*, *Postmaster*, *Charulata*, and *Pikoo*. In *The Apu Trilogy*, Ray brings forth men and women characters juggling and struggling in their day-to-day life. "The entire *Apu Trilogy* is defined by authenticity, sincerity, beauty, and humanism, which never lets overt politics or doctrinary ideology interfere with the characters' stories and lives." [Levy, 2011] Born in Calcutta into a Bengal family, Ray started his career as a commercial artist and was inclined towards writing and storytelling from his childhood. "He received many coveted awards like the Bharat Ratna, Honorary Oscar (for lifetime achievement), Legion d' Honor (the highest civilian award in France) and the Kurosawa Award (for lifetime achievement as a film director), apart from numerous others at international film festivals." [Ray, 2021] He began his journey as a director in 1955, with his epic film *Pather Panchali*, which he created by adapting the novel *Pather Panchali*, by Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay, published in 1929.

Cinema can create meaning and bring the realities of life, and films such as *Pather Panchali*, *Aparajito* and *The World of Apu*, *Ghare Baire*, etc. delve skilfully on themes like poverty, homelessness, death, and struggle of everyday life. Ray portrays his characters realistically, and they are shown going through their routine chores and daily struggles, presenting the complexities of human life. He wrote the scripts of the three movies from *The Apu Trilogy*, including *Pather Panchali*, *Aparajito* and *Apur Sansar*. He also looked at the casting and editing of the movies personally. He was awarded eleven international prizes for the movie *Pather Panchali* including the inaugural Best Human Document award at the Cannes Film Festival in 1956. The magnificent movie showcases Ray's technical mastery and is full of excellent shots depicting people and their surroundings. It is full of cinematic images, sounds, and reverberations that beautifully capture the reality of Indian life.

The three movies of *The Apu Trilogy* traces the journey of Apu as a son, the man and finally as the father. *Pather Panchali*, the first movie, depicts a grim struggle for the existence of a poor Bengali family, and the plot unfolds the uncertainties surrounding their lives. The story captures the lives of all members of the Ray family, including the children Durga and Apu. The struggle of Harihar to meet ends meet and the simple pleasures children

experience in nature's lap are brought out with equal uniqueness. The movie gyrates around the family's financial insufficiency, and Harihar, the talented Brahmin who happens to be a playwright and a poet, is obligated to eke out a living for his children and wife by gathering rents. For a long time, the father struggles to bring the family to their ancestral home but is eventually required to leave the house for the family's welfare. The movie, *Nagarik* directed by Ritwik Ghatak revolves on similar lines and focuses around the life of the central character Ramu, who is looking for a job in Calcutta where the family struggles to meet both ends. Both the filmmakers have a unique style to present their point of view, but the common thread is their portrayal of the character's struggles in their daily lives. "The film presents us with a marvellous picture, bordering on the ethnographic, of the dreamy languor of a rural Indian community of the 1920s." [Bertocci, 16] It brings out the authentic Bengali village life, corruption, jealousy, social suffocation, isolation, and corruption in an enchanting way. Through Apu, Durga, Harihar Ray, and Sarbajaya Ray, Ray highlights the misery and poverty and presents the suffocating world of the poor filled with suffering and distress. The characters of the movie *Pather Panchali* experience misery, despair, and hopelessness, yet they find happiness in the everyday routine of their life. Ray's representation of rural Bengal through a child's eyes makes the movie attractive and exquisite. Ray uses the vast plains of Bengal, the trains, rivers, and the monsoon season to highlight the beauty of Bengal in the film.

Culture denotes the customs, beliefs, arts etc., of any particular society, group, time or place. The term denotes a large and varied set of intangible facets of social life and presents our attitude, perception, opinions, feelings, and behaviour. These beliefs, customs, and traditions help individuals stay connected with their community and surroundings. The customs and ethnicities are significant and beneficial in an individual's life and give the society its distinctive lifestyle. Various sociologists and anthropologists regard culture as a way of life, a way of thinking, and a symbol to determine values and feelings. One of the famous anthropologists, Clyde Kluckhohn, defines culture and says:

"Culture consists in patterned ways of thinking, feeling and reacting, acquired and transmitted mainly by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e. historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values". (p.86, no. 5)

The traditions and customs reflected through the daily lives of Ray's characters represent the culture of people living in Bengal in the early 19th century. Specific aspects of rural life and culture in Bengal are exhibited through the lives of Apu, his sister Durga and their family. He projects the characters' daily life by depicting them enjoying the company of nature, by mentioning their food habits, and through the songs in the film. Despite the family's economic condition in the movie, the innocent children, Apu and Durga, are happy and satisfied. The continual struggle for survival of the elders does not affect their innocent childhood. Both of them continue to enjoy their childhood just like every other child and celebrate the simple joys of life like running after the candy man or running away from home to catch a sight of the train. When Durga is sick, and Apu feels lonely, Durga says:

"We'll go see the train when I'm better, all right? We'll go there early and have a good look. You want to?" (*Pather Panchali*)

Durga cares for Apu with motherly affection; she tries to comfort Apu by reminding him of the fun activities they used to do together. The time the children spend happily in nature's company are the simple joys of everyday life. Their childhood games and experiences and usual activities keep them oblivious of the family's worries and keep them happy, cheerful, and jovial.

Besides being represented by a place's beliefs, art, morals, and customs, culture is also about the banal and ordinary route of mundane practices. According to Inglis, "different people have different sorts of everyday lives; the sorts of everyday routines and activities they engage in depends on their social position; understanding how everyday life is structured for particular people requires understanding how the society in which they live is itself structured and organised." [Inglis 2011] The everyday routine of Apu and Durga involved sitting silently under the tree, watching pictures from a seller's bioscope, running after their father to get money to buy candy from candy man, and watching folk dance performed by a group of actors. The kids found happiness in the monsoon season when they danced and had fun.

The movie exquisitely delineates the culture and ethnicity of rural Bengal by focusing on symbols and practices of people living in Bengal. The characters' lifestyle, food habits, and entertainment like folk songs are replete in the movie. The movie brings forth the scene of cooking a special Bengal dish, named, 'Pui shag' by Sharbojaya, where the dish conveys to the viewers about Bengal cuisine and Bengali culture. Food plays a major role while describing the culture of any society. Eating 'Pui shag' and mango with salt and mustard oil are central to a Bengali household and specific to Bengali cuisine and Bengali culture of that time. The true spirit of Bengali culture is in the folk ballads, and the people of Bengal express their hopes and excitement through ballads. In the movie, Indir Thakrun's ballads act as a recurring motif. During the monsoon season, Durga is seen using traditional mantras to stop the rain. She says:

"Rain, rain go away from me, / There's a koromcha fruit on our lemon tree" (*Pather Panchali*)

Movies play a dominant role in capturing rural Bengal and the people living in Bengal. Mohapatra opines, "through culture, people and groups describe themselves, conform to society's shared values, and contribute to

society.” [Mohapatra, 2017]. Durga’s use of traditional mantras, a mention of Bengali dishes, folk ballads, and the everyday life of their village symbolizes the traditions and culture of rural Bengal.

Cinema presents a multifaceted perspective on the characters and their milieu concerning various social indicators over the years. There is an undeniable exposition of culture in the movies. Ray, the legend, highlights Bengali culture and accentuates everyday life's complex reality and struggle in his masterpieces. The movie came during the 'Golden Age of Indian Cinema' and is considered a landmark due to Ray's expertise and the unmatched and unforgettable portrayal of the characters and their lives. Though the movie opens the eyes of the world to the beauty of Bengal, it also brings out the struggle between poverty and misery. The representation of Bengal through the eyes of a child projects the struggle and the urge to live a better life. Despite the family's miserable conditions, the powerful bond between Apu and Durga and their enthusiastic and delightful energy evades the despair around and reflect positivity. Through the trials and tribulations of the poor in *Pather Panchali*, Ray carefully examines the social reality of the state as well as the country.

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