

**BETWEEN WONDER AND INTUITION: PATHER
PANCHALI (THE SONG OF THE ROAD) FROM
BIBHUTIBHUSAN BANDOPADHYAY TO SATYAJIT RAY**

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Abstract: *Panchali* is the never ending story of road. *Path* is an eternal flow which carries the entire. *Pather Panchali* a masterpiece by Bengali writer Bibhutibhusan Bandopadhyay and a path-breaking film in the tradition of Indian cinema by Satyajit Ray. The film was acknowledged as the 'Best Human Document' award at the Cannes Film Festival of 1956. The focus in both is timeless human bond, an age old truth that touches the souls and minds, transcending cultural and linguistic barriers. It is the simple but deep emotions of everyday life- its joys, its bitterness, its anger, its resentment and its sorrows. It brings back to revisit the left behind time; it reminds the serene flow of a continuous stream- people born, live and die. Time flows, names alter but the *Panchali* is unchanged. The paper is a sincere attempt to arrest the fleeting treasured moments of life and explore the perpetual nuance of these. Both the film and the fiction, in fact, place the spectators/readers into a ring of wonder called 'life' and compel to comprehend the flow and seek the meaning of it.

Keywords: Childhood, Human bond, Memory, Acceptance, Eternity

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Introduction: In a backdrop of early 20th century rural Bengal, *Pather Panchali*, the masterpiece of Bengali writer Bibhutibhusan Bandopadhyay and a path-breaking film in the tradition of Indian cinema by Satyajit Ray, delineates the spiritual, moral, psychological growth of the individuals in the context of contemporary social system. Perhaps so the film was felicitated as ‘the greatest human document’ and was also instrumental in winning the ‘Best Human Document’ award at the Cannes Film Festival of 1956. *Pather* means the path or journey while *Panchali* means a folk poem or song which can be put loosely as *Song of the Road*. The Bengali feature film *Pather Panchali* or *Song of the Road* in English was directed by Satyajit Ray and released in 1955. It was considered a landmark in the field of Indian as well as world cinema.

Both the novel and the film reveal an in depth picture of the predicament of the rustics, shattered with poverty. It essentially deals with Opu, the protagonist, his poverty, his responses and a gradual psychological development from his adolescent to youth. It focuses on the life and gradual development of the poverty-stricken Roy family in their ancestral village with their agonized torment. The captivating depiction of the four members of the Roy family, their responses to the social happenings and their agonized existence in the native village of Nischindipur, till they move to Benaras in search of new life, happens to be the staple material to fabricate the story. In film, Ray chose mostly natural locations while shooting *Pather Panchali*. He wanted the backdrop of each shot to speak for itself. Ray stated,

The differences appear to emerge from evaluating the status of the narrative form through which the real would be articulated, through what means of representation, styles of acting, aesthetic strategies the real would be invoked. Here the popular compendium- studio shooting, melodramatic, externalized forms for the representation of character psychology, non- or intermittently continuous forms of cutting, diversionary story lines, performance sequences - was not acceptable within the emergent artistic canon, for they undermined plausibility and a desirable regime of verisimilitude (Ray, 1976).

The story is about little ones, the reader/spectator lives and grows with them, feels with and for them, looks through their eyes and knows the world and the people in it as he/she knows

him/her. Harihar portrays an intelligent but impracticable man, fails to meet the ends of his family, Shorbojoya, his wife has to maintain the family somehow, represents the poor mother, who in spite of loving her children cannot provide them with their minimum requirements except the palpable motherly affection. And the profound emotional bond, the playful pristine childhood of the brother and sister- Opu- Durga, their root of happiness –Nischindipur with its galaxy of children, the trees, fruits and flowers, the path through the village, the birds, the sky, the clouds and Opu's constant friend, the evening star, all collectively develop the story line of the novel.

In both the novel and the silver screen, the growth of Opu and Durga from their adolescent to maturity is delineated beautifully. The transformation is manifested with the change of their feelings and responses to different incidents come in their way. Their tranquil ecstasy in the agonized existence, their secret picnics, getting lost while searching for the railway tracks, their habit of stealing from the neighborhood etc marked their childhood with unspoiled elation. Opu often shifts himself in his self-made world, tried to see the unseen. Mere awareness of distance was enough to fill his little mind with a feeling of wonder and make him happy.

The blue sky was a long way off. So was the paper kite that flew in it. He could not explain what he felt, but whenever he thought of things or places which were a long way off he seemed to be lifted out of himself and transported to another world. But, this is the most amazing part of it, whenever this fascination of distance took possession of him, his thoughts suddenly turned to his mother who always seemed to be left behind when he went on his long journeys. His eyes followed the circling bird until it finally vanished from his sight; then they came back to earth with a jerk and he bounded from the outer room...and threw his arms round his mother... (69)

Opu feels frightened when he encounters with the outer world. He is sent to the school for the first time, but he is reluctant to part from his mother; his entire shelter. He had an idea that only naughty boys who disobeyed their mothers, were sent to schools. He had never done those things, so why should he go to school? He considered it as an injustice done by his mother. So he warns Shorbojoya, "You watch! I shall never come home again." (116) Opu steps out, starts discovering the world; so many faces, so many places but he was alone, alone on an endless sea. The inevitable destiny or rather the vicious poverty did not let the family flee from the dark shade of death. Durga, stricken with malaria, suffered almost without medical treatment, finally submitted to death. A beautiful description is given by the author:

From time to time the hand of eternity breaks through the blue veil of the heavens and beckons to a child, and the little one, no longer willing to wait, tears itself away from the breast of Mother Earth and is lost for ever down a road that knows no returning. In that dark evening hour of her sick and restless life Durga had heard those summons, and leaving the paths loved so well, she commenced a new journey, down a highway her feet had not trodden before. (291)

The craft is such rich and beguiling that the reader feels both the joys and the sorrows of the characters. The onlooker is readily able to enter into the fabricated earth, with its bickering but caring neighbors, flawed individuals, and complex familial relations. We are shown the conflicts between a husband and wife, between a mother and her children, between two siblings, and also the real love each of these persons has for the others. They are given a vibrant life and are situated in a frequently entrancing world. While the novel is simple, even pedestrian visually, its austerity is so infused with a real appreciation of the world in which we live that the viewer is consistently fascinated by the images with which he is presented. Ray too never made comments on his actions, characters or situations. He never pitches hints at his audience and never tells them just what to think and feel. At the same time he was not at all apprehensive about taking the appropriate stances. This is because he was predisposed not to his characters but to the drama of life itself. He had his own ways to suffuse life on to the screen in order to impart a shimmer of hope to all his characters.

The writer's ability to immerse the reader in his fictional world is greatly facilitated by his consistently well realized characters. The same has been captured in the camera marvelously. Durga, in particular, is a delight. She is a mischievous, sprightly girl who is absolutely filled with life. The spectator is bound to be entranced not only by her sheer love of the world but even by her numerous imperfections. In fact, she is made especially enchanting because she is such an ordinary and flawed human being. She steals from the neighbors. She is angered by and hits Opu. She manipulates him and others to get what she wants. She is very much like most other children. Opu himself is, perhaps, the movie's least engaging personality. Like most young children, Opu is more of an observer of the events of the world than a participant in them. As is the case with Durga, however, Opu's ordinariness does pull us into his world. As a consequence, while, like him, we remain merely observers, we are also deeply affected by what we see.

The quest of two juveniles for discovering new world, exploring the unexplored and moreover their cosmic reliance is exposed in a stirring way:

Opu went to look out of the window. He was happy to see the sun again, and stood there watching the last rays in the tree-tops.

‘Opu, come here a minute.’

‘What is it, Didi?’ Opu asked, and he put ear very close to her lips.

‘Will you take me to see a train one day?’

‘Of course I will,’ he replied. ‘But I’ll do more than that. As soon as you’re better I’ll ask Daddy to let us both have a ride in a train and go and bathe in the Ganges.’ (290)

The journey is explored in two fold ways- from ‘home’ to the ‘world’ and ‘world’ to ‘home’ back again. Opu wants to explore the world and Indir, prepares herself to go bck home with a wretched intense plea to God. Ray captures her in a night scene, she sings sitting against the wall:

Hari, the day is over, it is dusk,

Ferry me across.

I have heard that you are the master

Who takes people across.

So I pray to you.

I hear you help even those

Who do not have a penny.

I am poor, like a beggar.

Look, in my bag,

There is not a single penny.

Hari, the day is over, it is dusk,

Ferry me across. (Ray, “Alias Indir Thakrun” 179-180)

Poverty is the fate of the poor mothers which motivates the life and situation of the individuals, giving it a variety of shades, which ultimately ends in the moral and psychological revelation of the concerning individual. The family of Opu leaves their village in search of a new life in Benaras. But can root be replaced? Horihar is fighting with himself alone, fears to be dislocated but Shorbojoya takes the departure as her freedom from old memories. Horihar is in a flux. His

ancestors had lived on that piece of land. He thinks of the deserted compound next door, and how its glory has departed. Would the jungle swallow his house too? The evening lamp has burned there for years; but tonight no one will light it and all the rooms will be dark. As soon as their village finally is receded from view, Shorbojya feels relieved; all their sordid depravation and the contempt they have had to suffer are now left behind. She dreams of a new world, a new way of life and a new prosperity. But Opu's heart is very heavy. Though he is fond of exploring new lands, the song in his soul becomes sadder, it is hurting him to say his root goodbye.

The uprooted venture of the whole family is dismal. Opu experiences the train for the first time. But his mind goes back. He and his sister went to look at the railway line. His memory took him back to a stormy monsoon night, to a dark room in an old house and the ceaseless noise of the rain when his sister implored to him from her sick bed, "Opu, when I get better will you take me to see a train?" (358) It seems an insightful feeling of injustice, done to her sister against his parent comes out from his heart. "They had not brought her with them; they had all come away and left her behind." (357) Though she is no more but Opu always feels her near him, by the river, in the bamboo grove or under the mango tree. He has felt her invisible presence everywhere in their old house. But now he is being parted from her for ever. He can see his sad, pale-faced sister, standing under his so well known rose-apple tree, staring after the train and then the words of his heart have found expression in tears; he struggles to send Durga a message: "I'm not really going away Didi... I haven't forgotten...it's not that I want to leave you...they're taking me away!" (357) Opu had not forgotten Durga and he did not forget.

The loss of a loved one is like an earthquake that fractures our emotional landscape. The pain from loss is also related to the nature of the relationship. A child experiences the most distress when he is close to and dependent upon the one he is separated from. If the move or the separation takes the child away from the loved one, he may experience the same intensity of pain as if this were a death. In the same way, the film appeals directly to the sub-conscious, it is hypnotic. Throughout the film, there is almost no shot where life is not seen.

Perhaps it is true to name life as *Panchali* which means the never ending story of road. People walk along wondering what the road has in store for them round the next bend. Some are lush

with grass and fruit, gay with flowers and bird-song, but others are hard under foot and strewn with thorns, sometimes lashed by storms and darkened by threatening clouds though always there is hope that the air will be kinder. The road is eternal. Opu and Durga still walk on, growing continuously in character and experience and in the nature of their dreams and their hopes for the future. The film has been hailed by critics, filmmakers and cinema lovers across the world as one of the greatest of all times. The essence of *Pather Panchali* is adventure, commitment and discovery. In both, film and fiction, *Pather Panchali*, we are captured in a ring of truth that touches the souls and minds, transcending cultural and linguistic barriers. It deals with the grim struggle for survival by a poor family and it projects the respect for human dignity. It allows the readers the simple but deep emotions of everyday life- its joys, its bitterness, its anger, its resentment and its sorrows. It brings all back to revisit the time left behind. It reminds the serene flow of a big river- people are born, live out their lives and then accepts their death. Time passes, names alter but still families deal with random catastrophe, still parents love their children unconditionally. And from this, emerges a unique, if not ultimate, idiom that enriches intensity of human consciousness.

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