



SATYAJIT RAY: THE LANGUAGE OF FILM

Pather Panchali

Satyajit Ray on 'Pather Panchali'

I remember the first day's shooting of *Pather Panchali* very well. It was in the festive season, in October, and the last of the big *pujas* was taking place that day. Our location was 75 miles away from Calcutta. As our taxi sped along the Grand Trunk Road, we passed through several suburban towns and villages and heard the drums and even had fleeting glimpses of some images. Someone said it would bring us luck. I had my doubts, but I wished to believe it. All who set about making films need luck as much as they need the other things: talent, money, perseverance and so on. We needed a little more of it than most.

I knew this first day was really a sort of rehearsal for us, to break us in, as it were. For most of us it was a start from scratch. There were eight on our unit of whom only one – Bansi, the art director – had previous professional experience. We had a new cameraman, Subrata, and an old, much-used Wall camera which happened to be the only one available for hire on that particular day. Its one discernible advantage seemed to be a device to insure smoothness of panning. We had no sound equipment, as the scene was to be a silent one.

It was an episode in the screenplay where the two children of the story, brother and sister, stray from their village and chance upon a field of *kaash* flowers. The two have had a quarrel, and here in this enchanted setting they are reconciled and their long journey is rewarded by their first sight of a railway train. I chose to begin with this scene because on paper it seemed both effective and simple. I considered this important, because the idea behind launching the production with only 8,000 rupees in the bank was to produce quickly and cheaply a reasonable length of rough cut which we hoped would establish our bonafides, the lack of which had so far stood in the way of our getting a financier.

At the end of the first day's shooting we had eight shots. The children behaved naturally, which was a bit of luck because I had not tested them. As for myself, I remember feeling a bit strung up in the beginning: but as work progressed my nerves relaxed and in the end I even felt a kind of elation. However, the scene was only half finished, and on the following Sunday we were back on the same location. But was it the same location? It was hard to believe it. What was on the previous occasion a sea of fluffy whiteness was now a mere expanse of uninspiring brownish grass. We knew *kaash* was a seasonal flower, but surely they were not that short-lived? A local peasant provided the explanation. The flowers, he said, were food to the cattle. The cows and buffaloes had come to graze the day before and had literally chewed up the scenery.

This was a big setback. We knew of no other *kaash* field that would provide the long shots that I needed. This meant staging the action in a different setting, and the very thought was heart-breaking. Who would have known then that we would be back on the identical location exactly two years later and indulge in the luxury of re-shooting the entire scene with the same cast

and the same unit but with money provided by the Government of West Bengal.

When I look back on the making of *Pather Panchali*, I cannot be sure whether it has meant more pain to me than pleasure. It is difficult to describe the peculiar torments of a production held up for lack of funds. The long periods of enforced idleness (there were two gaps totalling a year and a half) produce nothing but the deepest gloom. The very sight of the scenario is sickening, let alone thoughts of embellishing it with details, or brushing up the dialogue.

But even a day's work has rewards, not the least of which is the gradual comprehension of the complex and fascinating nature of filmmaking itself. The edicts of the theorists learned assiduously over the years doubtless perform some useful function at the back of your mind, but grappling with the medium in a practical way for the first time, you realise (a) that you know rather less about it than you thought you did; (b) that the theorists provide all the answers and (c) that your approach should not derive from Dovzhenko's *Earth*, however much you may love that dance in the moonlight, but from the earth, the soil, of your own country – assuming, of course, that your story has its roots in it.

Bibhutibhusan Banerjee's *Pather Panchali* was serialised in a popular Bengali magazine in the early 1930s. The author had been brought up in a village and the book contained much that was autobiographical. The manuscript had been turned down by the publishers on the ground that it lacked a story. The magazine, too, was initially reluctant to accept it, but later did so on condition that it would be discontinued if the readers so wished. But the story of Apu and Durga was a hit from the first instalment. The book, published a year or so later, was an outstanding critical and popular success and has remained on the best-seller list ever since.

I chose *Pather Panchali* for the qualities that made it a great book: humanism, lyricism and its ring of truth. I knew I would have to do a lot of pruning and reshaping – I certainly could not go beyond the first half, which ended with the family's departure for Banaras – but at the same time I felt that to cast the thing into a mould of cut-and-dried narrative would be wrong. The script had to retain some of the rambling quality of the novel because that in itself contained a clue to the feel of authenticity: life in a poor Bengali village does ramble.

Satyajit Ray, 'A Long Time on the Little Road', *Sight and Sound*, Spring 1957

PATHER PANCHALI (SONG OF THE LITTLE ROAD)

Director: Satyajit Ray

Production Company: Government of West Bengal

Screenplay: Satyajit Ray

Based on the novel by: Bibhutibhusan Banerjee

Director of Photography: Subrata Mitra

Editor: Dulal Dutta

Art Director: Bansi Chandragupta

Music: Ravi Shankar

Sound: Bhupen Ghosh

India 1955

125 mins

New 4K restoration made by the

Criterion Collection in collaboration with the Academy Film Archive at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences

Cast

Kanu Banerjee (*Harihar, the father*)

Karuna Banerjee (*Sarbajaya, the mother*)

Subir Banerjee (*Apu, the son*)

Uma Das Gupta (*the older Durga*)

Chunibala Devi (*Indira Thakrun*)

Runki Banerjee (*the younger Durga*)

Reba Devi (*Seja Thakrun*)

Aparna Devi (*Nilmoni's wife*)

Tulsi Chakravarti (*Prasanna, the schoolteacher*)

Binoy Mukherjee (*Baidyanath Majumdar*)

Haren Banerjee (*Chinibash, the sweets seller*)

Harimohan Nag (*doctor*)

Haridhan Nag (*Chakravarti*)

Nibhanoni Devi (*Dasi*)

Ksirodh Roy (*priest*)

Roma Ganguli (*Roma*)

SATYAJIT RAY**THE LANGUAGE OF FILM****The Philosopher's Stone (Parash Pathar)**

Fri 1 Jul 20:35; Sun 10 Jul 18:20

The Zoo Chiriyakhana

Sat 2 Jul 12:00; Sun 10 Jul 12:20

The Adversary (Pratidwandi)

Sat 2 Jul 15:10; Sun 10 Jul 15:30

Pather Panchali (Song of the Little Road)

Sun 3 Jul 18:20; Sat 9 Jul 12:00; Sat 30 Jul 14:30

The Film Language of Satyajit Ray

Wed 6 Jul 18:00

The Middleman (Jana Aranya)

Wed 6 Jul 20:20; Sun 24 Jul 18:10

Two Daughters: The Postmaster and Samapti (The Conclusion)

+ intro by Aparna Sen

Thu 7 Jul 17:50

The Unvanquished (Aparajito)

Sat 9 Jul 15:00; Thu 14 Jul 18:15; Sat 30 Jul 17:40

The World of Apu (Apu Sansar)

Sat 9 Jul 17:50; Sat 16 Jul 20:45; Sat 30 Jul 20:30

+ pre-recorded intro

Raahgir (The Wayfarers)

Mon 11 Jul 18:00

Company Limited (Seemabaddha)

Wed 13 Jul 18:20; Tue 26 Jul 20:45

Satyajit Ray: His Home and the World

Sat 16 Jul 12:00-17:00

Satyajit Ray Documentaries Programme 1: Rabindranath Tagore

+ **The Inner Eye** + **Sukumar Ray**

Sat 16 Jul 18:30; Sun 31 Jul 12:00

The Adventures of Goopy and Bagha Goopy (Gyne ar Bagha Byne)

Sun 17 Jul 13:00; Sat 23 Jul 12:10

The Golden Fortress (Sonar Kella)

Sun 17 Jul 15:40; Wed 27 Jul 18:00

Branches of the Tree (Shakha Proshakha)

Sun 17 Jul 18:10; Sat 30 Jul 12:20

The Kingdom of Diamonds (Hirak Rajar Deshe)

Mon 18 Jul 18:10; Sat 23 Jul 14:50

Joi Baba Felunath (The Elephant God)

Tue 19 Jul 18:10; Mon 25 Jul 20:40

The Stranger (Agantuk)

Thu 21 Jul 20:40; Sun 31 Jul 18:20

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