



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Pather Panchali

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 Bandyopadhyay

Director of Photography: Subrata Mitra

Editor: Dulal Dutta

Art Director: Bansi Chandragupta

Music: Ravi Shankar

Sound: Bhupen Ghosh

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*)

Ksiroth Roy (*priest*)

Roma Ganguli (*Roma*)

India 1955

125 mins

Digital

Adapted from the autobiographical novel by Bengali writer Bibhutibhusan Bandyopadhyay, Ray's film is one of the most extraordinary feature debuts ever made. It follows the everyday lives of an impoverished family in rural Bengal in the early years of the 20th century. We witness events through the eyes of the young Apu, whose sentimental education makes for subtle moral, social and psychological insights. A timeless masterpiece.

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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.

BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

The Trial

Mon 25 Mar 12:20; Mon 8 Apr 12:20; Thu 18 Apr 17:25

The Gospel According to Matthew Il Vangelo secondo Matteo

Tue 26 Mar 20:20; Fri 29 Mar 17:50

Nosferatu

Wed 27 Mar 18:15 (+ intro by Arike Oke, Executive Director of Knowledge, Learning & Collections); Sat 6 Apr 13:15; Fri 12 Apr 21:00

The Picture of Dorian Gray

Thu 28 Mar 18:10; Sun 7 Apr 12:50; Tue 23 Apr 12:00

Little Women

Sat 30 Mar 13:15; Tue 9 Apr 12:20; Sat 27 Apr 20:30

The Last Temptation of Christ

Sat 30 Mar 19:50; Sun 14 Apr 17:30

The Leopard

 Il gattopardo

Sun 31 Mar 17:00; Tue 16 Apr 13:30; Sun 28 Apr 19:30

The Grapes of Wrath

Mon 1 Apr 20:10; Sat 20 Apr 15:45

Pather Panchali

Tue 2 Apr 20:30; Mon 22 Apr 18:00; Tue 30 Apr 12:10

The Heiress

Wed 3 Apr 18:05 (+ intro by Ruby McGuigan, BFI Programme and Acquisitions); Sat 6 Apr 20:30; Mon 15 Apr 20:45

Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde

Thu 4 Apr 20:30; Wed 10 Apr 18:10 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large)

The Last of the Mohicans

Fri 5 Apr 18:10; Sun 21 Apr 20:20

Women in Love

Thu 11 Apr 20:20; Sat 20 Apr 13:00; Fri 26 Apr 14:40

Beau Travail

Sat 13 Apr 13:20; Fri 19 Apr 20:45; Wed 24 Apr 18:10 (+ intro)

Great Expectations

Wed 17 Apr 17:45 (+ intro by Jade Evans, AHRC REACH PhD student with QMUL and BFI); Thu 25 Apr 12:00

Ordet The Word

Sat 27 Apr 13:15; Mon 29 Apr 14:40

Rope

Wed 1 May 18:10 (+ intro by Bryony Dixon, BFI National Archive Curator); Fri 3 May 21:00; Tue 14 May 12:30; Sun 26 May 13:00

Henry V

Thu 2 May 14:40; Thu 9 May 20:15; Thu 30 May 14:30

The Magic Flute Trollflöjten

Fri 3 May 12:00; Fri 24 May 20:25; Tue 28 May 14:30

Pandora's Box Die Büchse der Pandora

Sat 4 May 15:10; Fri 17 May 18:00; Sat 25 May 13:10; Fri 31 May 14:30

West Side Story

Sun 5 May 19:30; Thu 16 May 14:30

Cabaret

Mon 6 May 20:20; Sat 11 May 14:45; Tue 21 May 14:30

A Streetcar Named Desire

Tue 7 May 12:10; Sat 18 May 20:30; Fri 24 May 14:50; Sun 26 May 17:40

Camille

Wed 8 May 18:10 (+ intro); Sun 12 May 20:40; Mon 27 May 12:30

His Girl Friday

Fri 10 May 18:10; Sun 19 May 20:30; Thu 23 May 18:30; Wed 29 May 18:00 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large)

Beautiful Thing

Mon 13 May 20:40; Wed 22 May 18:20 (+ intro by Simon McCallum, BFI National Archive Curator); Thu 30 May 12:10

Bluebeard's Castle Herzog Blaubarts Burg

Wed 15 May 18:10 (+ intro by Alex Prideaux, Marketing and Events Manager – Our Screen Heritage); Fri 31 May 18:10

Chi-Raq

Mon 20 May 18:05; Thu 30 May 20:30

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SIGHT AND SOUND

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 Bandyopadhyay'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