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APARAJITO (The Unvanquished) 1956

Produced by

Epic Films, Calcutta

Story

Based on a novel of the same name by Bibhuti

Bhushan Bandyopadhyay

Script & Direction

Satyajit Ray

Photography

Subrata Mitra

Art Direction

Bansi Chandragupta

Music

Ravi Shankar

Editing

Dulal Datta

Lead Players

Kanu Banerjee (Harihar),

Karuna Banerjee (Sarbojaya),

Pinaki Sen Gupta (Young

Apu), Smaran Ghosal

(Apu), Charuprakash

Ghosh (Nandababu),

Subodh Ganguly

(Headmaster), Ramani Sen

Gupta (Uncle Bhabataran),

Kalicharan Roy (Press

Proprietor), Sudipta Roy

(Nirupama), Shanti Gupta

(Landlord's Wife), Ajay

Mitra (Anil)

Benares, 1920.

Harihar Roy, a Bengali priest, his wife Sarbojaya and ten-year-old son, Apu, live in a small three-storeyed house in the by-lanes of Benares, the holy city. Harihar reads the scriptures to an audience of old widows on the steps of the holy river Ganga. Apu plays with his friends on the street.

A letter arrives from Bhabataran Chatterjee, Sarbojaya's aged uncle, who is also a priest in the village of Mansapota in Bengal. He suggests that Harihar take over the priestly duties in Mansapota while Bhabataran himself would spend his last years in Benares.

Sarbojaya, a strong woman contemptuous of charity, declines the offer.

In the autumn of the same year, on 'Diwali' night (festival of lights celebrated to welcome God-Prince Rama's return after 14 years in exile), Harihar returns home delirious with fever, to die within a few days.

The widowed Sarbojaya takes the job of a cook in a 'zamindar's' (feudal landlord's) house. A young and neglected Apu runs errands for the zamindar for small money which he spends on peanuts to feed the monkeys in a temple nearby.

A few days later, Uncle Bhabataran arrives to invite his niece once again to Mansapota. This time she accepts. She has realised that her son will have no future here.

Back in Bengal, Bhabataran, after imparting to Apu the rudiments of priesthood, leaves for Benares. Sarbo-

jaya appeases an unhappy Apu by sending him to school. The headmaster awakens Apu's interest in knowledge and in the wider world. At 16, Apu matriculates with distinction and a scholarship of Rs 10 (\$1.25) a month. A helpless mother watches her only son leave for Calcutta to study further, disregarding her attempts to keep him near herself.

Bewildered at first, Apu soon adjusts to city life. A month's vacation in the village now seems dull. Sarbojaya, sensing the change in him, does not talk to him of her failing health.

Unaware, Apu prepares for his examination in Calcutta till a letter brings him news of his mother's critical health.

Apu arrives a day after his mother's death. His uncle Bhabataran, who is also back, asks him to resume his priesthood. Apu declines. He is sad, but he is free.

Sarbojaya nearing her death while Apu is away at college in Calcutta



FORGING THE UNCREATED CONSCIENCE OF HIS RACE

Stanley Kauffman
A World on Film

To one who has seen Part One, two things are now evident. The first film now seems better than it did, because the second was made; and the director, Mr Ray, is in the process of creating a national film epic unlike anything — in size and soul — since the Soviet Maxim trilogy of 1938-40. Further, as a record of a people's life, in its daily travail and its largest aspects, it bears comparison with Flaherty's *Nanook* and *Moana*.

For this viewer, the value of the first film was mostly along these lines, as a cultural record. The play had less interest than the by-play, the characters were not much more than acceptable types. And the story was so freighted with catastrophe that one began to balk. It is doubtless a regrettable human frailty that when excessive woe descends on one house, the spectator's sympathy palls. He suspects either that compassion is wasted on people so helpless, or that the gods, if not the screen writers, have a slight addiction to soap opera.

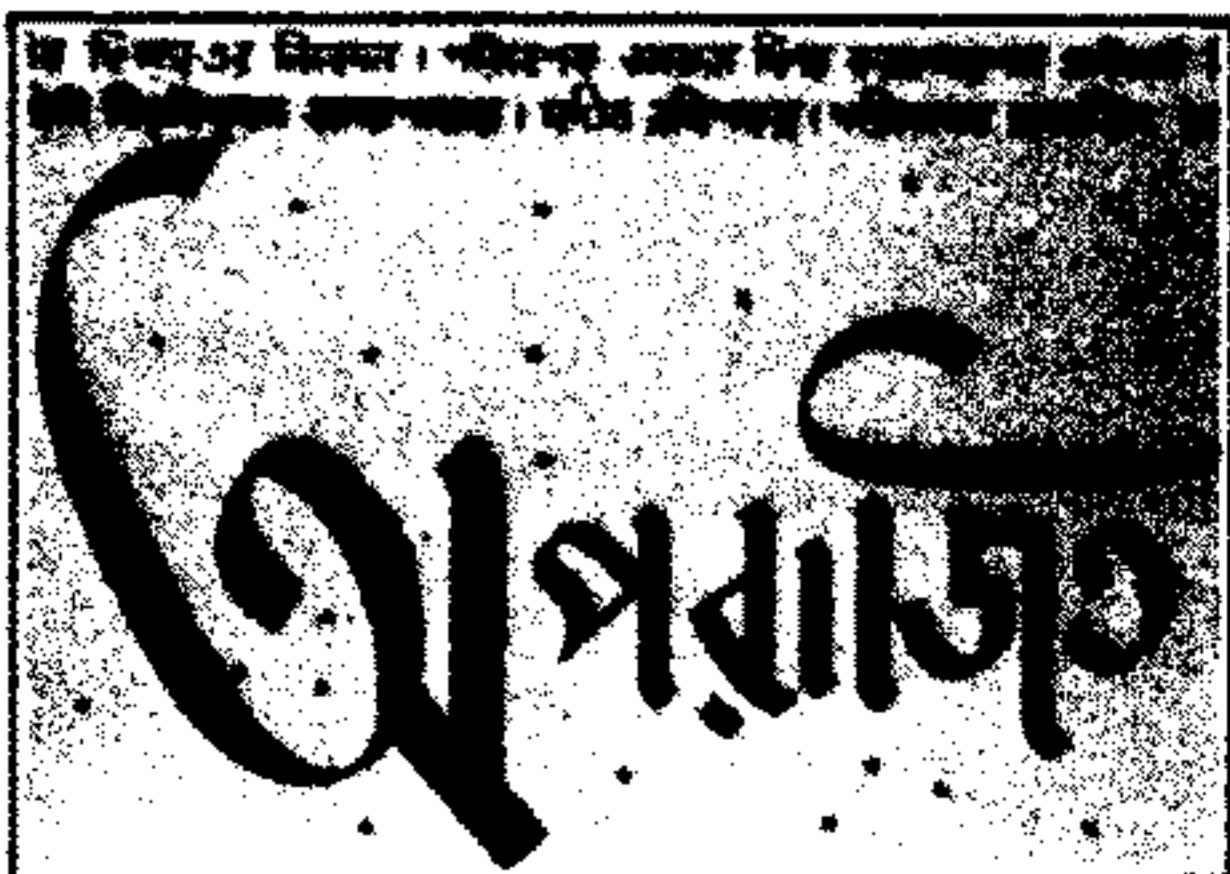
This question does not arise with *Aparajito* which, in addition to its documentary interest, has much greater interest as a drama than the first picture. Here, sorrow, when it strikes, involves us; here, too, the story moves out of a mere struggle for existence into deeper issues that evoke more than pathos; and this gives the characters a light that shines retrospectively on the first picture. For example, I cannot now think of the mother in *Pather Panchali* only as a woman whom trouble has made a scold against her will. The tenderness and complexity of her character as revealed in the second film add dimension to her in the first.

Ray, the director and adapter, is carrying this project forward with the dedication of a man determined to preserve the truth about his people for the people themselves and for the world: who means (to paraphrase Dedalus), to forge in the smithy of his art, the uncreated conscience of his race.

Clearly, too, Ray is learning a great deal about filmmaking as he progresses. The bogging of transitions, the stickiness of the obviously arty shot, these are absent from this second film. There is still a bit of difficulty with Ray's sense of timing; a few scenes are brushed off too quickly, a few dwelled on too long. But ideals of timing vary from culture to culture, and whether Ray is adhering to the standards of his country or has not yet quite mastered timing as practised by the western artists from whom he has learned so much else, it is impossible to say.

Some scenes — like the inconclusive episode of the Brahmin looking for a wife, like Apu's visit to the temple of the privileged monkeys — are novelistic material, discursive in a film. But on the whole, in script and in action, Ray has made the picture move, laying the lives of a few simple people so bare that he has distilled history. We

Poster for *Aparajito*



Time/1959

*Shamlal
Montage, Special Issue on
Satyajit Ray/1966*

Apu after his mother's death



know, when Apu hoists his suitcase to his shoulder and flops his big feet down the path toward the railroad station, that he is on his way to change the motion of the planets.

CLOSELY OBSERVED PASSIONS

Aparajito will probably be weighed in the balance with *Pather Panchali* and found slightly wanting. But such a comparison misses the point: as the second movement in a composition, *Aparajito* is meant to express the consequences of the first movement, *Pather Panchali*, and to prepare the mood for the third movement. In a pictorial sense the film lacks something of the noble simplicity of *Pather Panchali*, but if its images are more sophisticated, they are no less brilliant and effective. What is perhaps most striking to the Western observer, is the profoundly Asiatic quality of the moviemaker's genius. He suffers passionately with his characters, and yet all the while remains curiously calm and almost indifferent, as though he understood that life must ultimately find its meaning and its peace in something larger than life.

BENARES SYMPHONY

The air is cool. The sky is flecked. It is morning. A fat priest calls pigeons to breakfast. There is a mild flutter of wings. Aren't these rather cosy perches for the birds, these rakish bamboo and straw sunshades? We see the long, long flights of steps to the river. We sense it is the Ganga. We guess these are the ghats of Benares. Each image fixes itself in our mind—the birds on wing, the morning bathers, the muscle man, the rapt and bizarre faces of the 'pujaris' (devotees) in the temple. The whole scene shapes itself into a poem. All the noises compose themselves into a symphony. Don't ask if it is real Benares. I have never been there. But it is pure cinema—as pure and as real as it can be. It is Satyajit Ray's Benares. He does not merely see. He lives what he sees. From the moment we meet Apu's father at the ghats—we, too, are involved in the life of his small family.

The story by itself is banal through and through. There is no inner conflict. There is no drama. But the bare bones of the story give no clue to the intensities of *Aparajito*. We can never get out of our mind the dreariness of the life in the sooty, crooked house where the family lives. We will always hear the drip, drip, drip of the miserable tap and the screech of the broom against the stone floor. We will always hear the last gasps of Apu's father as he lies dying. We will always remember the dumb animal pain on the face of the mother and dumb sorrow of the boy in the face of death. Who said the poor die like rats?

Mr Ray transfigures poverty. He doesn't sentimentalise it. It does not make us cry. But it does make us think of death and of the loneliness of man. As Apu's father lies ill, the street outside is ablaze with 'Diwali'

fireworks and full of the happy shrieks of children. This enhances the sense of loneliness of the mother and the child. Apu's father dies and the image of the dying face is followed by a magnificent sequence with the image of pigeons in flight and the dark, frenzied faces of the temple priests at prayer. It adds to our sense of desolation.

But the ambivalence of life asserts itself. The point counterpoint of the images puts every episode in focus. The mother takes up a job, and Apu is again free to play. In a playful sequence we see him feed a group of temple monkeys. Life goes on in spite of death. The joys and sorrows of life are so mixed up. *Aparajito* renders this homespun philosophy in unforgettable images.

RAY'S COMMENTS

In *Aparajito* I was not able to achieve more than 60 per cent of what the script demanded. There were many reasons for this, one of them a peculiarly technical one. A camera had just come — an Arriflex, that is what we use all the time now — and it jammed frequently during the shooting in Benares. It became impossible to do more than one take of a scene. As a result there is a lot of deficiency in the shooting. And then we had to rush through the editing stage — as so often in my films — because the date of release was getting near. Another problem was that Ravi Shankar should have composed half as much more music than he did. There are blank moments as a result, slowing down the film. But I find the psychological aspect — the relationship between a growing Apu and his mother — very successful.

*As told to Jyoti Dutta,
Kolkata Magazine*

*Sarbojaya, Harihar and Apu
have migrated to the holy
city of Benares*

