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# A Long Time on the Little Road



Two scenes from "Aprajita", sequel to "Pather Panchali", in which the boy Apu grows up to find himself torn between old and new worlds. Left: the twelve-year-old Apu. Right: Apu explains the workings of a globe to his mother.

by SATYAJIT RAY

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 ensure smoothness of panning. We had no sound equipment, as the scene was to be a silent one.

It was an episode in the screen-play 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 whole 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.

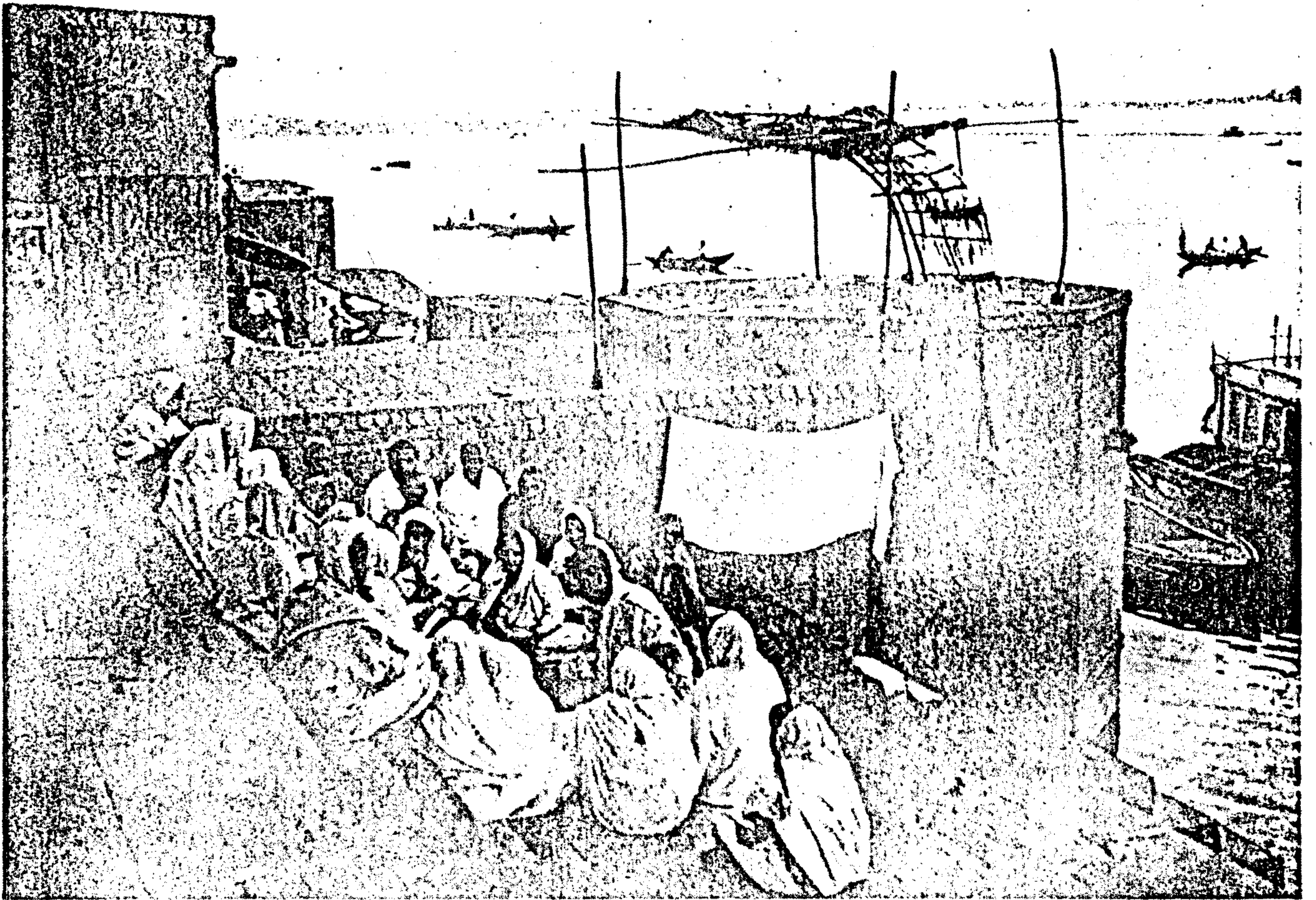
At the end of the first day's shooting we had eight shots. The children behaved naturally, which was a bit of luck because I hadn't tested them. As for myself, I remember feeling a bit strung up in the beginning; but as work progressed my nerves relaxed and in the end I even felt a kind of elation. However, 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 shortlived? 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 set-back. 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 heartbreaking. Who would have known then that we would be back on the identical location exactly two years later and indulge in the luxury of reshooting the entire scene with the same cast and the same unit but with money provided by the Government of West Bengal?

2

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





"Aprajita": the father reads from the scriptures to a crowd assembled on a ghat in Benares.

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 work—even a day's work—has rewards, not the least of which is the gradual comprehension of the complex and fascinating nature of film-making itself. The edicts of the theorists, learnt 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 don't provide all the answers, and (c) that your approach should derive not 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 Bannerji's *Pather Panchali* (*The Little Road*) was serialised in a popular Bengali magazine in the early 1930's. 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 grounds 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 of the magazine 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: its humanism, its 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 Benares—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.

Considerations of form, rhythm or movement didn't worry me much at this stage. I had my nucleus: the family, consisting of husband and wife, the two children, and the old aunt. The characters had been so conceived by the author that there was a constant and subtle interplay between them. I had my time span of one year. I had my contrasts—pictorial as well as emotional: the rich and the poor, the laughter and the tears, the beauty of the countryside and the grimness of poverty existing in it. Finally, I had the two natural halves of the story culminating in two poignant deaths. What more could a scenarist want?

What I lacked was first-hand acquaintance with the *milieu* of the story. I could, of course, draw upon the book itself, which was a kind of encyclopaedia of Bengali rural life, but I knew that this was not enough. In any case, one had only to drive six miles out of the city to get to the heart of the



authentic village.

While far from being an adventure in the physical sense, these explorations into the village nevertheless opened up a new and fascinating world. To one born and bred in the city, it had a new flavour, a new texture; and its values were different. It made you want to observe and probe, to catch the revealing details, the telling gestures, the particular turns of speech. You wanted to fathom the mysteries of "atmosphere". Does it consist in the sight, or in the sounds? How to catch the subtle difference between dawn and dusk, or convey the grey humid stillness that precedes the first monsoon shower? Is sunlight in Spring the same as sunlight in Autumn? . . .

The more you probed the more was revealed, and familiarity bred not contempt but love, understanding, tolerance. Problems of film-making began to recede into the background and you found yourself belittling the importance of the camera. After all, you said, it is only a recording instrument. The important thing is Truth. Get at it and you've got your great humanist masterpiece.

But how wrong you were! The moment you are on the set the three-legged instrument takes charge. Problems come thick and fast. Where to place the camera? High or low? Near or far? On the dolly or on the ground? Is the thirty-five O.K. or would you rather move back and use the fifty? Get too close to the action and the emotion of the scene spills over; get too far back and the thing becomes cold and remote. To each problem that arises you must find a quick answer. If you delay the sun shifts and makes nonsense of your light continuity.

Sound is a problem, too. Dialogue has been reduced to a minimum, but you want to cut down further. Are these three words really necessary, or can you find a telling gesture to take their place? The critics may well talk of a laudable attempt at a rediscovery of the fundamentals of silent cinema, but you know within your heart that while there may be some truth in that, equally true was your anxiety to avoid the uninspiring business of dubbing and save on the cost of sound film.

Cost, indeed, was a dominant determining factor at all times, influencing the very style of the film. Another important factor—and I wouldn't want to generalise on this—was the human one. In handling my actors I found it impossible to get to that stage of impersonal detachment where I could equate them with so much raw material to be moulded and remoulded at will. How can you make a woman of eighty stand in the hot midday sun and go through the same speech and the same actions over and over again while you stand by and watch with half-closed eyes and wait for that precise gesture and tone of voice that will mean perfection for you? This meant, inevitably, fewer rehearsals and fewer takes.

Sometimes you are lucky and everything goes right in the first take. Sometimes it does not and you feel you will never get what you are aiming at. The number of takes increases, the cost goes up, the qualms of conscience become stronger than the urge for perfection and you give up, hoping that the critics will forgive and the audience will overlook. You even wonder whether perhaps you were not being too finicky and the thing was not as bad or as wrong as you thought it was.

And so on and on it goes, this preposterous balancing act, and you keep hoping that out of all this will somehow emerge Art. At times when the strain is too much you want to give up. You feel it is going to kill you, or at least kill the artist in you. But you carry on, mainly because so much and so many are involved, and the day comes when the last shot is in the can and you are surprised to find yourself feeling not happy and relieved, but sad. And you are not alone in this. Everybody, from "Auntie" for whom it has been an exciting

if strenuous comeback after thirty years of oblivion, down to the little urchin who brought the live spiders and the dead toad, shares this feeling.

To me it is the inexorable rhythm of its creative process that makes film-making so exciting in spite of the hardships and the frustrations. Consider this process: you have conceived a scene, any scene. Take the one where a young girl, frail of body but full of some elemental zest, gives herself up to the first monsoon shower. She dances in joy while the big drops pelt her and drench her. The scene excites you not only for its visual possibilities but for its deeper implications as well: that rain will be the cause of her death.

You break down the scene into shots, make notes and sketches. Then the time comes to bring the scene to life. You go out into the open, scan the vista, choose your setting. The rain clouds approach. You set up your camera, have a last quick rehearsal. Then the "take". But one is not enough. This is a key scene. You must have another while the shower lasts. The camera turns, and presently your scene is on celluloid.

Off to the lab. You wait, sweating—this is September—while the ghostly negative takes its own time to emerge. There is no hurrying this process. Then the print, the "rushes". This looks good, you say to yourself. But wait. This is only the content, in bits and pieces, and not the form. How is it going to join up? You grab your editor and rush off to the cutting room. There is a gruelling couple of hours, filled with aching suspense, while the patient process of cutting and joining goes on. At the end you watch the thing on the moviola. Even the rickety old machine cannot conceal the effectiveness of the scene. Does this need music, or is the incidental sound enough? But that is another stage in the creative process, and must wait until all the shots have been joined up into scenes and all the scenes into sequences and the film can be comprehended in its totality. Then, and only then, can you tell—if you can bring to bear on it that detachment and objectivity—if your dance in the rain has really come off.

But is this detachment, this objectivity, possible? You know you worked honestly and hard, and so did everybody else. But you also know that you had to make changes, compromises—not without the best of reasons—on the set and in the cutting room. Is it better for them or worse? Is your own satisfaction the final test or must you bow to the verdict of the majority? You cannot be sure. But you can be sure of one thing: you are a better man for having made it.



Satyajit Ray directing Chunibala in "Pather Panchali".