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Author(s)	J. Hoberman J. Hoberman
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SONY PICTURES CLASSICS

Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali* was a paradigmatic indie and the final masterwork of neorealism.

The Hunger Artist

By J. Hoberman

Pather Panchali
Written and directed
by Satyajit Ray, from the novel
by Bibhutibhusan Banerjee
A Sony Pictures Classics release
At the Lincoln Plaza
April 7 through 20

Pather Panchali, the 1955 masterpiece that launched Satyajit Ray's career and, newly restored and resubtitled, inaugurates the rerelease of nine features by the Bengali master, is a serene heartwrencher.

Propelled by Ray's death (and deathbed Oscar) in 1992, *Pather Panchali* was for the first time listed in *Sight and Sound*'s once-a-decade critics' poll of the 10 greatest films. It was not always so regarded. The story of a poor Brahmin family in rural Bengal was described, in its initial *New York Times* review by Bosley Crowther, as "a rambling and random tour of an Indian village . . . a baffling mosaic of candid and crude domestic scenes."

Indeed, *Pather Panchali* is less a linear narrative than a series of rhyming incidents—arrivals and departures, both cosmic and mundane—which continually dissolve into the underlying spectacle of the natural world. A dreamy poet, and sometime Hindu priest, periodically goes to the city in search of work, leaving his anxious, practical wife in charge of two big-eyed children—10-year-old Durga and her younger brother, Apu—as well as the toothless, bent crone they call Auntie. The family's ramshackle courtyard and the forest that surrounds their dusty village are the perimeters of a cruel Eden in which nothing much happens. The wind moves in the trees, the weather changes, itinerant entertainers come to town, meals are prepared, and people die—disappearing as if into the depths of the lily-choked pool in the forest beyond the house.

The inevitability of death in *Pather Panchali* is all the more affecting for the archetypal vividness of the movie's characters. A maddeningly selfish and useless creature, Auntie is the personification of pure, heedless Being. Her decrepit vitality is matched by the intensity of Durga's hunger—for fruit pilfered from a neighbor's garden, for candy and gewgaws and pure sensation. When a monsoon arrives, the girl runs outside in the rain, her upturned face drinking in the experience.

Although Apu is the protagonist of *Pather Panchali*'s two sequels, *Aparajito* and *The World of Apu*, he is here largely an observer—watching kittens play in the courtyard, running to see the train to Calcutta roar through a field, absorbing his mother's shame at their poverty, taking in the accusations leveled against the sister he has displaced from the family center. Still, Durga is the film's soul—she, it's been said, has to steal life itself.

Born in 1921 into a distinguished literary family, Ray was first an enthusiast. He cofounded a Calcutta film society and was inspired to become a filmmaker after seeing *The Bicycle Thief*, Vittorio De Sica's neorealist account of a poor Rome family. In 1949, Ray met neorealism's most important precursor, Jean Renoir, who was in Calcutta shooting *The River*; Ray helped Renoir scout locations. Renoir, who had extensive experience working outside the French film industry, encouraged the young graphic designer to make his own film.

Ray spent nearly two years trying to raise money for *Pather Panchali*, which, although adapted from a popular 1928 novel, was deemed so uncommercial a project as to be beyond comprehension. (Ray was not the only would-be independent in Bengal; Ritwik Ghatak, the tormented filmmaker unfairly eclipsed by Ray's subsequent prominence, was already in the midst of his never released first feature.) Finally cashing in his life insurance, Ray plunged in. He assembled his cast, few of whom had any prior screen experience, and went on location—shooting on weekends for the better part of a year until he ran out of money. His 4000-foot rough cut generated no interest. Time was against him: Durga and Apu were growing up, Auntie (a former stage actress living in Calcutta's red-light district) was an octogenarian who needed a daily dose of opium to get through her scenes.

Shooting had again been suspended when, almost by chance, a curator from the Museum of Modern Art heard about *Pather Panchali*, saw the footage, and enthusiastically offered a venue for the finished film. Around the same time, a sympathetic government minister got wind of the project and provided state funds to complete the movie. After struggling for nearly four years, Ray suddenly had six months to deliver the completed project. To make the MOMA deadline, he and his editor virtually moved into the film lab. In a burst of virtuosity, Ravi Shankar composed and recorded the trilling, rolling score—at once plaintive and exhilarating—in an all-night session.

Ray had yet to see the finished film, which was shipped without subtitles and screened in New York in the spring of 1955 as *The Story of Apu and Durga* for a small but enthusiastic audience. *Pather Panchali* opened in Calcutta that summer to word-of-mouth success. Overcoming opposition from both state and national governments (in part because Prime Minister Nehru was enlisted to its cause), *Pather Panchali* was shown at Cannes in 1956 where, despite some hostility on the jury, the movie won a special award.

In its vicissitudes and ultimate triumph, *Pather Panchali* is also the quintessential indie production. John Cassavetes's similarly hand-to-mouth *Shadows* was already shooting when Ray's film opened commercially in September 1958 at the Fifth Avenue Cinema. For some it seemed all but underground. The director "provides ample indication that this is his first professional motion picture job," *The New York Times* complained. "Any picture as loose in structure or as listless in tempo as this one is would barely pass for a rough cut in Hollywood."

From start to finish, *Pather Panchali* was unlike anything produced in the commercial Indian cinema. Not only were there no stars, there was no romance, no singing, no dancing—Ray used the original score only as background. Even the *Times* noted the absence of sentimentality.

All exteriors were shot on location, but *Pather Panchali* was no more cinema vérité than Ray himself was an aesthetic primitive. Calcutta, the capital of the British raj, gave the Bengali intelligentsia a unique vantage point; Ray continued the fusion of Eastern and Western art forms associated with his family friend, Rabindranath Tagore. *Pather Panchali*'s performers were mainly professionals; only the smaller roles are played by actual villagers. What the movie did was to immerse neorealism in the flow of life, documenting the sophisticated city dweller Ray's discovery of rural Bengal. Unlike his subsequent movies, *Pather Panchali* never had a proper script. Ray worked from a treatment and the sketches he had shown producers.

As long as *Pather Panchali* took to complete, it retains a powerful spontaneity. This quality is unique to Ray's first film; his subsequent features are far more conventionally skilled, nuanced, and detached. Still, although a recent tribute to Ray published by Michael Sragow in *The Atlantic Monthly* posits Steven Spielberg as heir to the Renoir-Ray tradition of "luminous observation," none of these later films are exactly a *Temple of Doom*.

Pather Panchali is fascinating for its pragmatic use of linking dissolves and offscreen space. Ray's somewhat studied compositions—his characteristic two-shot has one performer face the camera while listening to another who looks away—are given texture by the splotched emulsion and mismatched film stocks. To some Indian observers, *Pather Panchali* seemed a regression to silent cinema. Ray used close-ups to show reactions while dubbing his post-synchronized dialogue over long shots and cutaways.

Thus, *Pather Panchali* is not only the paradigmatic independent and last masterpiece of neorealism, it's also a model for that "imperfect cinema" extolled in the late '60s by Cuban cultural theorist Julio Garcia Espinosa—the new Third World film practice that "can be created equally well with a Mitchell or with an 8mm camera . . . no longer interested in predetermined taste, and much less 'good' taste." With his skillfully unmatched compositions and suggestively elliptical editing, tricky sound bridges and understated dramatics, intuitive structure and humble subject matter, Ray made a formal virtue out of necessity.

While commercial movies were by definition opulent, *Pather Panchali* was, almost shockingly, concerned with hunger. (One recent critic, born in Guyana and experiencing firsthand the shock of recognition, counted 47 incidents that revolved around food.)

As lyrical as *Pather Panchali* is, as uninsistent as its flow of imagery can be, as steeped as it is in random existence, no movie has ever been more concerned with physical survival. ■

Film