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**Focusing the Village: Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali* and Prafulla Mohanti's *My Village, My Life***

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[**Abstract:** Gandhi insisted that the spirit of India lives in its villages, but the drift away from the village and toward urbanization in post-independence India continues. Questions arise regarding the ideological motivations driving artists' treatments of the village in various notable works in the modern South Asian canon. A comparison is drawn between Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali* [1955] and Orissan artist and author Prafulla Mohanti's *My Village, My Life* [1973]. While at first glance the two may seem to have little to do with another, a close consideration reveals some striking similarities between them, providing some compelling insights into Ray's methods and vision.]

"I am convinced that if India is to attain true freedom and through India the world, then ... people will have to live in villages, not in towns, in huts not in palaces."

—M.K. Gandhi, "Letter to Nehru," 5 October 1945

Nehru, once in contact with the common rural masses: '... a new picture of India seemed to rise before me, naked, starving, crushed, and utterly miserable.'

—*An Autobiography*, 1936

**M**.K. Gandhi famously exhorted those who wished to know India to "go to the villages"; "India is not Calcutta and Bombay. India lives in her seven hundred thousand villages."<sup>1</sup> Most would not dispute the fundamental "Indianness" of village life across the subcontinent, in

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all of its regional variations and manifestations, but would also seek the soul of India in its cities. Mayor of London Boris Johnson, for instance, recently declared, “As anyone who has been to India can testify, Gandhi was wrong. It is unromantic but true that the future of the world lies in cities. . . . People [simply] yearn for the memory of the village” (NDTV). Census data from the Government of India continue to reflect a steady deterioration of the village, with corresponding shift to urbanization in the Asian subcontinent. Bibek Debroy noted in 2010, relying on census data from 2001, “Since Gandhi wrote these words [regarding the seven hundred thousand villages], the number of villages has dropped by 100,000.” The 2011 census data reveal a continuing contraction of the rural population. While India’s overall rural population stood at 72% in 2001, it declined to 69% by 2011 (Census of India).<sup>2</sup> Debroy does not see this as a negative development:

The classic village is one where government and governance is non-existent. There is no formal law and order machinery. There is no physical infrastructure (roads, electricity, drinking water, sanitation). Housing is unsatisfactory. There is no occupation outside agriculture, and there is no irrigation. . . . Villages lack these amenities. If these amenities, connectivities, and opportunities exist, the dichotomy between rural and urban India will break down. . . . Villages will disappear, and that is a good thing. Everywhere in the world, urbanization is correlated with economic development.

There is a significant amount of data in support of this view. One will note, for example, that in India maternal mortality has declined nationally by over 30% in the past ten years (“Maternal and Child Mortality Rates” 9) and infant mortality has likewise declined by more than 30% over the past twenty years nationally; as the Census report notes, however, “Still, 1 in every 20 children [national level], 1 in every 18 children [rural area], and 1 in every 29 children [urban area] die within one year of birth” (“Maternal and Child Mortality Rates,” *Census of India* 13). Total fertility rate nationally has also declined over the past twenty years to 2.6 children per family, while the rural total fertility rate is approximately one child higher than the urban rate (2.9 versus 2.0). While the literacy rate (7+ years of age) has improved in both rural and urban areas over the past ten years (nationally from 65% in 2001 to 74% in 2011), the rural rate nationally stands at 69% in 2011 versus 85% in urban areas in 2011 (*Census of India*). In other words, while measurable gains are being realized in both rural and urban areas, urban indicators remain more encouraging, while there continues a corresponding decline in the number of villages and the total village population.

Nonetheless, the evident compulsion to bring the Indian village to the page, to the screen, to the world has obviously and for a long time

inspired a tremendous corpus of work and certainly some of the best-known and most highly regarded productions in South Asian literature and film. The list is long, but surely must include such dominant titles as Premchand's *Godaan*, Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*, Rao's *Kanthapura*, and Bannerji's *Pather Panchali*. While the milestone works expose and explore the hardship, injustice, exploitation, and apparent hopelessness faced by the rural poor, they of course also evince and reinforce such core traditional values as the sanctity of family, generosity and cooperation between and among neighbors, honesty, integrity, hard work, perseverance, endurance, and hope; they also foreground the fundamental connection of the villager to the natural world, and that tends to place them in contrast to their inverse depiction of the presumed darker aspects of urban life, most notably overcrowding, filth, dissipation, indifference to suffering, alienation from nature, and a survivalist sophistication that expresses itself in deceit and exploitation. As Gandhi had written in *Hind Swaraj*, "Where this cursed modern civilization has not reached, India remains as it was before" (56). The village/city dichotomy is thus a central trope in Indian literature, to be sure, and as Sisir Kumar Das remarks, it is frequently "technological intervention in the rural space" following urban growth during colonial rule that highlights a standardized tension between "urban and rural India as contrasting and hostile areas" (406) and that marks the creeping assault of the urban on the rural spaces. Is it, as Boris Johnson has pronounced, because "people yearn for the memory of the village" that many of these pieces have made their respective marks and *continue* to encourage wide rereading or viewing again and again? Do the works themselves generally share (with their audience) a nostalgia for a vanishing world, a pre-colonial (or pre-globalizing) world, an idyllic or romanticized view of a reality (despite some of the grim realities they depict) that, according to the data at least, more accurately reflects a life marked by lower literacy, lower life expectancy, higher maternal and infant mortality, more pronounced hardships of virtually every kind?

From the range of artists and works that center on life in the village and consider the village from fused urban/rural perspective, two stand out to me that are illuminating in their own right and that usefully shed light on each other when they (and their creators) are juxtaposed: Satyajit Ray's classic 1955 film *Pather Panchali*, based on the novel of that name by Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay (Bannerji), and Prafulla Mohanti's non-fictional accounts of village life in Orissa (Odisha), *My Village, My Life* (1973) and, later, *Changing Village, Changing Life* (1990), as well as reflections on the village (and village/metropolis dichotomy) which have been gleaned through subsequent interviews. Ray is a consummate Calcuttan (recall Gandhi: "India is not Calcutta

...”), and Mohanti a villager-cum-Londoner. Both are artists in more than one medium. Both artists share a deep desire to evoke a “real India” (to use Adela Quested’s phrase from Forster’s *A Passage to India*). Certainly both men have made concerted efforts to bring the village to the world, while both have expressed reservations about bringing the world to the village. In the end, the rural/urban or traditional/modern tensions they express draw them closer together than one would at first assume.

Prafulla Mohanti, painter,<sup>3</sup> writer, poet, dancer, architect, and town planner, was born and raised in the remote village of Nanpur (Orissa), approximately 30 miles northeast of the city of Cuttack and 220 miles south of Calcutta. As he recounts in *My Village, My Life* as well as in *Through Brown Eyes*, his account of coming to England from India in the early 1960s, his was a typical village life: caste was the fundamental and unquestioned organizing force of the community (Mohanti is from a Karan family), religion dominated the fabric of everyday life, daily life was fused with nature and nature itself was both revered and feared, the fine line between life and death was well understood by everyone...as were hunger and poverty, the pace of life was blissfully slow, there was no radio or television, connections between and among villagers was intimate, literacy was low, contact with others beyond the village was minimal, and art was inextricable from both religious faith and village economy (*My Village* 9-14). Because Mohanti distinguished himself as a young student and artist, he was granted a scholarship to study architecture in Bombay, 1300 miles from Nanpur. This experience took him from home and to the city for the first time; he had considered perhaps applying to study medicine in Calcutta, but “my aunts were vehemently opposed to the idea: for them Calcutta was a dark place that destroyed people. The villagers with no other choice went there to work, caught TB, VD, or both, and died” (*Changing Village* 4). In Bombay he felt lost and was led to contemplate his village from a distance: “I missed it and missed my mother, and when I went home during the holidays I usually stayed longer than the time allowed” (*Changing Village* 4). His experience as an architecture student in Bombay exposed him to Western modes and principles, and began the Indian/English, rural/urban hybridity (or dichotomy) that eventually came to define his life:

The school of architecture ... had been established by the British and the method of education was Western. The training bore no relation to my village or culture. I learnt to design Western-style buildings—houses, flats, offices, hotels, theatres, cinemas—by referring to magazines imported from the West. I designed houses with Western-style bathrooms and furniture, but when I went back to the village I

swam in the river and sat cross-legged on the mud floor. (*Changing 5*)

His connection to Britain through his teachers and through the curriculum eventually drew him to London in 1960 for additional qualifications and experience. He found the city to be “noisy, polluted and lonely” (*Changing 5*), and he also arrived at a heightened awareness of being Indian, and especially of being from the village:

I became conscious of ... my roots in my village, embedded in Indian village culture. In Nanpur I was the son of a Karan family; in Cuttack I was a boy from Nanpur; in Bombay I was a student from Orissa; and in London I was an architect from India. (*Changing 5*)

Mohanti’s decision to study town planning in Leeds allowed him further travel within England, and it also then fostered ideas of how to perhaps integrate the best of village life into the city, as well as how to involve some fundamental aspects of urban planning into village infrastructure while still retaining the essential core of village life. Mohanti reveals how these ideas grew to a revised Gandhian vision for a village-centered India that could be sustained into the future:

As I travelled around England I saw how rapid industrialization had ruined the countryside. If the planners, politicians and administrators in India were not careful, the same thing could happen there. I came to the conclusion that since the majority of the population lived in villages, the village should be taken as the theme for India’s development. Groups of villages should be developed as social, cultural and economic units under broad regional and national plans. These units exist in a natural way all over India. My aim was to plan and design them with imagination. Each unit would have a market place with a community centre containing a theatre, art gallery, school, library, advice centre and health clinic. Work would be provided in the villages with small-scale industries to help the communities and with a cooperative system for farming and crafts. (*Changing 6*)

Inspired, Mohanti wrote to government planning officials in India (but received no replies) and when he again visited India, in 1966, he spoke to a range of planners, administrators, and politicians, but was met only with apathy. “I saw people decaying in the streets and nobody seemed to care. Disappointed and disillusioned, I returned to London” to work as architect-town planner for the Greater London Council (6).

Despite continuing as a resident of London, where he has remained active painting and exhibiting, writing, and engaging in community service (“Interview” 5; prafullamohanti.com), Mohanti has returned to Nanpur during the winter months, over several decades. His village development ideals have become more localized, as he has built and

administered a school for small children, another school for teaching basic computer literacy and English language skills, a village art center, and has organized an annual local arts festival (prafullmohanti.com). His belief that the Indian village has something to say to the world led to *My Village, My Life*, which may be described as a prose documentary, interspersed with a number of Mohanti's minimalist sketches of villagers and village life. Ganeswar Mishra claims that *My Village* "is perhaps the most authentic account of Indian village life we have so far" (35). Primarily, along with his own descriptions of the many facets of life that define Nanpur, *My Village, My Life* provides an outlet for the villagers themselves to speak about their village, their lives, on topics (chapters) such as "Caste," "Religion, Superstitions," "Women," "Education," etc. Mohanti claims this is "the first time a book has been written by an Indian villager about his own village" [*My Village* 17]); *Changing Village, Changing Life* followed suit as a sort of sequel, providing an overview and assessment of the village some seventeen years after publication of *My Village, My Life*. The drawing lessons that Mohanti received during his childhood (described in *My Village*) inform the style, focus, and themes of the illustrations in the books, and have continued to inspire and shape his lifetime body of work as an artist. In both books, both in the text and in the illustrations, the village is fully present.



[Prafulla Mohanti, "Naba, the Traveling Saleswoman." *My Village, My Life* (London: Davis-Poynter, 1973: 187). Permission of the artist.]

As Mohanti peered into the future from 1973, aware of the challenges faced by his village and by villages across India, he wrote that, ultimately, "if the village way of life is taken as the basis for

India's development—encouraging economic growth without destroying the beauty of life, creating a balance between human values and technology, India could become a source of inspiration to the world" (*Changing Village* 222). While concentrating his efforts on Nanpur exclusively, though his ideology extends more broadly, he has continued to struggle against the grim realities of wanton development and bureaucratic indifference to village poverty and vulnerability. Given his bi-located London/Nanpur adulthood, when asked how he would wish to be remembered (implying either as a writer or as a painter), Mohanti answered without hesitation, "As a village boy" ("My Village, My Mind" 71).

Nostalgia? Yes, but also a passion to preserve and to continue improving. However, that simpler world of his childhood village home continues to drift toward urban incorporation. Satyajit Ray's first of an eventual 35 films, *Pather Panchali* [*Song of the Road*, 1955], took him to the village via a confluence of causes that he clearly recounts in a scattering of interviews and personal reflections over the years, but probably best or most systematically described in his *My Years with Apu* (1994), in which he describes making not only *Pather Panchali*, but the three films known collectively as the classic *Apu Trilogy* (the others being *Aparajito* [*The Unvanquished*, 1956] and *Apur Sansar* [*The World of Apu*, 1959]). To briefly recast the story, Ray was first tasked in 1946 by the English advertising firm for whom he served as art director in Calcutta, D.J. Keymer, with illustrating and designing the cover for an abridged children's version of Bannerji's beloved novel *Pather Panchali*. As Ray familiarized himself with the novel (a novel he claimed later to know by heart), he was immediately captivated:

The book filled me with admiration. It was plainly a masterpiece and a sort of encyclopedia of life in rural Bengal. ... The amazingly lifelike portrayals, not just of family but a host of other characters, the vivid details of daily existence, the warmth, the humanism, the lyricism, made the book a classic of its kind. (*Years with Apu* 11)

Though struck by the cinematic qualities and potential of the narrative, he had no experience yet producing a film. It was French filmmaker Jean Renoir who encouraged Ray to pursue the film project he was now pondering during Renoir's visit to Calcutta in 1949-1950 to shoot his film *The River* (*Years with Apu* 17). Ray was already at this time a great fan of international cinema, and began and directed the fledgling Calcutta Film Society (hence the meeting with Renoir). The passion for shooting *Pather Panchali* grew in Ray, but many obstacles stood in the way—financial, technical, logistical, and political (*Years with Apu* 27-51).



While in London working for Keymer, Ray took in as many films as he could; he maintains he viewed ninety-nine films in six months (*Years with Apu* 25). In a 1958 interview with Hugh Gray, Ray explained that while he was in London “it was [DeSica’s Italian neorealist film] *The Bicycle Thieves* that finally gave me an idea of how to make my own film. No stars, and mainly on location” (Cardullo 5). Back in Calcutta, Ray’s efforts to gather a cast and crew are now the stuff of legend. Contrary to popular belief, the cast was not entirely amateur (Kanu Bannerji as Harihar, and Chunibala Devi as Indir Thakrun are notable exceptions, with Karuna Bannerji [as Sarbajaya] going on to play significant roles in subsequent films, enjoying an Apu-accelerated career path). Inspired by Renoir and deSica, primarily, Ray was hoping to break the mold of Indian cinema:

All the world knew that India turned out a vast number of films with a lot of singing and dancing in them. ... [Bengal] didn’t make song-and-dance movies; it made tame, torpid versions of popular Bengali novels for an audience whom years of cinematic spoon-feeding had reduced to a state of unredeemable vacuity. (qtd. in Sandip Ray 70)

Reflecting on his motivation for jumping into filmmaking with *Pather Panchali*, Ray wanted to do his utmost to draw India cinema toward an international standard that would starkly defy Indian cinema stereotype: “It was high time Indian cinema came of age, and high time it came out of its self-imposed seclusion to be measured by the standards of the West” (Sandip Ray 71). Ray’s quest was for *authenticity*.

In his interview with Hugh Gray, when asked about a moral or message in Bannerji’s novel that makes it “essentially Indian or of Bengal,” Ray answered, “I don’t like morals or messages. This story says true things about India. That was enough for me. It had the quality of truth, the quality that always impresses me, wherever I see it” (Cardullo, *Interviews* 6). Ray had written in 1951 in *Our Films, Their Films* that “the Indian film maker must turn to life, to reality” (127). Similarly, in another interview, with Bert Cardullo, Ray stated, “It is important, let me reiterate, that stories have their roots in reality” (“An Interview with a Cinema Master” n.p.). It is Ray’s unflinching determination to offer an authentic work that, according to Chandak Sengoopta, led those in the West who were initially exposed to the film<sup>4</sup> to regard it as a “documentary,” much in the same spirit as Robert Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North* (278). In fact, the Flaherty Society showed the film in 1957 at their annual Flaherty seminar, and they invited Ray as their special guest to the 1958 Flaherty seminar. A reviewer in the *New York Post* at this time wrote that the film reveals “what it is like to live in an Indian village” (cited in Sengoopta 282).

Along with this, the first of many awards garnered by *Pather Panchali* came at the Cannes Film Festival in 1956, where it received a special jury award as “Best Human Document.”

There certainly are documentary qualities about *Pather Panchali*,<sup>5</sup> so it is not surprising that those unexposed to or less familiar with the literary source material may find themselves searching (especially in the first half of the film) for a clear plot, as opposed to confronting a tour of “the authentic” or what may be understood as the film maker’s sense of “the real India.” As Surindher Jodhka has suggested in “Nation and Village: Images of Rural India in Gandhi, Nehru, and Ambedkar,”

The village has long been viewed as a convenient entry point for understanding “traditional” Indian society. It has been a signifier of the authentic native life, a social and cultural unit uncorrupted by outside influences. For the professional sociologists and social anthropologists, the village represented India in microcosm, “an invaluable observation centre” where one could see and study the “real” India, its social organization and cultural life. By studying a village, the pioneering Indian sociologist MN Srinivas claimed, one could generalize about the social processes and problems to be found occurring in great parts of India. (3343)

“The social processes and problems” revealed by Ray in *Pather Panchali*, simply through his commitment to being true to the spirit and visual quality of Bannerji’s novel, came to haunt him when the Government of West Bengal threatened to withhold hard-won and vital financial support of the film because it exposed community problems among the poor, rather than highlighting their support and relief. Since funds needed to finish the film would come by way of the Community Development Project, the Chief Minister of West Bengal wondered especially why at the end of the film “the family leaves home to migrate to Benaras. ... Couldn’t the other villagers persuade them to stay? Help them to rebuild their wrecked house? Can’t you inject a message which would go in favour of community development?” (*Years with Apu* 60). Ray and company managed to convince him that devoted readers of the novel would be dismissive of the film if it were to have such a drastically altered ending. That argument achieved a narrow victory which saved a film that otherwise would very likely never have been finished.

Ray’s treatment of the village is indeed uncompromising. Similar to Mohanti’s desire in *My Village, My Life* and then *Changing Village, Changing Life* to allow the villagers to speak for themselves, Ray suggested to Chidanda Dasgupta in a 1962 interview that, though the film is not documentary, “My intention is to present ... situation[s] in a clear and honest way, and then let the audience draw its own

conclusions” (Dasgupta 10). The hunger and desperation faced by the mother, Sarbajaya, as she struggles to feed her children during the prolonged absence of her husband, Harihar, following his departure from the village in search of employment that will allow him to (hopefully) return with some money; Sarbajaya’s agitated, frustrated, hair-pulling assault on her daughter Durga when the latter is accused of stealing a neighbor child’s necklace (consistent with her filching fallen mangoes from beneath the neighbors’ tree); the soiled, tattered saris of Durga and Old Aunty Indir Thakrun; Old Aunty’s stooped and withered body; the decaying condition of the family home; Durga’s fever and death—these are only a handful of many possible examples, but taken together, with Ray’s filming on location, outdoors, with existing light, they provide a powerful sense of our being privy to “life as it is” in the village. In very much the same vein, Mohanti hides nothing as he explores village life in chapters titled, for example, “Untouchables” and “Disasters and Diseases, Death” alongside “A Child Is Born,” “Visitors,” and “Festivals and Fasts” (*My Village*). Challenged in an interview with Udayan Gupta that “some critics feel that you romanticize poverty, that the poverty and misery in your films never become ugly,” Satyajit Ray responded, “I think that *Pather Panchali* is fairly ruthless in its depiction of poverty. The behavior of characters, the way the mother behaves towards the old woman, is absolutely cruel. I don’t think anyone has shown such cruelty to old people within a family” (Cardullo 131)

Yet, more than “human document” or realist tour of the Bengal village, all of these scenes (and more) are visual (and audio) translations of Bannerji’s text into film. The spirit of the novel, of the village life that it evokes, is the standard to which Ray remains true, rather than to any evident or implicit social or political statement. Nevertheless, the film emerged at a time when the Gandhian-inspired vision of a nation of villages was losing momentum in the face of Nehru’s inspired commitment to accelerating the industrial economy. Any focus on the village, then, would invite consideration within the foregrounded national “Gandhi-Nehru” dialogue over India’s future.

Poignant scenes from Ray’s *Pather Panchali* evoke parallel passages in Bannerji’s novel, such as when Shorbojoya’s (Sarbajaya) frustration and humiliation boil over in the face of neighbor Shejbou’s accusations against Durga for stealing the necklace, insinuating that the family’s need to borrow and their inability to repay has marked them all as “thieves”:

That final insult had included her husband and that was more than she could bear. She swung round on Durga and grabbed hold of her by her long dry hair, and ... began to thump and slap her, blow after blow .... “You little fiend!” she screamed. “...Would to God you

were dead!" Durga was terrified, and with the blows still falling on her she broke away and dashed out the back door. Some strands of her torn dry hair remained behind in Shorbojoya's hand. (84-85)

Also, the indelible image of Chunibala Devi cast as Indir Thakrun (the Old Aunt) in Ray's film is lifted straight from the pages of Bannerji's novel:

...no longer the slim, smiling-faced girl of the year 1833, but an old woman of seventy-five. Her cheeks were sunken; her body bent forward from the waist; and her eyes could no longer make out distant objects as they once did. When anyone passed in front of the house, she used to raise her hand to her brow and peer out from under it .... "Who is that?" she would say. (7)

Indir is described by Bannerji as living in a thatched hut, "unrepaired for a long time," on the edge of Harihar's family compound. "On a bamboo peg hung two dirty garments, the torn ends of which she had knotted together" (9):

She did not sew nowadays because she could no longer see well enough to thread her needle; so when her clothes tore she tied knots in them. ... Some torn clothes, which were all she had, were tied in a bundle. ... Yet she kept them with great care. (9-10)

The balance between distress and joy breathes from the pages of the novel, as it does in Ray's film, and in this way perhaps more than in any other, Ray succeeds in his quest for authenticity. Regarding Indir, for example, Bannerji writes that "the road of her life was an old road. She had walked along it since childhood, and now even the slightest bend in it made her happy, and was an occasion for rejoicing" (8). Her joy connects her closely with the children, Apu and Durga, and their joy in their village and in the simple connections to nature are central to the novel and are dominant in the *feel* of Ray's masterful translation of this to film.

Trees! Yes. Durga loved her trees! She loved the village, too, every stick and stone in it, and the river, and the path that led down to it. She had known them all her life so naturally and intimately that they had become part of her. (228)

In how many scenes in Ray's film does he manage to convey precisely this connection, this intimacy, as Durga alone or together with Apu comes running or skipping barefoot along the path through the thicket of trees? So many of the children's reflections in the novel find their silent counterpart in Ray's cinematography. At one point we read, "Opu was not listening. His eyes were fixed on the bamboos outside the window and on the crisscrosses of light and shade they cast on the jungle bushes beneath" (70). These "crisscrosses of light and shade" are

emblematic of Ray's rich black and white aesthetic (he cites Cartier-Bresson as among his strongest influences [*World of Apu* 29]), as he brings the natural spirit of the village to life in some of the most vivid and memorable scenes: the water bugs skating across the pond as the raindrops begin to dimple the water's surface; the play of light and shade through bamboo as the children run along the path (before discovering the body of deceased Aunty under the trees); the sigh of wind, the solitary chirping of a bird; the rumble of approaching thunder—all of these mark the on-location authenticity (and beauty) of the film, as much as the straightforward evocation of anxious poverty, and all of these features are testament to Ray's loving attachment to the novel. In short, Ray had lauded the novel for its saying "true things about India," and his film is true to the spirit of the novel.

Prior to shooting the film, though, Ray's experience of the village was, nevertheless, necessarily (almost entirely) second hand. The village Ray had selected as the setting for *Pather Panchali* was Boral, just four miles outside Calcutta. In various ways, it fit Bannerji's description of Nischindipur, the Bengali village of the novel, and it had the advantage by its proximity of allowing Ray and his crew to shuttle by automobile between city and village with some (relative) efficiency. Ray's direct contact with rural life was minimal. He had enrolled as an art student at Tagore's university in Santiniketan (one hundred miles from Calcutta) in 1940 at age nineteen, and remained there for two and a half years. It was here that he was first exposed to life in the village: "The campus was surrounded by villages where we used to go to sketch and I, who was born and bred in the city, was exposed to the charms of rural Bengal for the first time" (*Years with Apu* 7). Aside from those sketching expeditions, though, Ray admits:

I had no firsthand knowledge of life in a village. But the frequent trips to Boral while [art director] Bansi [Chandragupta] built the house and making acquaintance of the people there, who took us into their homes and offered us tea and home-made sweets, gradually made us familiar with the life described in the novel.

But knowing the village primarily through the novel that he claimed to know by heart was not enough for Ray:

There were things I had to discover for myself. Evaluating life in the village opened up a new and fascinating world. To one born and bred in the city, it had a new flavor, a new texture, and its values were different. It made you want to touch and probe, to watch for the revealing details, the telling gestures, the particular terms of speech. You wanted to fathom the mysteries of atmosphere. You wanted to watch the subtle difference between dawn and dusk and convey the grey humid stillness that pervaded the first monsoon shower. ... The more you probed the more was revealed and familiarization bred no

discontent but love, understanding, and tolerance. (*Years with Apu* 53-54)

Ray's success in connecting not only with the novel but with the aura and texture of the village is evident on several levels in *Pather Panchali*. Ray considered even the film's tempo a mark of authenticity. In an interview with Bert Cardullo, he admitted that "by your [Western] standards, my pace is slow—or leisurely, shall we say?" (Das Gupta via Cardullo). The slow and quiet movement of *Pather Panchali* epitomizes this characterization, just as it matches the pace of life in the village; as Mohanti writes in *My Village, My Life*, "The concept of time in the village is different" (17). In fact as he begins *My Village, My Life*, he says, "This is the portrait of a village in India. It has been there for a long time. Nobody knows its history. It was never planned; it grew and developed. It happened" (9).

Mohanti's observation applies well to the structure of Bannerji's novel, with its strong flavor of the organic throughout the narrative, the feel of people and events driven by unpredictable joys, beauties, and terrors. It also applies to Ray's approach in his film interpretation of the story. The narrative is a series of self-contained events that "just happen" and are not often strongly or obviously connected to what immediately precedes or follows. Similarly, as Ganewsar Mishra has noted about the form of Mohanti's *My Village, My Life*, it shares a form common with the puranas and "innumerable folk narratives.... Most of them are presented in the form of dialogues and as a series of episodes, each episode independent by itself" (42). Ray's commitment to this same folk spirit of the text also led him to *create* scenes that were not in the original text (while he also dispensed with a great number of the many events and characters from the original), but fit the mood he distills from the experience of the novel and life in the village, and therefore fit well with the larger fabric of the narrative. In a 1989 interview with Bert Cardullo, Ray insists:

The main strength of [*Pather Panchali*] ... lay in certain peculiar moments of inspiration, like the death of Indir, Durga's death, the incident concerning the snake at the end, or the sequence in which the train passes by as Apu and Durga watch. None of these were in the novel, and even today I enjoy watching these scenes. ("Interview with a Cinema Master")

Ray says in "Problems of a Bengal Film Maker" that he felt "obliged morally and artistically" to make a film with its "roots in the soil of our province" (*Our Films, Their Films* 42), and as Bert Cardullo reflects, "that style consisted of a slow rhythm (using long takes, deep focus, and minimal camera movement) determined by nature itself, by the landscape and the countryside." And, according to Ray, even the script

of *Pather Panchali* “had to retain a rambling quality—the very essence of the source novel—because that quality contained a clue to the achievement of authenticity: life in a poor Indian village *does* ramble” (Cardullo ix).

Nevertheless, as Chandak Sengoopta has argued about the Apu Trilogy taken as a whole,

In Ray’s Apu Trilogy, time moves in a far more linear and progressive fashion [than in Bannerji’s novels]. ... Ravi Shankar’s pastoral theme from the background score of *Pather Panchali* reappears at crucial points in *Aparajito* but there is no other indication that Apu ever recalls his childhood. (279)

In the final film of the Trilogy, as Sengoopta reminds us, Apu is an orphan with no apparent ties to relatives or his village. “No loose ends interfere with the forward journey of Apu” (279). As Sengoopta sees it, Apu’s path in the Trilogy from village to Benares to Calcutta marks a movement from village to metropolis (without looking back) that is consonant with the trajectory India itself has been taking, and one that at the time of the Apu Trilogy (1950s) aligns Ray politically with the “liberal, individualist, cosmopolitan, and modernizing vision of India’s future associated most prominently with ... Jawaharlal Nehru” (279).

As Nehru had put it in *The Discovery of India* (1946), “There is no going back to the past; there is no turning back even if this was thought desirable. There is only one-way traffic in time” (cited in Sengoopta, 280). Sengoopta argues that “Ray, at this stage in his career, broadly shared that liberal, nationalistic vision of progress and all his early films are imbued with it” (280). Even though, as Sengoopta admits, “the films were non-political and set in the 1920s,” Ray’s progressive sympathies at the time may well argue for the sort of “moving out” from the village to the city, from the secluded world to the more urbane cosmopolitanism that broadly marks his film oeuvre. Such a view would seem to place Ray at philosophical odds with Mohanti, who retains the vision of a village-based India as offering a more fruitful and sustainable future for the nation. Yet even in this evident dichotomy there are complications and inherent contradictions that draw the two artists closer.

For one, while Sengoopta points to Ray’s “modernizing vision,” it is apparent that Ray’s earlier films, at least, are of two minds. They serve as critiques of the sometimes crass and dismissive spirit of the modern just as they find liberating, progressive value in it; they critique the sometimes repressive and superstitious traditional, just as they lament the loss of defining cultural traditions. The “technological intervention” that Sisir Kumar Das cites as a central trope of Indian fiction provides a focal point for the traditional/modern tension and

ambiguity in the earlier films--the three films of the Apu Trilogy, *Devi* (*The Goddess*), and *Jalsaghar* (*The Music Room*) are all cases in point. The famous “train scene” from *Pather Panchali* is a classic: Apu and Durga wend their way outside the village, wander through a field of beautiful, wind-swept rushes, only to come upon towering, ominous telegraph pylons...and then the approach and rushing past of the deafening (and exhilarating) locomotive. The passageway to a world beyond the village, a suggestion of a world that transcends the experience and rambling pace of village life, yes, but also a powerful and abrasive intrusion into the quiet calm of much of the film. One is reminded of Mohanti’s reflections in *My Village, My Life*, as he witnessed the first stages of development in Nanpur (in 1966), when a new road had just been built, as well as a concrete bridge over the river, because engineers had decided it provided the “most direct route to Paradip” (220):

What had they done to my village? ... [The villagers] had been isolated for so long that the idea of easy travel to Cuttack was exciting and they had not thought about the consequences. Now lorries thunder along the road day and night and it is amazing that people have got used to the noise. In a few years’ time, when the port of Paradip is fully developed, this road will become very important and even more noise and fumes will be created. (220)

Ray himself noted in a 1970 interview, in response to the question, “Do your films carry a message, or are they pure entertainment?”:

Generally the emerging theme has been the conflict between the old and the new existing side by side. This is the recurring theme of all my films. Not consciously but—as I look back—I see the theme repeated again and again. (Daniels)

Much later, near the end of his life, in an interview with Kerstin Andersson, a reflective and melancholy Ray points again to the tension in his films between the modern and the traditional, noting that “there is a contradiction between simple life and modern life. I am interested in this contradiction between the savage and the modern. I am influenced by this simplicity. ... I regret that I am not a savage because they are in sympathy with what they are doing. I don’t believe in modern life. I am disappointed, disillusioned” (209-11).

Mohanti speaks directly to the qualities Ray cites. In a 1998 interview, Mohanti extols both the virtue of simplicity and the connectedness of the villagers to their art/life. Regarding simplicity, in response to an observation that both his painting and his writing are “quite spare ... [a] stylistic simplicity [that may be] an outgrowth of your village experience” (which parallels Ray’s “one of the things I



have aimed at constantly in all these years is economy of expression” [“Introduction,” *Our Films, Their Films* 11]), Mohanti says:

It is very difficult to be simple. If people are not clear in their mind, in their thoughts, they can actually hide behind their jargon. I’m afraid that is what I find terrible now in art criticism and in literary criticism. So, yes, the village has helped me to understand the meaning of simplicity. (“Interview with Prafulla Mohanti” 17)

Consistent with Ray’s point about the “savages” being in sympathy with what they are doing, Mohanti comments in the same interview on the fusion of art and life in the village:

In the village it’s not just “art” as painting or whatever, it’s the art of life, the art of living; they are integrated. . . . In the village, art is not just about decoration, it is a way of life. A pot, a sari, a piece of jewelry—*everything* is handmade using mechanical means to help the hand, rather than having machines that make the hand redundant. (8)

Mohanti’s own experience of leaving the village and moving on to the great metropolis reminds one of Apu’s progression in the Trilogy. Unlike Apu, however, Mohanti has repeatedly returned to the village of his childhood—never permanently, but annually . . . for months at a time, and for many decades. The passage back and forth between London and Nanpur, between Metropole and village, certainly parallels Ray’s own exploration of the tension between the traditional and the modern, the old and the new. Mohanti has spent much of a lifetime hoping that perhaps the vision Gandhi once had of retaining a village-centered India (though Gandhi himself did not grow up in a village) could be realized through careful, controlled management and conscientious and generous implementation of select, sustainable technologies, through a national commitment and persistent attention to the village and the quality of life it affords or could afford. This sentiment follows from his steadfast belief that “Indian culture is essentially a village culture and to lose it in the process of development would be suicidal” (*My Village* 221). He has long been an advocate for this evolution, has committed enormous amounts of time and energy to village improvements, but he has been repeatedly disappointed and disillusioned. And the national village profile continues its accelerating decline. Regarding the state of his own village, despite his efforts to the contrary, Mohanti recently wrote that “it is very painful to watch my beautiful village go on decaying day by day” (email). The ills of village life lead him to embrace the city; the bleak realities of city life leave him longing for the village (“Interview” 2, 6).

At the dawn of his long and celebrated career in film, Satyajit Ray immersed himself in the life of a village and achieved arguably his greatest success as an artist in his village-based film *Pather Panchali*.

Not because he had a “village-centered agenda” and not because he was in any way nostalgic about village life, but because of his love for a novel that he considered “authentic,” one that “says true things about India,” he was able to capture and communicate its simplicity and the lives of characters in sympathy with their world, a world defined simultaneously by the joys of nature and the pain of deprivation. And then he moved on. In the end, however, “disappointed and disillusioned” by modern life, he spoke, perhaps nostalgically, of the virtues of the simple life.



[Production still from *Pather Panchali* (1955). Courtesy of Satyajit Ray Film and Study Center, University of California, Santa Cruz.]

### Notes

1. Quoted by Robert Sherrod, “Dr. Gandhi, Mahatma prescribes nature cures for India”, in *Life Magazine*, 15-7-1946, vol. 21, No. 3, 18.

2. 2011 Government of India census data reveal the following about total number of villages by total population:

<u>Number of persons</u>	<u>Number of villages</u>
Less than 200:	82,151
200-499:	114,732
500-999:	141,800
1000-1999:	139,164
2000-4999:	96,428
5000-9999:	18,652
10,000 or more:	4,681

3. Mohanti’s collection *Indian Village Tales* (1975) is also well worth considering, as an anthology of tales commonly shared among villagers in Nanpur.

4. Mohanti's paintings are held in the following collections, as well as by many private collectors:

The British Museum  
 National Gallery of Modern Art and Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi  
 Leeds City Art Gallery  
 University of Leeds  
 University of Kent  
 Museum of Modern Art, Berkeley  
 Academy of Fine arts, Kolkata  
 Air India  
 First National Bank, Manila  
 Indian Council for Cultural Relations

5. In 1954 Ray had shown an unfinished version of *Pather Panchali* to Monroe Wheeler, then Director of Publications and Exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, who was visiting Calcutta at the time. It was Wheeler who arranged for the "world premiere" of the film at the MoMA. Writing to Richard Griffith, curator of the Museum's film library, Wheeler said that "this documentary film might be something to look forward to" (recounted in Sengoopta 280). Wheeler had also passed some stills from the film to Edward Steichen, who included them in his celebrated MoMA exhibition *The Family of Man* (Sengoopta 280).

6. As a reviewer in the Times of India wrote in 1956 about *Pather Panchali*, "There is no trace of the theatre in it. It does away with plot, with grease and paint, with songs, with the slinky charmer and the sultry beauty, with the slapdash hero breaking into song on the slightest provocation or no provocation at all" (Adib 21).

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