



Re-inventing Bibhutibhushan's Pather Panchali: Song of the Road as a Memory-text and Testimony of Nostalgia and Belonging

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Abstract

Village life and community, festivals and celebrations, rituals and superstitions, the sense of belonging to the 'place', the events of history witnessed individually and as a community, thread of nostalgic moments which weave the several generations altogether and the changes in perception and experience can form the matrix of the study. Such Study may lead us to the understanding of change that accompanies a village. The text chosen is: Pather Panchali. Through the analysis of the text the nature of everyday life of Bengali village will be looked into. The pictures of village life represented in the selected novel, with their culture and rituals, their superstitions, their festival and celebrations will be analysed. The way the characters are constructed and situated in poverty, socially and culturally, will be contrasted with earlier Bengal. And also how they react to their situation, and the way poverty effects their modes of expression and changes the relation among them. Memory will be used as a record of shared past and a marker of past to look into the texts. Such production of memory by the writers in the fictional texts should also suggest the idea of memory as a textual strategy. The rituals, festivals or celebration bridges the relationship of memory, particularly in its collective form and its ability to create a sense of 'identity' and 'community'. The place is characterized by references to the both, a collective past and a collective ideal of small villages and better times; an ideal that many of its inhabitants either did not know, or experience in a very different way than how their earlier generations used to do. Their engagement with the past has resulted in a community built both aesthetically and ideologically with the nostalgia which has an operational role too in rendering the environment habitable.

Key-words: Village, Community, Belonging, Memory, Nostalgia, Change

Full Paper

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The text chosen is: *Pather Panchali*. Through the analysis of the text the nature of everyday life of Bengali village will be looked into. The pictures of village life represented in the selected novel, with their culture and rituals, their superstitions, their festival and celebrations will be analysed. The way the characters are constructed and situated in poverty, socially and culturally, will be contrasted with earlier Bengal. And also how they react to their situation, and the way poverty effects their modes of expression and changes the relation among them. Memory will be used as a record of shared past and a marker of past to look into the texts. Such production of memory by the writers in the fictional texts should also suggest the idea of memory as a textual strategy. The rituals, festivals or celebration bridges the relationship of memory, particularly in its collective form and its ability to create a sense of 'identity' and 'community'. The place is characterized by references to the both, a collective past and a collective ideal of small villages and better times; an ideal that many of its inhabitants either did not know, or experience in a very different way than how their earlier generations used to do. Their engagement with the past has resulted in a community built both aesthetically and ideologically with the nostalgia which has an operational role too in rendering the environment habitable.

This present paper is focused on the novel *Pather Panchali (Song of the Road)*, a remarkable masterpiece of Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay (September 12, 1894 – November 1, 1950), an Indian Bengali author and one of the leading writers of modern Bengali literature. His best known work is the autobiographical novel, *Pather Panchali (The Song of the Road)*, which was later adapted (along with *Aparajito*, the sequel) into the *Apu Trilogy* films, directed by Satyajit Ray. Popular throughout the length and breadth of India, the story has already been brought to audiences in Europe and America by the widely acclaimed film by Satyajit Ray. The immediate appeal of *Pather Panchali*, which the passage of time done nothing to weaken, can in the main be attributed to its Vivid, moving and authentic portrayal of the day-to-day life of a Brahmin household seen through the eyes of the two young children of the family, Opu and his sister Durga. Village life has been painted before by other Bengali writers sometimes with convincing realism and sometimes with nostalgically and with a sense of lost romanticism which the modern age is fast losing. But in *Pather Panchali* the village is not idealized, it is not explained or commented on, it is presented as it is objectively at times, but more often

subjectively, by the people who live in it, and in particular by the two children. Perhaps that is the reason there is little formal description. It is not necessary to describe the things one lives with everyday, one knows them, as the reader comes to know the village of Nishchindipur, through familiarity.

The social environment is all all-embracing: work and holidays, religious festivals, daily worship and the grim rites of death. The reader senses the reality of family ties, the power of the supernatural in ordinary things, the relations between the castes and between rich and poor. Not only that, how the agents of 'development', in this case the motif of 'Train'(symbolic of British Colonial Rule) is about to introduce a 'change' in the society and their life, has been indicated. In creating this picture of rural Bengal, Bandopadhyay has introduced us to an area of life which so far has been a closed book to foreign visitors to India, and which scholars know a little about.

The first section of the novel (Pather Panchali) titled "Ballali Balai" gives us the idea of an odd but widely practiced kind of marriage custom in many remote villages of the then-Bengal. As poverty was a much prevalent phenomena, men took polygamy as a means of livelihood. They looked forward to receiving dowries and also, moved from one in-laws' house to another in rotation to lead a life without earning on their own but rather enjoying on what they got during those visits to their in-laws. Indirthakrun was also married to one such man who had once left her parents' house for another wife's one but never returned. Indirthakrun later on spent her life with her parents and following her brother's death, she had nobody other than her distant cousin Harihar to live with. But still she had to change her habitat every now-and-then just like a water hyacinth does- but every time, her paths led her at Harihar's place ultimately.

The main point of cultural consequence could be notified in the last segment of the first section. The rudest face of Hindu Caste System is unveiled with the narration of Indirthakrun's death scene. Following an argument with Sharbajaya, Indirthakrun left Harihar's house. As her health was not going well for the few previous days, she could not reach her temporary home outside the village; rather she had to stop at a locality where low-caste dwellers lived. As soon as her condition started deteriorating, the locals could surely understand that she was going to die but none of them came forward to pour water into her drying throat. They thought that this might destroy Indirthakrun's Brahmin identity in addition to

making themselves even more undesirable in the view of the upper-caste community as well as in the view of their Supreme God. By the time a person from the Brahmin community reached the spot to feed water to Indirthakrun, she had already passed away.

While the second section “Aam Aatir Bhepu” completely revolves around the young lad Opu, but throughout the section Durga, Opu’s sister, was also a dominating character. Here Bibhutibhushan has successfully portrayed the sweet and sour relationship shared by all siblings. At one point, Durga would scold, and even beat Opu for disclosing her involvement in the mango-stealing activity in the neighborhood orchard; at another point, she would convince her brother at the next moment by offering him something tasty to gobble, and most of the time, the scrumptious item would be mangoes again. Basically, the second chapter mainly narrates some events rather than highlighting any major cultural issue.

The last chapter “Akrur Sangbad” focuses on the ever prevailing concern regarding the discrimination between rich and poor in the undivided Bengal Region. Here, Bibhutibhushan has again succeeded to depict how a Brahmin housewife feels when she has to transform herself into a housemaid because of poverty. While reading the fine description, we could clearly sense the pain of Sharbajaya and at this point, there could hardly be any person who will be able to hold his tears back. Moreover, the treatment that her son, Opu, received from her shelterer also magnifies the way poor were treated at that period by the elite society.

Indeed, “Pather Panchali” is a complete chronicle of the ups and downs experienced by an individual throughout his lifetime and also a testament of some notable cultural practices practiced in the undivided Bengal.

There was one of the famous short poems (translated to English ,for those who have read the original, forgive me for my purely functional non-poetic translation),) by Rabindranath Tagore that I remember in this context,

“ I have been gone everywhere, spent a lot of money—travelled to the mountains, seen the sea.....trying always to find beauty. I now realize that all the time I wandered the earth, I missed seeing the splendour that lay before me, just 2 steps from my door—a dewdrop glistening on a blade of grass”.

If anything ever lived upto the essence of the poem, it is *Pather Panchali*. It opened the eyes of the world to the beauty that lay in the most unexpected of places—rural, poverty-stricken Bengal and in the lives of those struggling to live there. If there is something at the heart of Pather Panchali, it is this overwhelming power of life that asserts itself even in the face of poverty, misery and death. the sheer weight of the visuals— the trance-like dance of the raindrops on the pond, the wind rustling through the kaashphool, the sweet vendor’s reflection gliding over the pond —and the timeless simplicity of its story still have the power to hypnotize a generation brought up on cell-phones and laptops....a generation in which many of us have never seen or shall ever see a “real” village.

So, when coming down to analyze, what are the factors that work through the piece of art to makes it an encyclopedia of rural life?

- 1) The nature of everyday life of Bengali village has been betrayed. The authentic pictures of village life represented in the author’s writing with their culture and rituals, their superstitions, their festivals and celebrations.

There are particular rituals or cultural connotations to every culture. For example, these cultural problems become more difficult. The use of a particular word or phrase in Bengali is sufficient to invoke for a reader of that language a whole sequence an related situations. To take a simple Bengali example, the word *Ekadoshi*, which occurs frequently in the novel, needs no gloss for the Bengali reader, but for the English Readers full comprehension must be told that the term is the name of the eleventh day of the lunar fortnight, which Hindu Widows are required to observe a fast. Then too there is the complex business of ritual defilement which the Hindu taught from childhood and knows thereafter automatically, but of which English readers will be ignorant.

- 2) The pictures of poverty, the way the characters are constructed and situated in that poverty. Not only that, how they react to their situation, how the poverty effects their modes of expression and changes the relations among them. For the Director, Satyajit Ray who made the movie version of the novel, it is been said, ‘He made the poverty look beautiful’.
- 3) The social manifestation of caste, economic disparities in a close-knit unit like village are evident. The human cost of such discriminating categories has been brought out. This kind of incidents are very evident in villages. In the text, Pather Panchali the incident of Indirthakrun’s death can be shown as an example to this. While she was living

her last moments in a locality is surrounded by the low-caste people, everybody knew that she is about to die but no one came forward to pour holy water in her dying throat, just because they thought she belonged to a Upper-caste Brahmin society and drinking her last drop of water from a low-caste people might destroy her Brahmin identity.

4) The use of memory as a record of shared past and a marker of past has been looked into.

The story of the novel is mainly about Opu and Durga and the reader lives and grows with them, feels for them, looks through their eyes, and knows the world and the people in it as they know them. The other principals are Shorbojoya and Horihor and their poor and dilapidated home, and the village Nischindipur, with its galaxy of children, men , women on the one hand, and on the other, portrayed so often as personified beings, the trees, fruits and flowers, the paths through the village, past the houses, down to bathing steps, through the jungle and across the open country, the birds, the sky, the clouds, and Opu's constant friend , the evening sun. Occasionally the scene is set outside Nischindipur, as when Opu goes away with his father and meets Omola, or when Horihor is looking for work in at Krishnanagar; but in a very real sense they are still at home. Opu's mind at every turn harks back to Durga and Shorbojoya; and his family's plight is never out of Horihor's mind. Even when Opu in imagination soars into far distances of the sky or follows the road of his dreams beyond the horizon, he rushes back and throws his arms around his mother. And herein lies the unity of the book. 'Life in a poor Bengali Village does ramble' and may be for that reason the story/narrative also has a rambling quality in them. But it is emotionally coherent and the narrative is integrated about the children of the village. And the climax is surely reached when Opu and his parents leave Nischindipur. When the train journey to Benares begins, the cast has already been broken up. This is really a nostalgic moment for Opu ; for him the road goes on, but Durga, his home and the village, are now finally left behind. As the train draws away from the station, the last chords of the symphony are struck, and the rest should be silence.

But the merits of the work rests on the ease with which it is written, with its naturally executed changes of style, and on the vivid and sympathetic realism of its portrayal of the day-to-day life of the two children, their parents and the other member of the village community. The life of the people in the 'place' placed in a social , cultural and economic context reveal a whole new level in the plot. The high-low caste discrimination is evident, but it is the economy dictates

over the caste-system. The Indir Thakrun's death is a cruel example of the rudest face of Hindu Caste-system. Following an argument with Sharbajaya, Indirthakrun left Harihar's house. As her health was not going well for the few previous days, she could not reach her temporary home outside the village; rather she had to stop at a locality where low-caste dwellers lived. As soon as her condition started deteriorating, the locals could surely understand that she was going to die but none of them came forward to pour water into her drying throat. They thought that this might destroy Indirthakrun's Brahmin identity in addition to making themselves even more undesirable in the view of the upper-caste community as well as in the view of their Supreme God. By the time a person from the Brahmin community reached the spot to feed water to Indirthakrun, she had already passed away. But as I said the economy dictates the life most here. As inspite of being a High-caste Brahmin, their life is miserable due to lack of enough income to sustain them and it is the reason why in spite of being a Brahmin Scholar and aspired Playwright in the days to come, Horihor spends almost most of his time searching for work and to fulfill the basic needs of his family, forgetting his dream and even then also he fails miserably as he loses his daughter due to lack of proper treatment. And Shorbojoya lives her life as a maid servant in spite of born in a Brahmin family. Their daughter, Durga, though a happy-go-lucky girl, secretly desires for the things her playmates own and finally it is this poverty that compels her to steal the things that she does not own and she resort to the act of stealing, be it the fruits from the neighbor's orchard, or the small gold jar which shejhou lost. Of course, nobody knows about till the end of the story until except finds out at dead end of the story as her hiding spot only Opu knew. As soon as he finds it out, he throws it away in the heart of the Bamboo grove where the bushes grew thickest — the burial of a small secret memory in collusion with Nature. Thus 'memory' has been trickled in every part and parcel of *Pather Panchali*. Again, the chord of 'nostalgia' is struck right at the dead end with Opu looking out of the train window sobbing his goodbyes to his sister, his home and his village and the thousands of memory through which they are bound together like eating secretly the stolen mangoes from neighbour's backyard, running after a candyman who passes through the village, watching a kaleidoscope shown by a vendor and being marvelled by its exquisiteness, walking miles far away from their home just to have a glimpse of the train and so on. The description is so beautiful that we are transported to the place where the kids enjoy and have fun and it is bound to evoke memories of our childhood. Thus Bibhutibhushan's *Pather Panchali* rings the truth again and again that poverty, death and deprivation are mere sidelights to the inexorable march of village life.

In the field of cultural studies, Village can be termed as a cultural unit. In fact the definition of 'Village' depends on how we look at it and approach it. Not only village but village life and community, their festivals and celebrations, their rituals and superstitions, the sense of belonging to the 'place' they live in, the events of history they witnessed as an individual and as a community, the thread of nostalgic moments which weave the several generations altogether and the changes in perception and experience that has occurred through generations. Memory could possibly be a resource or device to look into these cultural aspects of a village and more which might define the change and how it has taken place, the memory that people shared as a community and also as an individual.

Focusing on the concept of "The Village", it can be said that the village – as an idea, an organizing principle, and as a basis for life- remains very powerful even today. Villages are perceived to be not only units of society, but culture, community, identity and the structures on which analysis of rural life is based. Given the power of the village as an idea, it is imperative that we clarify our conception of what the village was, what it has become, and how processes of change have manifested themselves in the village. Not only this, how this element of 'Change' can be measured or to put it in other words, what should be the parameters through which change can be measured.

In the context of the text under reference, we can see that the village is presented as it is, not idealized ; it is not explained, nor commented on. In other sense, it has not been projected as a 'traditional' village, but like a very real one with its flaws and authentic strokes of reality. The very village 'Nischindipur' becomes a representative of a typical Bengali village and yet very individualistic by the surrounding, the people who live in it, Opu and his family and the sense of belonging with the 'place' they live in and the dilapidated house they reside in. When I say that the scene is set outside Nischindipur (the village), as when Opu goes away with his father and meets Omola, or when Horihor, the father, is looking for work at Krishnanagar(another 'place'), but in a very real sense, they are still at home. Opu's mind at every turn harks back to the village, back to Durga and Shorbojoya, and his family's plight is never out of Horihor's mind, just like Opu in imagination soars high into the far distances of the sky or follows the road of his dreams beyond the horizon, he rushes back and throws his arms around his mother. It is the nostalgia for the 'village', their 'place' that works here. That is the reason even when they are physically outside the village, they are quite so, well, not at all psychologically.

Apart from all these, there are one of the most important symbol, Trains, that is. We first hear one in *Panchali* as Apu's father is teaching him to write in an evening; there's the sound of the engine, and a whistle; the boy's wondering face as he asks his sister where the line is, and if she's ever seen a train. Trains in *Panchali* are heard at first afar off, a magic suggestion that a bigger, more interesting world exists beyond the village. Not only in *Pather Panchali* alone, in each of the trilogy the Train serves an important role gradually and systematically developed for the need of the plot. The train echoes like banshees in all the three sequels of Apu Trilogy. It is also the agent of 'Development', symbolizing that of the British Colonial Rule, that is about to bring 'change' in the village and in the life of the villagers. And it is also suggestive of a more mechanical and so called 'developed' (whatever that means) life of which these people are not aware of. Apu stands still, amazed and thrilled and this is the initial effect that a village receives when first time it is introduced to 'development'. In the later two sequels, Apu's horizon of vision increases gradually and he gets more and more well acquainted with the agents of 'modernity' and 'development' (symbolizing as a 'globe').

Even if we see the movie adaptations, everywhere in these films, there are apertures- windows,-doors-entrances-exits. They suggest escape, but also imprisonment, perception and distance and failure to connect. We first see the young Opu in *Panchali* as an eye peeping through a blanket; it is actually about how the hole through which he sees life becomes wider and wider until, at the end, there is no hole left. The old Aunt demonstrates the paucity of her wardrobe by holding up her shawl and peeping through the hole through in that. Apu and his sister first view the sweet-seller through a hole in their brick-wall(the house, as said, is in constant need of repair). Thus it makes an emptiness signify anything.

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