

DEVELOPMENTALIST TURN: RECOVERING RAY'S PANCHALI

SOURIN BHATTACHARYA

Aesthetic judgements may not be the last thing to be said about any work of art. We may have other kinds of interest when reading a novel, experiencing a theatre or viewing a film. To deliver a judgement on the mere aesthetic quality of a work is often trivial, if not downright misleading. 'Speaking aesthetically' thus does not always carry much sense beyond giving an expression of one's subjective preferences. These preferences also are analysable and in themselves they may constitute an important area of discourse, which, one should remember, is a discourse different from that of the primary work under consideration. With reference to any work of art there can be a discourse of that work itself and an array of associated or collateral discourses of so many subjective preferences. But the 'discourse of that work itself' is again not so simple a structure. Such a discourse is not simply there up for verification or out for our inspection and examination. The discourse itself gets constituted through our readings, through so many of our readings in fact and in our readings there can be an interference of our subjective preferences, may not be in a pure form though. These preferences plus do constitute our readings and our readings constitute the discourse of the work itself and thus the two levels of discourses may also have several interfaces.

The above must not be taken to mean that aesthetic analyses, whatever that may mean or even technical considerations are unimportant. On the contrary, it is to enrich our conceptualisation of the 'aesthetic' and to lend substance to what is usually known as the 'mere technical' that we may start off from the end of the different layers of discourse. This may bring us to the context of history and culture. All our spheres of activity are historically contained and culturally moulded. Thus to look into a work of art is also to look for the historical and cultural constitution of the work. This is often evident in a very straightforward manner. The storyline in a novel or a film or even in epics of the dimensions of the *Ramayana* or the *Mahabharata* usually weaves a pattern leading to the structure of a narrative. The narrative is shaped out of the elements of the story when they are put into a certain kind of relational network. Both these levels should hold our attention for different reasons. The elements of the story may directly give us information about historical and cultural state of the society in the period concerned and the narrative through the structure of relations tells us about the way the people used to look upon their own state. But since there is representation involved in what we get to know, we do not expect to know the thing-in-itself. We know things only through layers of refraction.

In a sense all our doings and utterings basically have a discrete character. But that we may make pictures, tell stories and sculpt figures with these is made possible through our being able to gather all our elements into a structure of relations. This is how we build our narratives. A given set of elements may very well enable us to build different narratives. This indicates a kind of freedom the artist loves to enjoy. But there can also be a narrativising role at the level of reception. The receptor's work thus also becomes creative. Thus with any work of art we are confronted with these two levels of the narrative — the creator's and the receptor's. The creator may not really be conscious of

her/ his narrative for she/ he is primarily telling a story or painting a picture, sculpting a figure or making a film. But the artist has to arrange the elements to bind them into a certain structure and it is here that there emerges a narrative. The signs of the times enter the work of art at this level of arrangement of elements and probably also at other levels as well. We are narrativising also at the level of reception of the same work of art. And there is no reason why the two should necessarily coincide. For everything else apart, there may be a separation of times: we often have to take a work of art that was made in a different age. Even when the creation and the reception belong to the same age, there may be wide differences in our perception for we may share the times differently. This is all the more pertinent for modern times. When the hold of the collective life was relatively stronger, the social sharing could be more homogeneous. But with the emergence of the individual that homogeneity gets fractured, there occur divergences in the social sharing of times. To bring back the homogeneity of perceptual experiences one needs to have an external reinforcing mechanism often working through cultural dispersals. The receptor thus builds a narrative of his/ her own, which bears the mark of all these complexities. That also contains the signs of the receptor's times.

Hence, there are two open spaces. One is at the level of the artist, the creator, the builder of the narrative, who exercises her/ his options on the elements of the work of art. The narrator through the particular mode of the weaving of the pattern happens to say something. What does the narrator say? How do we reach, what he/ she says really? The receptor's open space becomes important at this point. The receptor reaches the narrator through the narration itself, whatever else may be put at her/ his disposal, maybe in the form of biographical notes, or in the form of references to the historical events may have a complementary role at the most. The elements of the creator are the elements at the hands of the receptor as well. The receptor's narrative has also to be built up basically on the same elements. But while making his/ her narrative he/ she need no longer be constrained by the terms laid down by the creator's narrative. This is precisely her/ his open space. It is for the openness of this space that one has always to be on one's guard so that no arbitrary element may creep in at the level of the receptor's narrative. New elements in the narrative in the form of new turns and unexplored suggestions must be let in but that what is arbitrary must be filtered out. The borderline between novelty and arbitrariness certainly remains a grey area. Here there is no surer guide than commonsense and the maturity of one's aesthetic judgement. So the aesthetic does come back and it comes back in an urgent way. In this idea of a kind of independent narrativisation we may find a way out from the shackles of a mere internal reading of the text and once we do that many a possibility may open up for we may then work on a collateral vision of hitherto unsuspected social forces now informed with meaning.

Talking about films we have by now quite a good tradition of talking about the state, the nation and the nation-state and their narratives. We have used this narrative in writing about Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali* and also about the Apu trilogy as a whole. Geeta Kapur in her article in *Journal of Arts and Ideas*¹ presents an in-depth analysis of the creative work done here in the first decade after our independence. The paper virtually becomes a case study of early Ray. A newly independent modern nation-state was emerging. There was enough enthusiasm all around. Maybe that its reach was limited

but the enthusiasm itself was genuine in at least the segment of the society that could be so reached. There was nothing unnatural in it that one would like to respond to Ray's trilogy in this perspective of transition to modernity. But the openness of the narrative space we have referred to would probably allow us to build other competing narratives as well.

Using Ray to construct a narrative of our creativity of the first post-independence decade one is naturally drawn close to Tagore. After all, Ray had an early phase in Tagore's institution at Santiniketan. As an art student there, Ray had the opportunity of experiencing the Tagore feel, though it was the very last days of the poet. But the ambience was there, with which Ray had possibly rather felt a kind of internal distance. While he was painting nature there, *Citizen Kane*, he laments in his later reminiscences, was being shown in Calcutta, a film he was loath to miss.

Satyajit, Santiniketan, Rabindranath, Bengal renaissance, the dawning of nineteenth century political thought. All this seem to go well within a certain kind of a model. Brahmo morality, filmmaking within the ambit of close literary tradition, the traces of the nineteenth century modernity of mind, all that could be said to constitute the basic elements of Ray's aesthetic perception. In this model there penetrates a certain narrative of the Tagore-Santiniketan project. Santiniketan symbolically represents pan-Asian revivalism and Tagore inasmuch as he was committed to the rural craft-based technology was as though poised against industrial modernity. 1947 was a termination of all this, leaving at most only traces of nostalgic remembrances. Then comes a new era, a new regime and the beginning of a new phase of modernity with a new face altogether. The narrative of a model like this is all too familiar to all of us. Not just Gandhi, Tagore also had to face bitter criticisms for being atavistic, tenaciously clinging to the image of a glorious past. Had to face even embarrassment in foreign lands, causing consternation in the minds of his foreign hosts.² The temperamental differences often seemed unbridgeable. We have not even shied back from fitting Tagore against machine—based industrial civilisation. But the Santiniketan narrative inclusive of Sriniketan could also be arranged in a different way. Instances are not rare where one tends to find an even more intense modern meaning in a more intimate reading of the project. The dimensions of modernity that we often talk about are all too linear. The premises of modernity are as though not temporally or spatially related. To many that view of modernity might very well seem to be shapeless. One, therefore, could reasonably look for different kinds of modernity in different contexts, making for modernisms in the plural.

Once we reach this point we can take upon ourselves the responsibility of a search for our modernity. Do we find any promise of this search in the Sriniketan-Santiniketan project? No point being bothered about its success or failure, the question is our being able or not to get to the idea of the project. Shouldn't our modernity have anything to derive from an enormous work-oriented project to displace the form of modernity that is based on individuality into a form based instead on a confident selfhood that looks for authentic modes of expression, social and aesthetic, in fact both merged into one full identity? One may have something here to enrich one's vision of the alternative narrative of modernity. In its attitude towards environment, in its search for water in an arid zone,

in its use of organic manure, in its rhythmic cadence of a cooperative life the initiative that was taken to shape a kind of community living was no less modern. True there were gaps and limitations and inadequacies. The question, as I have said, is not one of success or failure. It is the conceptual scheme of things that should hold our attention now.

Just as we can have one kind of narrative for Ray's *Pather Panchali* and Apu Trilogy starting off with one kind of narrative for Tagore and Santiniketan, so we can probably reach another kind of narrative for Ray's modernity if we can successfully question the earlier narrative. *Pather Panchali* was a 1955 film. We can very well describe those times in the mid-fifties of the last century as the moment of development. It was not yet a full decade after the Indian independence, that is after the political transfer of power, that is after the administrative transfer of power in India. The first spell of emotional upsurge was yet to die down. As a matter of fact the emotions were sought to be kept alive in a proactive manner on the part of the state. One may recall that the tenth anniversary of the independence day was celebrated in 1957 on a rather grand scale and on this occasion that year the schools and colleges remained closed for both days, the 15th and 16th of August. One may question the wisdom of declaration of public holidays, but there is no denying the fact that these are unmistakable signs of state reconstruction of the social mind. It is in this logic that we are allowed to enjoy a public holiday even for a 'historic' victory in a cricket test match at Kanpur. The same logic should have prompted a similar holiday when the Mohunbagan club won the IFA shield in 1911, but those were other times.

The mid-fifties of the last century were a moment of development. In a rough division of the first half century of independent development activities the beginning of the decline is usually located in the middle of the sixties, the seventies and the eighties being decades of crisis and the nineties marking the beginning of a new meaning of development altogether. The mid-fifties then were a period when the first five-year plan was coming to an end, which by no stretch of imagination could be taken to be a very big effort in development planning. Nevertheless, the enthusiasm it could generate in planning itself was truly remarkable. It was commonsense then that that would be the way India was to revive herself. To bear any doubt about that was anathema. Then came the second five-year plan in 1956. This was the period of the famous Mahalanobis model, of Nehruvian socialism, state-sponsored planned economic development and the spirit of the Avadi session of the Indian National Congress that pledged to build a socialistic pattern of society in India. This was the so-called progressive phase of India's development. Days of questioning 'progress' itself were yet to come. A particular paradigm of development was unfolding itself through such mega projects as the multipurpose river valley developments at Damodar and Bhakra-Nangal. This was the period when India was set on, in Nehru's metaphor, to build her new temples of modern times in the form of these engineering wonders. Incidentally, was this choice of the temple metaphor careful or casual on Nehru's part? Did Nehru realize right then that to put the message through it would be prudent to speak in these terms or it simply sneaked into his subconscious? Is it symptomatic of a kind of paradox for modern India? Was the chasm between tradition and modernity these sought to be wished away?

We are talking about development and the memories of that development. Whose memories are we talking about anyway? It is, to be sure, the memories of the likes of us who happened to have shared the process of that development. But there were many, too many really, whom the process had scarcely even touched. They are the excluded ones. The exclusion has been made possible through many a development at the levels of society, economy, politics and culture and education. This is certainly nobody's case that there had been no physical impact of the development processes on the excluded segment. What we want to argue is that to be merely touched by the developmental activities is one thing, while to be submerged in its memories and be romantically nostalgic about that is another. One needs to share not just the development experiences but also the development narrative for this nostalgia. We may share the narrative of development without sharing the development narrative. The narrative of development may be confined to the physicality while the development narrative has to concern itself with the responses to that physicality. If we have to talk about the moment of development, then we have to talk about both these levels.

The development narrative of the fifties was much broader in its sweep than the simple narrative of development. It had many other elements as well. Remember this was also the period of cold war which was so intense in its psychological impact that the world events then came to be easily, if not entirely accurately, interpreted in bipolar terms. The western capitalist democracies under the hegemonic leadership of the USA on the one hand and the fledgling socialist republics under a sort of totalitarian control of the USSR on the other. The international events and relations were the result of actions and interactions of these two polar powers. The competition between the two, their mutual distrust and intolerance were nearly total. The socialism of the Soviet circle was then trying to gain self-confidence, it was to play a game of one-upmanship with the West even in matters of technological industrialisation. The West was materially afraid of the East. In nuclear terms, the Eastern socialism was already comparable. The 1957 Soviet Sputnik sent shockwaves to the western psyche. When this was the spirit of the times, the conceptual categories of progress and reaction seemed to be unproblematically postured. It was reactionary to prepare for nuclear warfare, while it was progressive to organise peace movements. The reaction was out to destroy human civilisation, progress was to take guards, reaction was aligned to vast accumulated capital, associated science and technology being only too eager to serve its cause, while progress was to think out newer ways of resistance, bereft of power and resources it seemed to be left in the wilderness. The Soviets then symbolised progress, the Sino-Soviet rift was still years ahead and the Sino-Indian conflict was still far off. When this was the nature of perception of world events, our Nehru was busy along with Nasser of Egypt and Tito of Yugoslavia organising the non-alignment movement. The 1955 Bandung conference, the peace efforts in the Korean war before this and such other events of the period also made important contributions to shape the development narrative.

The state is doubtlessly the principal protagonist in this development narrative. That was the mark of progress then. The responsibilities of the state almost appeared to be total and that came to be rather easily accepted. Even in matters of art and culture the role of the state was then welcome. The state also began playing a collaborative role in

these fields. Institutions like the Sahitya Akademi and the Sangeet Natak Akademi were then coming up wholly under state patronage. The merit and the efficacy of their functioning are a different question. But there can be no doubt about the fact that through the mediation of these institutions it was being somewhat possible to move towards some kind of an idea of Indianness. No point in surmising if this idea was there right in the beginning when these institutional policies were being conceived. But one cannot also reasonably doubt the fact that through these efforts the regional works of art to a certain extent could assume an Indian character. The awards and fellowships of these akademis bring with them an all-India recognition. Moreover, it is important that the regional works now merit judgements by all-India standards. A regional play or a film now more easily and naturally claim to be judged in the Indian perspective. While set within the matrix of regional language and culture, the works now assume an Indian face. This extension was no mean achievement. Maybe not exactly consciously, but through all these a certain state design was being fulfilled. 'Indian literature is one written in different languages', this theoretical position of the Sahitya Akademi is an important concept, to be sure, to move towards acquiring an all-India character. These new developments also posed serious problems. On the one hand it was important to judge whether this Indian character was nourishing or debilitating for the regional cultures, as it was important on the other to know whether this was unduly enabling the state to stretch its arms to undesirable lengths. To build a pan-Indian nation-state was conducive to the interests of organized capital. Too much regional intervention, there was bound to lead to clashes and conflicts. And the emergence of a sense of regional ethno-identity was also inevitable in the backdrop of a free and fearless development of regional cultures. Did these early social antinomies ultimately develop into the crisis of national unity and integrity, which was to cause so much state headache as to call for a constitutional amendment (42nd amendment, 1976) for a verbal insertion of the word 'integrity'?³ These processes were certainly more complex. But one may reasonably note that our thinking of industrialization of the fifties was neatly compatible with our thinking of this extension of the state and state-sponsored cultural activities. These activities gradually extended to all these fields of literature, music, drama, fine arts and films. Not by design and certainly not within this mode, but that the making of *Pather Panchali* was also to depend on state funding to get over the initial financial crisis almost inevitable for any such project based on solely private initiative may appear symbolically significant. But it would be quite mechanical to try to see *Pather Panchali* merely for this funding question to be set within this state narrative. Those who feel that *Pather Panchali* has in fact its rightful place there must have other reasons too.

Whatever may be the coincidences, the decade of the fifties was a remarkable period for drama and films. 1954 was marked by *Raktakarabi* and 1955 by *Pather Panchali*. This was the decade when all three, Sombhu Mitra, Satyajit Ray and Ritwik Ghatak were simultaneously working vigorously. Ray and Ghatak were truly contemporaneous. Ghatak's *Nagarik* was in fact made a little earlier than *Pather Panchali*, which marks the beginning of that new wave. Ray's work since then moves forward steadily and Ghatak gradually makes *Ajantrik* (1958), *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960), *Komal Gandhar* (1961) and *Subarnarekha* (1965). All this could be seen to be an explosion. The exact nature of the self-image of these directors must be largely a matter

of speculation. Some of them may not like to place themselves very securely within any tradition of Bangla films. But even *Pather Panchali* may be seen to have a history linked to the tradition of indigenous films. I am not exactly speaking of influence; more important is a question of succession. Leaving out such directors as Nitin Bose, we may legitimately start thinking from *Udayer Pathe* (1944). The quality of the film language used here is not being judged. We are thinking of the idea of the film, the mode of its making, its situation in the total cultural scenario of the time. Looked at this way this film may be taken as an important turning point in the story of this succession. The kind of situation that films enjoy in our total cultural map now has not always been there. It took years to emerge and our films had to earn that position. There are many ups and downs here and many a twist in our socio-cultural condition. The cultural respectability of films owes much to *Udayer Pathe*. After this even a random roll of names should include *Anjagarh* (1948), *Chhinnamul* (1951), *Pathik* (1953), *Natun Ihudi* (1953) and *Dukkhir Imam* (1954).

This moment of films, therefore, touches upon the moment of development, at least in respect of temporal coincidence. Is that possibly one of the reasons why we should feel tempted to see *Pather Panchali* within the development narrative? For Apu trilogy this possibility certainly cannot be ruled out. The motif of the railways, the death of Durga, the end of the feudal placidity of rural Bengal, the attempt to escape village poverty for the family as a whole, and then the gradual uncertain steps of Apu towards the problem-ridden hard realities of life, the emergence of the individual in him through succession of personal loss and tragedy — Apu leaves behind all his past and inexorably moves into his world. There are turns and twists in this journey, and there is a death in each of its turns. The family moves to Kasi after Durga's death, the mother and the son leave Kasi again after the father's death and Apu finally leaves the rural life after the lonely death of his mother in their new-found village home. With Aparna's death Apu takes his plunge into the unknown. With these discrete elements one may build a narrative of forward movement in a linearly progressive manner. But with the same elements one may also choose to build another narrative that may have tensions and fissures. They wanted to come out of the wastage and humiliation of life in Kasi and came back to Manasapota with an old distant relative of theirs. On Sarbajaya's part the decision was not easy to take, but her silent look on the staircase of her rich employer's house tells a lot. Her decision was not simply a helpless surrender to an unknown fate. That remarkable shot that focuses on her expressive pensive melancholy eyes seems to suggest an element of an active rational decision. The strength involved in this meaningful decision in a state of desperation may also be seen to have an element of genuine modernity in it. Sarbajaya may have nursed the idea in her mind that Apu would eventually take to the family profession of a brahmin priest. That could give some kind of security to the mother-son unit. But Apu would have other ideas and with Sarbajaya's death even the faint possibility of her idea materialising came to an end. But note the paradox. If Sarbajaya's active decision had a touch of modernity in it, this modernity itself would need the continuity of the traditional for its survival. So things are not that straight. Requested by the old man that Apu should perform the last rites of his mother in the village itself Apu replies that he would do that at Kalighat in Kolkata. He then moves forward with his small things bundled up into a packet. His uncertain steps into the future

also did not lead to anything straight and simple. During his aimless roaming days Apu was lost to the rest of the world, but then when he comes back he finally takes Kajal up on his shoulders. Kajal symbolises to Apu his disastrous past and Apu in fact had meant to pass that over. To take a leap from one phase of life to another is not all too simple. In our moment of the modernity debate now may we not arrange things into such a non-linear narrative?

Our social times influence the kind of narrative that we may build. In fact, our narratives are a way of negotiating our times. *Pather Panchali* or the Apu trilogy was at one time possibly looked upon in a way that bore the mark of 'progress' as a sign of one particular phase of our social times. In our social moment now we may feel free to construct a new reading of the same text. This would call for a constitution of a new narrative. To draw theoretical sustenance we proposed a kind of reworking of the Sriniketan-Santiniketan narrative. If we can derive alternative suggestions from that model, then we may also grope for ways of emancipation from the pressures of untainted modernity. To move away from modernity is not necessarily to move into primitivism. There can be faces of modernity. Sriniketan-Santiniketan may represent one such face. Related to this there may be a cognate reading of the Apu texts full of fissures and disjunctions. It may not really be a narrative of neat continuity.

That well-knit narrative of development and the development narrative of the early days both have now developed cracks. This doesn't mean that we no longer talk of development. We do talk of it to be sure, in fact at the moment here if anything we are a little more passionate about it. Our politics today seems totally wedded to development. Politics seems not to have any broader and nobler ideal. Even in these days of developmentalist politics the narrative of development is broken. This is to mean that development can no longer progress in a linear straightforward manner. It could possibly never do so. But its fractures, distortions and rough edges so far would mostly escape our attention. That we would not notice them was what the development narrative did to it. The role of the narrative becomes important precisely here. What happens to the narrative of development may be better perceived through what happens to the development narrative. The current development narrative would possibly show us that not much could really be achieved through state diktat alone. One can very well sanction a certain amount of money to construct a macadamised road that would run right through the village. But whether the road would in fact be constructed and what would be its quality, if constructed at all, would no longer be matters over which the state machinery may have any effective control. At that stage it really becomes closely linked to the social structure and the web of social relations. Furthermore, suppose the road is constructed alright. What does it mean for development after all? How does that village stand to benefit from this? The goods that would be transported through that road may mean different things for the village in different circumstances. What if this village for this road gets into the vortex of things of international drug trafficking? That we have to look at these things, that while assessing development activities we have to take also these things into account is a teaching of the development narrative. That the narrative of development is fractured today can only be seen through the development narrative. This narrative has been caused by social experiences and there we must remember that it has no fixed static frame. It has

a fluidity in it and a certain kind of pattern seems to emerge as though from the stirrings of the muddy water of critical perceptions of our social existence. No clearer picture can possibly be ever expected.

That the narrative of development got fragmented may be taken to suggest that in the first phase of our development perception there was possibly no room for the complexities of social relations. We failed to see the depths to which the complexities of life could really penetrate. We were bent on making faultless plans and staked all our resources to provide for expenses of ever attractive projects. No wonder that these development efforts failed us. Development is after all a social process. It is difficult to make any headway here without allowing oneself to be totally submerged in the whirlpool of the lived experiences of the life of the community. One has to take account of the relations of love and hatred, the clashes and conflicts of the individual interests as also the tension between different social classes and the evils of machinations and manipulations. A formal—institutional approach as embodied in such state—level efforts as CDP (Community Development Programme), IRDP (Intensive Rural Development Programme), CADP (Comprehensive Area Development Project), Indira Rozgar Yojana etc. may lead us from one project to another but may not enable us to touch the people's life except in a very superficial manner. Even with this there can be a certain kind of development, there can, of course, be a certain degree of technological advancement and to that extent a certain amount of modernisation is possible. This development is likely to remain set to the exterior and without much of an internal impact on the social life. It is fraught with other kinds of danger, a danger of destabilized equilibrium.

Does the film *Pather Panchali* have a note of warning here for this moment of the development narrative? Maybe the maker of the film had nothing like this in his mind, it doesn't matter really. Our reception may claim this much autonomy, only if it does not have to do much violence to the text itself. We have only to examine perceptively if the body of the film allows any such suggestion. Well, here is a film made in a very affectionate tone with a kind of empathy for the community life. Does it really go well with the statist mentality inherent in the rule-oriented bureaucratic temperament? Following this lead we may push our inquiry a little further.

Let us look for small evidences. Why did Ray make the film at all? What was his attraction for the novel *Pather Panchali*? And the attraction was so intense that he left aside the long-cherished *Ghare Baire* project and went out to search for location around Garia-Boral-Mallikpur. He had no producer to back up the project, really had to take a lot of financial risk in the early stages. Shooting had to be interrupted. The continuous compact shooting schedule for which he was later known was really for later years. *Ghare Baire* was not forgotten after all, it merely remained postponed for about thirty or so years. And that film was also about this tension between the home and the world, the inside and the outside in fact. Satyajit Ray in his articles often refers to the pictorial quality of Bibhutibhusan's writings. But was *Pather Panchali* only that? Here is what Ray says why he had chosen *Pather Panchali* for his debut film:

'I chose *Pather Panchali* for the qualities that made it a great book:

its humanism, its lyricism and its ring of truth.’⁴

These were some very natural qualities for which one can make a choice. The humanism and the lyricism are well talked about, both for the novel and for the film. The film was acclaimed in the Cannes festival for the documentation of the human quality in it. But ‘its ring of truth’ needs to be given attention to. In a sense all that we get in a novel or a film is artificial, made up, not real that way. But certain things and certain pronouncements do sound all right, it appears to have been rightly said. What makes it like that defies clear analysis and description.

This ring of truth is a rare quality indeed and it is this that attracted the director. How he would go about filming this novel? The director has this to say:

‘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.’⁵

While thinking about the form of the film the director experiences a transcendence. The ‘ring of truth’ in the novel had an attraction for him. Now the ‘rambling quality’ also draws his attention. There can be no straight orientation, you take a turn here, make a fast move there, then stop suddenly, then again begin a hesitant move perhaps. This meandering way of our narrative discourse is rather recently being probed with all the seriousness it deserves. For the authenticity of the film, Satyajit finds it necessary to have the rambling quality in its form. He points to an important social truth: ‘life in a poor Bengal village does ramble’. This vision of the poverty—stricken rural Bengal gets intermingled with the sense of the form of the film. It was then not merely the pictorial quality of *Pather Panchali* that attracted him, it had even other elements of attraction.

Following this strand of thought may we look for an alternative? The narrative of development and the development narrative of the middle fifties were relatively more linear, they were then not prepared for the non-linearity of the rambling. How important are these underlying tensions of the non-linear are now being gradually realised through experiences, maybe it has not yet been fully realised. But we may wish to look for them in our narrative of today. May we not, therefore, take Ray’s pronouncements on the fifties of his experience as a sort of warning?

Well, the vision of the rambling was not just there for Satyajit to be picked up. In the 1978 piece referred to above he records: ‘what I lacked was first-hand acquaintance with the milieu of the story’. He lamented the lack of first-hand acquaintance, it had not deterred him. You need to know what you do not know. He knew that for knowing the unknown it ‘was not enough’ to depend solely on the novel. This led him to step out. The inspiration of the Italian neorealism may not have been the only decisive factor. For his location he passed over Jadavpur and Garia and finally settled for Boral. In the aftershock of partition, Jadavpur, Bagha Jatin, Bijaygarh were then already experiencing the winds of change, new refugee colonies were already coming up in these areas. Boral was

relatively unshaken till then. It is here that he looked for that rambling quality of life. The following passage shows what the director gets here:

‘While far from being an adventurer in the physical sense, the 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: you wanted to observe and probe, to catch the revealing details, the telling gestures, the particular turns of speech’.⁶

Once you step out you have then this entire world for you to savour. All this may be your entry to the life of the community. How do you draw your sustenance unless you learn to look for these things? Do our narrative of development and the development narrative remain somewhat undernourished for this lack of acquaintance?

References:

1. Kapur, Geeta, ‘Cultural Creativity in the First Decade: The Example of Satyajit Ray’, *Journal of Arts and Ideas*, No. 23 -24, January, 1993.
1. Tagore, Rabindranath, *Talks in China* (Edited by Sisir Kumar Das) Rabindra Bhavana, Visva-Bharati, 1999.
2. Government of India, Ministry of Law, justice and Company Affairs — *The Constitution of India*, Preamble, p.1, fn. 1 and 2.
3. Ray, Satyajit — ‘A Long Time on the Little Road’ in *Our Films, Their Films*, Orient Longman Ltd, 1976.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.