

NOTES

SOCIAL RHYTHM AND FILMS: THE DIMENSION OF REALISM IN *PATHER PANCHALI*

BASAB MULLIK*

In popular mind rhythm is associated with something universal. It cannot be created, it can only be grasped as something eternally existing out there. It is thus beyond human manipulation, existing outside the human correlates of time and space. This vision of 'pure' rhythm may at best apply to only those of its portions which are determined by mathematical measures such as the basic gradations of a musical scale. In large parts, however, it is not static but dynamic. To a great extent, it remains undetermined, being a matter of human interpretation and construction. As art forms developed giving rise to ever newer forms of rhythm, frontiers got extended. These came to include even irregularity in the body of the text itself. Finally, what all these meant was that as long as the pulsations of an artwork and of the audience beat in unison, rhythm was considered to have occurred. In each such case of extension of its frontiers, the social dimension seems to have played a major part.

Rhythm in music prominently displays certain characteristics like repetition, periodicity of the recurrences and change perceptible as a uniform increase or decrease in the repetitive element. But as one enters the realms of non-uniform change in rhythm, the nature of its social construction starts to become apparent. We are trained to perceive connections between two apparently dissimilar elements. This mode of perception requires a particular learning and it is socially disseminated. More importantly, it shifts the onus of 'experience' or 'reading', from the artist to the audience. A structure may now be perceived as rhythmic purely in terms audience anticipation and its fulfilment.

This anticipation or expectation is formulated around a core of prerogative movement which provides the 'centre', the motive force which helps to weave the pieces together to form a felt pattern. It is only when a reader perceives this moment that the pulsation of the reader and of the artwork start resonating together. It is quite clear that a strong cultural element is built into this moment.

In the specific case of cinema, this musical rhythm gets translated into what we choose to call a social rhythm. Like its musical counterpart it too deals with a certain conception of pace, brought about by constant punctuations of repetitions, anticipation etc. But unlike it, it is not concrete. In many ways it is far more abstract and impossible to comprehend physically. Nonetheless, whenever we speak about the situation or content of a plot we immediately assign certain qualities, pertaining to the exposition of life and its mode of operation, to it. The conception is almost visual, and helps to form what in the musical analogy would constitute the fourth element: the hierarchy of expectations. When Ray acknowledges that the village of his *Pather Panchali* has a definite pace and rhythm, it necessarily means this social rhythm.

But interestingly, we find that this visual conception about a particular context is too readily formed in our minds. They are available even without our direct recognition of and familiarity with them, and they condition our initial instruments of analyses of its representation. It is true that there is no ready-made reality for the filmmaker. What surround him are only material to be used selectively. Objects, locales, people, speech, viewpoint, everything must be carefully chosen to serve the ends of his story. Creating reality is part of the creative process where the imagination is aided by the eye and the ear. At the same time, what is real to the filmmaker might not necessarily mean reality to a given audience. A film is considered realistic only when the rhythm of the film matches the social rhythm we assign to the context depicted in the film. Our complete innocence about the subject then has no forbearance upon the judgement of authenticity of the representation. The pre-assigned characteristics must hold good in any representation of that subject. Science fiction films remain make beliefs, which is due to the fact that we have still not been able to assign any definite rhythm of life to societies existing at those limits of space and time.

Pather Panchali too has a pre-assigned notion of rhythm attached to it, which is generated in the film in terms of repetition of certain actions, anticipated action, and arrangement of successive images.

But where does this conception come from? When Ray speaks of a particular pace and rhythm — and it is known that he did not have an intimate knowledge of his backdrop- he must have been guided by previous notions, and formed a conclusion before he actually realised it in his films. He already had a premonition about the ebb and flow of life there, the kind that would constitute the pace of his film. One look at *Pather Panchali* would inform us that it is slow almost to the point of becoming static. Being a city-bred man he could not have had such a notion unless he was informed by viewpoints already prevalent about village life in India. To a large extent, he was helped by Bibhutibhusan, the latter's highly detailed portrayal of village life served as the foundation, but even then Ray could not have translated it the way he did without a rapport with the text.

It is perhaps not a coincidence to find some of those notions already predicted in the colonial discourses on Indian villages, where the British constructed a complex binary polity that appropriated an 'ancient' India as an external appendage to a modern Britain. It must be noted here that the dominant voice in formulating those discourses were principally those of the political economists and legal historians, who did not have any direct knowledge of their object. In those formulations the village was considered to have existed 'almost unaltered since the description of its organisation in Manu's code', and to have 'preserved its constitution intact, its customs, precedents and peculiar institutions unchanged and unchangeable amid all other changes'.

Now it is obvious that Ray would differ in many ways from the British civil servants, which in fact he does, but the interesting factor is the number of suppositions with which he agrees.

The conclusion derived from this might be extrapolated to show that realism is ultimately the reinstating of a particular social view already accepted to have been established, an agreement with a given construction of reality already acceded to. What this amounts to saying is that realism is not shaped by the reality out there, but is a teleological project in accordance with a reality already constructed in our minds.

Pather Panchali is constituted not only out of a unique mindset about the Indian village but was embellished with certain predetermined modes of storytelling and philosophy of life as well.

Throughout the trilogy the movement of un-changeability dominates storytelling. 'Hari din to gelo sandhya holo, par karo amare' acts as a constant reminder throughout. Ray's attitude in this was neither critical nor analytical but largely empirical. He was interested in establishing and understanding the village society in terms of this predominant movement. The theme of un-changeability as a consequence formed not only the frame of reference to life in the village, but also spilled over to the depiction of life in the city.

For an Indian this kind of exposition has a direct resonance in terms of his existence. It is never alien to him, he recognises a pattern, a rhythm in it because he understands and appreciates the nodal points of life and death in the narrative and the variations within. This anticipation and fulfilment of a particular worldview then serves as an impetus to what he considers authentic.

At the same time it is only fair to point out that though Ray might have followed the colonial discourses in spirit (knowingly or unknowingly), he varied his execution widely. Whereas the discourses generally showed appreciation of un-changeability of a morphological nature, Ray uses that more generally to mean a philosophy of life. The romantic notion of an idyllic Indian village is shattered through the depiction of thefts. Almost everybody in *Pather Panchali*, with the exception of Harihar, steals. The emphasis on this recurrent action draws attention to the benumbing poverty and a desire to get out of it. It is therefore not unusual to find the two gods being worshipped in Harihar's household to be Ganesha and Laxmi.

The notion of un-changeability is further infused with certain determinism, not only in matters of life and death but also in the question of a general moral depreciation. For example, Sarbajaya shows tremendous self-respect, she does not permit even Indir Thakrun to beg, but is ultimately driven to stealing herself. Harihar, who carries the tradition of faintly scholarship and self-respect in the village, is reduced to a nobody in Benaras. Indir Thakrun, who preserves her dignity till the end, comes back pleading to Sarbajaya, and literally dies in the field, completely destitute with nowhere to go. Durga, forever deprived, dies from lack of treatment. Apu has traumatic experiences in his childhood, which comes back to haunt him when his wife dies. There is death in every segment of the trilogy, and in this cyclicity of life and death is envisaged the story of how an entire family, in the face of grinding poverty, gradually lose their dignity, and finally their identity.

But even in this apparent repetition of death, theft and general loss of values, its emphasis on un-changeability, change is shown in a gradual shift of ideology, in a transition from the pre-modern to the modern. The narrative structure in effect is therefore not circular but spiral, incorporating both linear and non-linear modes, having both static and dynamic contours.

In the whole trilogy the only disruption to this rhythm comes in the form of the steam engine, and as if to associate rhythm with life itself, this disruption is definitely followed by a death in Apu's family.

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* Outgoing postgraduate student.