

# The Traditional Bengali Culture in Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali*: From the Perspective of Oscar Lewis' Culture of Poverty

Md. Shahrear Talukder<sup>1</sup>, Zahid Hasan Akash<sup>2</sup>

## ABSTRACT

*The Bengali countryside in the early 20th century is the setting for Satyajit Ray's film Pather Panchali, which examines topics of women, poverty, and culture. It scrutinizes socioeconomic problems, the movie's portrayal of traditional Bengali culture, and the characters' reactions to the "Culture of Poverty" theory. Examining clothing, cuisine, jobs, and habits, offers a thorough comprehension of the cultural and economic background as portrayed in the film. The study recognizes the necessity for historical context and points out areas that warrant more investigation.*

## KEY WORDS

Bengali countryside, Early 20th century, Satyajit Ray, Women, Culture of Poverty.

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## 1. Introduction

This article examines the themes of women, poverty, and culture in *Pather Panchali*, the renowned film directed by Satyajit Ray. It explores the movie's portrayal of these themes and examines rural Bengal's cultural and economic facets in the early 20th century. The movie is the primary data source for this research; secondary sources provide further context and previously published works on the subject. This study analyzes how *Pather Panchali* depicts traditional Bengali culture, focusing on how the movie deftly captures the relationship between cultural values and socioeconomic circumstances. By

examining aspects like attire, food, everyday activities, and religious customs, we reveal the lasting influence of Bengali culture in the setting of rural existence. In addition, we look at how the "Culture of Poverty" thesis is reflected in the characters' experiences in the movie, highlighting issues like low pay, unemployment, and property ownership, which significantly influence how these people live their lives.

## 2. Methodology of the Study

Women, poverty, and culture are the key themes of *Pather Panchali*. Generally, women deal with Bengali

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<sup>1</sup> Assistant Professor, Department of English, International Standard University (ISU)

<sup>2</sup> MA in English Literature and Cultural Studies, Department of English, ISU

women, poverty deals with socioeconomic class, and culture deals with the originality of conversational Bengali culture. As primary data, all elements are found in the film *Pather Panchali*. Furthermore, other secondary sources or film-related existing works are used to establish meaningful content. By using digital platforms, all data have been collected from the film's original screenplay and other existing works relevant to the film. This article analyzes several concepts from the film to give relevant ideas about various scenarios, namely women, poverty, and culture.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

American anthropologist Oscar Lewis first declared the term "Culture of Poverty" in his book *Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty*. According to him, the social structure is associated with being poor. In particular, the burden of poverty is imprinted on some people from their childhood and their propensity is, to remain poor. Furthermore, it is imprinted on their behaviour and attitudes forever, making them unable to escape poverty (Senior and Lewis 895- 909). That is, for those born into low-income families who grow up in poverty, the impression of the attitude of poverty is etched on their minds. This impression is so pronounced and dominant in their

minds that they cannot or do not want to escape poverty. As a result, they create a sub-culture within themselves, what Oscar Lewis called culture of poverty. Oscar Lewis gave a big blow to the conventional concept of poverty through this theory. However, researchers considering society's structure as the root cause of poverty rebuke Oscar Lewis, claiming that this theory has political motives (Woods).

According to "Culture of Poverty: Critique," it is found that traits and habits can keep people in poverty (Varenne and Scroggins 590). It can be noticed that the concept of 'cultural traits' is related to poverty; besides, it is one kind of way of life that runs 'generation to generation' (Varenne and Scroggins 593). It should be noted that the culture of poverty is related to 'the nature of family, attitude, values, and characters' in the individual dimension (Lewis 21). Moreover, people in the 'culture of poverty' turn out to "unemployment, low wages, lack of property and savings, and absence of food reservation at home" (Lewis 21)

## 4. Discussion, Analyses and Findings

### 4.1 Representation of Traditional Bengali Culture

Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali* wonderfully portrays the essence of traditional Bengali culture. The film, set in rural Bengal in the early twentieth century, provides a

beautiful picture of village life, with lush green fields, mud cottages, and meandering roads. It beautifully depicts essential festivals such as Durga Puja and Kali Puja, emphasizing their significance in Bengali culture. The film digs into the complexities of relationships, obligations, and disputes within a joint family, providing a window into the dynamics of traditional households. Traditional Bengali dishes, cooking methods, and communal family dinners illustrate the culinary culture. Characters wear traditional Bengali clothes such as sarees, dhotis, and kurtas, reflecting current fashion. All in all, conventional Bengali elements are portrayed in the film.

#### **4.2 Traits and Habits**

Characters in *Pather Panchali* wear traditional Bengali dress such as the saree, blouse, dhuti, shawl, and "ghunghat"/ "ghomta" (traditional scarf). These outfits exemplify Bengal's rich cultural legacy, embodying beauty and tradition. The 'saree,' a versatile draped dress, exudes charm. At the same time, the 'blouse' perfectly complements it (Ray 7:00). The 'dhuti,' a men's clothing, represents traditional masculinity and is frequently paired with a shawl for added sophistication (Ray 23:49, 33:35). A classic scarf, the 'ghunghat' or 'ghomta,' provides a touch of mysticism (Ray 45:02). When worn together, these costumes

capture the essence of Bengali culture, weaving a tapestry of legacy and elegance in *Pather Panchali*. In *Pather Panchali*, women adorn themselves with quintessential Bengali ornaments and cosmetics—the 'bindi' graces foreheads, symbolizing marital status and cultural significance (Ray 55:45, 18:02). 'Churi,' ornate Indian bracelets, rattle with every movement, while 'shakha-pola' the bangle pair, symbolic of marital bliss (Ray 16:40, 6:05, 32:32). Strands of beads drape gracefully, enhancing the ensemble. 'Payal,' delicate anklets, chime with every step, infusing rhythm into their gait. Lastly, 'sindoor,' the vermilion mark, adorns partings, denoting wedlock. These cosmetics and ornaments are not mere adornments but emblems of tradition, bestowing grace and meaning upon the women of *Pather Panchali*, showcasing the timeless beauty of Bengali culture. *Pather Panchali* provides a window into everyday life steeped in customary practices. Chewing betel leaf, a common habit, serves as a cultural marker, as does the traditional Indian cigarette and 'hukka,' symbolic of leisurely pastimes (Ray 18:30).

#### **4.3 Absence of Food Reservation at Home and Sub-Culture of Cookware.**

In this film, the unprivileged community has no relevant

reservations about food at home, and they use traditional, inexpensive cookware. Women employ traditional Bengali cookware skillfully and gracefully. 'Pital' or brass vessels, revered for their conductivity, cradle simmering delicacies. The 'khunti,' a versatile spud, aids in culinary mastery; in a scene where Sarbajaya cooks spinach, which has less nutrition, it seems she has no reservations about good foods like fish, meat, and others (Ray 16:15, 35:59). Clay pots, rustic and time-honoured, infuse earthy flavours into dishes (Ray 57:03). These implements, steeped in heritage, resonate with the rhythm of Bengali kitchens, creating a symphony of flavours that dance through the narrative of *Pather Panchali*, celebrating the artistry of Bengali culinary traditions. *Pather Panchali* vividly portrays rural Bengal's daily practices and traditions. Eating with hands—a tactile connection to food—is a cherished ritual, whether for rice or cooked or non-cooked dishes. These aspects are related to the concept of the 'culture of poverty,' where it is found that they are creating their sub-culture based on their socioeconomic background.

#### 4.4 Unemployment and Low Wages

The livelihoods depicted in *Pather Panchali* are diverse and deeply rooted in Bengali culture. Some engage in the mesmerizing art of

'puthi path,' reciting poetic Bengali manuscripts enthusiastically and precisely (Ray 38:31). Indeed, 'puthi path' has low wages and sometimes the reciter has been unemployed because it is a seasonal job. *Pather Panchali* weaves a tapestry of entertainment deeply ingrained in Bengali heritage. 'Pala gaan,' the art of musical storytelling, enchants listeners with its soulful narratives and melodic tunes (Ray 34:56). 'Jatra,' the traditional village stage drama, brings tales to life with vivid performances captivating audiences with its blend of drama and folk culture (Ray 1:05:50). The cherished tradition of storytelling weaves narratives that transcend generations, passing down wisdom and folklore. These forms of entertainment in the film resonate with the cultural vibrancy of Bengal, offering a glimpse into the heart of rural Bengali life, where song, drama, and storytelling thrive as cherished pastimes. Predominately, both are seasonal jobs. The artists can be employed anytime with low wages.

#### 4.5 Lack of Property

Agriculture, a cornerstone of rural life, embodies the enduring connection between the land and its people, a source of sustenance and livelihood for many in the narrative. These varied occupations form the vibrant tapestry of *Pather Panchali*, reflect the richness of Bengali

livelihoods. In this film, the lower-class people, especially the family of Durga, have no property for agriculture. In various scenes, Durga steals someone's garden's fruits and others—notably, Durga's mother steals coconut from someone's garden (Ray 14:54). It is related to the 'culture of poverty'; the marginalized community of that film has the burden of lack of property mainly the land of fruit orchards and traditional agriculture such as paddy, lentil, and more.

#### **4.6 The Nature of Family, Attitude, Values, Characters, and Cultural Traits**

*Pather Panchali* vividly portrays rural Bengal's daily practices and traditions. Besides, the culinary palette showcases Bengali flavours: cooked rice, 'kachagullah,' 'shandesh,' 'batasha,' puffed rice, and coconut sweets. All these delicacies celebrate the region's diverse taste (Ray 33:29, 37:10). The prized hilsha fish graces floors, symbolizing coastal abundance. Hindu religious symbols like 'Tawiz,' protective amulets, the sacred 'tulsi' plant, and the distinctive shaved head embody spiritual reverence and devotion (Ray 31:24, 13:06). These practices and symbols are integral to the *Pather Panchali* tapestry, reflecting rural Bengal's cultural values.

Caste dynamics are subtly portrayed, showcasing the diversified Brahmin

caste, each adhering to distinct ideologies. The film also acknowledges the presence of Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras, emphasizing the stratification within society. The film embodies Indian ideological norms. Walking barefoot signifies humility and simplicity, while the 'ghunghat', draped by adult women signifies modesty and tradition. The active engagement with education underscores its importance in society. Respecting teachers and elders forms the bedrock of cultural values depicted in *Pather Panchali*, offering a vivid portrayal of the nature of family, attitude, and values.

The film artfully weaves various religious rites and cultural elements into its narrative. It showcases the celebration of Durga Puja, a significant Hindu festival in Bengal, complete with idol worship, rituals, and cultural performances (Ray 1:04:06). Throughout the movie, Hindu traditions and customs, such as prayers, offerings to deities and temple visits, are portrayed as integral aspects of the characters' daily lives, reflecting their deep-seated religious beliefs. Additionally, the film sensitively explores the rituals associated with death and funerals, including cremation, emphasizing the importance of proper farewells for departed souls. Superstitions also find their place in the narrative, illustrating their

influence in rural communities. *Pather Panchali* is celebrated for its realistic portrayal of rural Bengal, with these religious and cultural elements adding depth and authenticity to the characters and their experiences. All these aspects of *Pather Panchali* show that a systemic cultural trait is transformed from one generation to another, so it is proved that the concept of 'culture of poverty' is appropriate to the representation of the socioeconomic background and culture of the film.

### 5. Scope for Further Research and Limitations

*Pather Panchali* offers a comprehensive framework for analyzing ecocriticism. This literary and cultural theory concerns how nature is portrayed in art and affects society as green peace (Mishra and Sarangi 193). Beyond using nature as a passive background, the film explores the complex relationship between Bengali culture and the natural world. Instead, nature is portrayed as a dynamic, impactful force that shapes the protagonists' lives. Hinduism is cyclical, reflected in the film's incorporation of spiritual activities in natural settings, the intense sensory experience of bird song and running water, and the river's constant symbolism (Mishra 46). The storm emphasizes the ecological influence on human experiences while symbolizing the

ups and downs of life. The characters' strong ties to nature emphasize the unbreakable bond between culture and environment and reflect Hindu devotion (bhakti). Satyajit Ray demonstrates how ecocriticism theory disentangles the complex relationships between nature, society, and spirituality in *Pather Panchali*. So, further research may be done based on ecocriticism in *Pather Panchali*.

### 6. Conclusion

To sum up, *Pather Panchali* offers an intricate depiction of traditional Bengali culture, highlighting the intricacies of rural existence, socioeconomic obstacles, and the deep interdependence between culture and the environment. The movie sheds light on how characteristics and behaviours are linked to poverty by highlighting the impact of the "Culture of Poverty" in the characters' lives. Traditional Bengali clothing, cuisine, and daily routines represent the culture's enduring legacy. The film emphasizes the harsh reality of rural life by showing unemployment, low earnings, and a lack of property. It also depicts the attitudes, values, and cultural characteristics expected in the area and the structure of families. Subsequent investigations may go into the socioeconomic consequences of livelihoods, the adaptability of

Bengali culture, and gender dynamics within this particular cultural milieu.

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