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Calcutta Through Different Lenses: Revisiting India in Jean Renoir's *The River* and Satyajit Ray's *The Apu Trilogy*

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Abstract
The Orientalist discourse has fostered a version of the East that, for ages, have seamlessly permeated into the various attempts of the West to portray the 'Orient'. One such attempt is Jean Renoir's "authentic" portrayal of India for a by-and-large Hollywood audience, *The River* (1951) shot entirely in Calcutta. Inspired by Renoir, Satyajit Ray presented his version of Calcutta through *The Apu Trilogy* (1955-'59) which was in stark contrast to Renoir's portrayal of the city. This paper seeks to explore how Renoir and Ray portray two different Indias – one smeared with a colonial perspective while the other breaks out of the West-imposed binaries to offer something more tangible – and how these marked differences are reflected through their respective filmmaking processes.
Keywords: orientalism; post-colonialism; Satyajit Ray; Jean Renoir; Hollywood; Bengali art cinema; Rasa theory; Calcutta

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Calcutta Through Different Lenses: Revisiting India in Jean Renoir's *The River* and Satyajit Ray's *The Apu Trilogy*

Ayush Chakraborty

Introduction

Jean Renoir's *The River* (1951), often regarded as his final bid to reclaim his lost status in Hollywood, serves as a significant case study in understanding the cinematic portrayal of India through a Western lens[1]. The film, an adaptation of Rumer Godden's semi-autobiographical work of the same name, encapsulates the coming-of-age experiences of its central character Harriet while growing up along the banks of the river Ganges during the final years of colonial rule in India. It was not simply the charm and the warmth of Godden's impressive writing that had interested Renoir in adapting it into a feature-length film: in his own words, the story seemed to check all the prerequisites that would attract the attention of the Hollywood film magnates. Moreover, he also wanted to make a film on India as authentic as possible – a desire that had prompted Renoir and his producer Kenneth McEldowney to shoot the film entirely on location in Calcutta making it the first Hollywood film to do so. Renoir wanted to present an India devoid of the Western stereotypes, particularly Hollywood's perception of India which, "without elephants and tiger-hunts was just not India" (Renoir, 1974, p.248).

However, at the same time, he was making a film for a Hollywood audience. Here, one might recall Adorno and Horkheimer's immortal work on culture as an industry and how the products manufactured in this industry are tailored to meet the larger demands of the capitalists. Renoir wanted to present the India that he was acquainted with through books written by European writers, especially Forster's *A Passage to India*. *The River*, as a result, became for Renoir an exercise in presenting India as a site of the exotic and the spiritual, the simple and the serene. This landscape, mostly wrought by his imagination, aligning the film with the centuries' old discourse that the West had propagated about the East, and by choosing to be oblivious about the harsh realities of the Indian scene for its edification by the Western audience, his "authentic" portrayal of India was limited simply to the gross generalisations of the West.

Renoir became a huge inspiration for Satyajit Ray who had met the veteran director during his first visit to India to scout locations for *The River*. Ray had already scripted the first draft of his adaptation of Bibhutibhushan Bandhopadhyay's *Pather Panchali* and had received encouragement from Renoir to start with the production of the film. Being influenced to a great extent by the film movements in the West, particularly the Italian Neo- realism and the French New Wave, Ray was aware of the domination of Hollywood over the Indian film scene and

vehemently encouraged against the “nightmarish versions and perversions of India perpetrated by Hollywood” (Ray, 1994, p.113), calling the American film industry a bad model.

Ray’s determination was, therefore, twofold – a portrayal of India in cinema that was true to its topographical and socio-political reality and a distinct ‘Indianness’ in its essence transcending the limitations set by Hollywood and Western expectations. It was along these lines that *The Apu Trilogy* achieved what Renoir had failed to in his “authentic” representation of India. Not only had Ray deconstructed the monolithic view of the East in the eyes of the West in terms of its geo-political reality, he had also universalized his characterization through the raw emotions evoked by the acute realism of his setting. It is not an exaggeration, therefore, to claim that *The Apu Trilogy* was one of the first post-colonial responses in Indian cinema to Hollywood’s cultural domination that sought to challenge the binary of the East and the West, and the Western conceptions of the oriental. The objective of this paper will be to substantiate this very claim by attempting an in-depth study of the portrayal of Calcutta in Jean Renoir’s *The River* and Satyajit Ray’s *The Apu Trilogy*.

Renoir And His India

The River was shot along the banks of Ganges in Barrackpore, then a small village in West Bengal, approximately 15 miles north of Calcutta. It was Barrackpore that became the

microcosm of Renoir's India – a land with its many socio-cultural and geo-political complexities. The film opens with a hand drawing a rangoli on the ground while the narrator explains that it is an Indian custom of welcoming and honouring guests: "With this rangoli, we welcome you to this motion picture filmed entirely in India…" (0:31) – a rare gesture that is common in theatrical performances that immediately distance the viewers from the view. Like any fairy tale or spectacle to behold, Renoir welcomes the audience to his India – a land conceived by his imagination for specifically the Western audience.

In his book *My Life and My Films*, Renoir writes about his first impression of Rumer Godden's *The River* as "children in a romantic setting, the discovery of love by small girls, the death of a little boy who was too fond of snakes, the rather foolish dignity of an English family living on India like a plum on a peach-tree; above all, India itself with its exotic dances and garments, all this seemed to me to possess a reassuring neutrality" (1974, p.248).

Renoir's fascination towards India, in his own words, is rooted in a "romantic setting" of "exotic dances and garments", underscores a rather problematic Orientalist technique of homogenising the East. He blends various cultures in order to give essence to his India – prominently, in Melanie's Bharatanatyam performance as Radha, a dance form known to have its origins in Tamil Nadu but presented as a part of the Bengali culture in the film. Moreover, the pastoral

landscapes, cultural festivals, gods and goddesses, soft exotic music, snake-charmers, exotic dances and the tranquillity of the River Ganges – everything seems to be linked to the Hindu cycle of life and death.

Célia Bertin, in her biography of Renoir, presents the director ruminating on how the eastern philosophy embodies a philosophical way of life where the life of wants is overpowered by the spirit of communion with nature, making it possible for people to find inner peace amidst the chaos of development. Reinforcing the dichotomy of the spiritual East and the materialistic West, Renoir places the East as a site of spiritual recovery that is very useful for the West – a view reiterated in his film with the arrival of the crippled Captain John, a World War II veteran, who arrives in Calcutta to seek solace from the turmoil perpetrated by the war.

Edward Said describes a strand of romantic Orientalism that sought to bring about a regeneration in the materialistic and mechanistic West through the Eastern culture, religion and spirituality. The 'romantic' project, says J.J. Clarke, made many Europeans search in India a state of childlike innocence, a rehabilitation amidst the serenity of nature, and a reunification with religion, philosophy and art. This sense of fascination towards Indian spiritualism is further heightened in two elaborate sequences: firstly, the documentation of the Kali puja and, secondly, the story that Harriet writes, an allegory of the love of Radha and Krishna, in order to woo Captain John. These two sequences stand out from the rest of the film because of the way these

are shot – both backed by Harriet's narration and a sustained cinematography capturing the various aspects of the two indigenous cultures giving them the structure of a documentary, and this documentation appears as a mere cataloguing of the Indian culture albeit influenced by the perspective of the Western eye.

Renoir interweaves the narrative of his film with the Hindu cycle of life and death, and the detailed voice-over backing the Kali-puja sequence does not document appropriately the cultural significance of the festival for the narrator describes the entire process of the celebration as symbolic of this cycle of life and death as Srinivasan and Shekhawat observe, "The clay from the river is used to make the idol of the goddess Kaali (the birth). Once the ceremonies (the life) are over, the sculpture is immersed back into the river (the death), thereby representing the cycle of birth, life and death" (Srinivasan & Shekhawat, 2020, p.7). Even Harriet's story depicts a cyclical narrative starting with a mother praying to the river for a child to be born and being subsequently blessed with a baby girl and ending with the girl, now grown up and married to her lover – both of them elevated to the god-like Radha and Krishna – praying to the river for the birth of a child. In both these instances, Renoir appropriates two disparate Indian cultures according to the limited Western perceptions and fascinations of the East.

Renoir’s Camera and the Indian Reality

Renoir’s presentation of India in the film was not merely shaped by his perspective, but also by the broader ideological strokes of the Red Scare and Hollywood’s response to anti-Communist movements. Senator Joseph McCarthy’s “witch-hunt” in the 1940s and 1950s had prompted the House of Un-American Activities Committee into investigating screenwriters, directors and producers who were suspected of having affiliations to the Left. With the high threat of communism, many directors, producers and actors with leftist leanings were brought before the committee for questioning. Renoir’s name had also been mentioned in a 1938 report to the Committee on Anti-American Activities, but he narrowly escaped the witch-hunt as he was in India scouting locations for *The River*. It is for this reason that it can be safely assumed that Hollywood, more than maybe Renoir himself, was responsible for shaping the film the way it is. The obvious orientalist strains aside, the anti-Communism movement in Hollywood played a substantial role in Renoir’s decision to ignore the effects of colonialism in India in his adaptation of *The River*. Rather, his focus remains on the pastoral charm, exotic music in the background, snake-charmers, heavenly deities and complacent boatmen and factory workers in the jute mills of Calcutta. As Bhatia observes, India, exemplified by Renoir’s Calcutta, emerges as haven for peace, wisdom and timelessness, the Indians a passive and unchanging community, engendering a discourse that claims an irrefutable a-historicity.

The River was Renoir's first experiment with Technicolor, and it was for the first time that India was being presented in all its colours to the world. Naturally, India became for Renoir an object for his technical and cinematic experiments, "marvellous motifs with which to test my theories about colour films" (Bertin, 1991, p.249). He wanted to capture the archetypal landscape which would evoke the true essence of the country. His precedence over the landscape and preoccupation with the technique had further ignored the socio- political history of the land. Renoir, consistent with the aesthetic legacy of his father Pierre Auguste Renoir, gave his film, like impressionist art, a pastoral quality that would endorse India as that exotic land that would spiritually heal the westerners.

Renoir also believed that black-and-white films had an abstract instead of a realistic quality. He asserted the role of the camera as "a sort of god" in an interview with André Bazin in 1958, positing that the only function of the camera was to record and record only. Clearly, Renoir was re-defining cinema as a means of presenting reality, and the camera as that which captured reality devoid of any distortion. Jean-Luc Conolli and Jean Narboni opine that 'reality' is but an expression of prevailing ideology, meaning the very theory that a camera is an impartial instrument that captures the world in its 'concrete reality' is basically a reactionary one for the camera is but a mere tool that captures the perspective of the dominant ideology and, therefore,

whatever it registers is not reality but a world experienced, filtered and refracted through ideology or, in other words, through discourse.

When critics like André Bazin hailed *The River* as “a pure masterpiece” and summed it up simply along the lines of “the discovery of love by three adolescent girls”, they had automatically averted questions on colonial and postcolonial concerns. Renoir’s experimentation with his camera, naturalism, colour and sets to produce an “authentic” portrayal of the landscapes of Bengal, which were lauded as the most absorbing aspects of the film, marginalised the very fact that the camera was capturing not what was “authentic” but rather exotic to the western eye, for the reality of the landscape was at that period of time, the 1940s, influenced by a number of significant socio-political changes that were taking place throughout the country. The British imperial rule was nearing its end and the struggle for independence began a new phase in Indian history. The nationwide protests and riots were very conveniently dodged by Renoir in his portrayal of a rather idyllic landscape where the British and the natives thrive in harmony – the native workers complacent towards British rule as depicted in the character of Nan, for instance. A striking imagery that occurs twice throughout the course of the film is that of the boatmen chanting a kind of a hymn while rowing the oars in proper synchronisation with the waves of the river as they bring in jutes for the factories. The camera focuses with great intensity on the strong and beautiful black bodies of the boatmen. Nandi Bhatia notes that the

boat-people's bodies as visually presented in the film did not resemble the rather emaciated and damaged bodies that filled the streets of Calcutta during that time. She is pointing at the effects of the Bengal famine of 1943 which, once again a result of international political developments, had killed between one to three million people in 1943, notes Sumit Sarkar. He further reports that the starvation and malnutrition resulted in malaria, small-pox and cholera epidemics as a result of which "the mortality figures were considerably higher than normal for years after 1943" (Sarkar, 2014, p.347). The image of the untarnished bodies of the boatmen, therefore, quite conveniently restores the damage caused by the British imperial rule. The camera, therefore, contradictory to what Renoir claims, ignores the two hundred years of oppression that the Indians had faced through its lush landscapes, exotic dances and the happy and content workers amounting to an "authentic" Indian experience.

Ray and the Changing Indian Landscape

In his essay, 'A Long Time on the Little Road', Ray writes, "I chose *Pather Panchali* [Song of the Little Road, 1955] for the qualities that made it a great book: its humanism, its lyricism, and its ring of truth" (Ray,1994, p.33). This offers a stark contrast to the romanticised depictions of India seen in Western cinema. Like Bibhutibhushan's source material, Ray's adaptation, too, does not deal explicitly with the socio-political developments that were taking place throughout

the course of the three decades that serve as the backdrop for *The Apu Trilogy*. However, he does not shy away from portraying the effects of those developments on his characters. The setting of the first film is the rural Nischindipur and the family on focus lives in a rather worn-down corner of their ancestral land which has been further divided among the inheritors. From the very beginning, Ray establishes the overarching theme of poverty as a hindrance to the fulfilment of the little earthly desires that define the spirit of childhood. He also injects the harsh reality of economic divide that pervaded throughout India through the dynamics between Sarbojaya and her sister in-law. His treatment of the village is uncompromising as his intentions, as he had suggested in an interview with Chidananda Das Gupta, were to be unabashedly honest in his portrayal of the situation.

Renoir fills his visuals with a pastoral charm to capture the essence of the 'exotic' landscape of Calcutta. Ray's camera, on the other hand, registers scenes more grounded in the everyday realities of rural Bengal – the hunger and desperation through which the family has to go through, the soiled and tattered saris of Durga and Indir Thakrun, the latter's old and withered body, the decaying condition of the family home – bringing forth a picture of India the offers a counter narrative challenging these orientalist views. That being said, Ray does not dwell simply on the impoverished existence of rural Bengal since his objective was an "honest" portrayal rather than a piece of sensational cinema for western edification. Challenging the "timeless" and

"ahistorical" perceptions of India as perpetrated by the West, Ray began to portray the change that the landscape was going through with the advent of industrialization in the West. As a result, one of the key sequences in *Pather Panchali* is the train sequence, and through the entire sequence Ray juxtaposes the collapsing home of Apu located in the dark forest against the bright, open countryside through which the train crosses. The train, a symbol of modernity and the rapidly changing Indian landscape from the rural to the urban, is a motif that Ray brings back in the two other films that followed *Pather Panchali*, *Aparajito* ('Unvanquished' 1956) and *Apur Sansar* ('The World of Apu', 1959) to reinforce the idea of transformation, both within the characters and the society at large.

In *Pather Panchali*, the train is an object of Apu's curiosity – a taste of the land beyond the bleak existence of Nischindipur. It also anticipates his journey from the countryside to the capital, from the village and its abject poverty to the crowded apartments of the urbanising Calcutta. However, the significance of the train, as Michelangelo Paganopoulos observes, changes with every subsequent film in the trilogy. In *Aparajito*, the train becomes a symbol of dislocation, separation, and a vain hope for reunification. The film introduces the effects of rapid urbanisation and a slow disintegration of the family-system as more people leave their families behind to search for opportunities in the city. Meanwhile, in *Apur Sansar*, the motif of the train marks the ultimate separation between Apu and Aparna. Succeeded by Aparna's eventual death

and Apu's attempt at committing suicide on the rail tracks, the train becomes a symbol associated with death. Quite symbolically, the rail tracks running through the heart of Calcutta in *Apur Sansar* have become a part of the city and its people, and together with the scene at the factory where Apu goes to look for a potential job – an option he instantly dismisses the moment he sees the horrific, mechanical movement of the workers – Ray portrays a 'death- in-life' existence of people in a rapidly changing Calcutta.

In an essay titled "Problems of a Bengali Filmmaker", Ray writes that the Indian film scene post-Independence was mainly dominated by three kinds of cinema – mythological, devotional and social melodramas, with their songs and dances which often went beyond two and half hours. There was an overindulgence of fantasy in cinema that Ray strove to challenge. He believed a serious and purposeful filmmaker could never withdraw into

pangs of fantasy as he would face the challenge of contemporary reality, examine them, analyse them, and transform them into cinema.

While Ray was supportive of Nehru's modernising missions in India post-Independence, he could not ignore the extreme wretchedness and heartlessness towards the downtrodden, as well as the spiritual disintegration and lack of romance in a world rapidly industrialising. In *Apur Sansar,* Apu is initially a sensitive young man immersed in poetry and philosophy who has, in his own words, a "greatness, an ability to create", who "never turns away from life" (24:36)

despite his poor living conditions – he is a romantic-idealist who turns down his friend's offer for a job as a railway clerk for he feels liberated from the constraints of social obligations. This powerful scene attains an ironic reversal towards the end of the film when we find Apu giving up his dreams of writing a novel to work at a coal-mine in Jharkhand; his face devoid of the hope and optimism of a romantic – a grim face that has been struck with repeated onslaughts of betrayal by fate, by society and by reality.

Rasa and the Indian Experience in *The Apu Trilogy*

Though Ray was highly influenced by the Western film movements – he particularly mentions Vittoria De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* which he had seen during his stay in London – he was also deeply rooted in the cultures and aesthetics of Indian art. Ray refers to his formative years as a student at Tagore's Fine Arts Academy in Shantiniketan as the basis of his acquaintance with Indian art. While on one hand, he expressed his debt to film-makers like Goddard and Truffaut for technicalities like fade-outs and freeze frames respectively, he also believed in incorporating a "truly indigenous style and vision that makes his cinema receptive and accessible to the Western as well as the Indian spectator" (Cooper, 2000, p.2). He points out how Ray's translation of Bibhutibhushan's novel falls along the lines of 'rasa' or mood in a poetic context, which is actually a transmutation of the various feelings or 'bhava' that an individual

experiences from time to time. According to A.K. Ramanujan, a poet singles out eight of these bhavas: *rati* (love), *hasa* (mirth), *soka* (grief), *utsaha* (energy), *bhaya* (terror), *jugupsa* (disgust), *krodha* (anger) and *vismaya* (wonder), and these rasas encompass all the physical aspects of their expression, along with their associated feelings, primary emotions, and resulting behaviors.

An important aspect of Rasa is that the feelings are not only experienced by the characters but are evoked within the spectators in a certain artistic way, and Ray understood principle, as he believed that even the subtlest of emotional states affects a person's speech and behaviour, and in the recognition of these changes by viewers far removed from the world of the film lies the true success of rasa. He aimed to convey the experience of the changing Bengal landscape not only to the Westerners but also to the rest of India. His intent was to encourage viewers to explore the nuances of gestures and tone in order to understand the true sense of the context.

For an experience properly conveyed, Cooper studies, there are certain principles of aesthetic organisation which form the basis of Rasa – the epiphany of wonder, the constancy of character and the constancy of gesture. The epiphany of wonder, or 'camatkara', is defined by Abhinavagupta in Abhinavabharati as an "uninterrupted ('acchina') state of immersion ('avesa') in an enjoyment characterised by the presence of a sensation of inner fullness ('tripti'). In *Pather Panchali*, which is basically focused on the 10 year-old Apu, Ray gives him the dominant quality of 'camatkara' and it is through his constant state of wonder that Ray conveys the experience of

the changing Indian landscape to his spectators. Once again, it is the train scene that stands as the perfect instance to substantiate this point. When the train enters the frame, Apu runs towards it, but the moment he gets to see the train for the first time, Ray does not present it subjectively, i.e., by making a traditional cut from the close-up of the passing train to the awestruck face of the little boy. Instead, he allows the train to occupy the entire frame with Apu on the other side of the tracks.

One might recall Joyce's definition of epiphany in his unparalleled coming-of-age *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: "it is that thing which it is and no other thing…the whatness of a thing" (Joyce, 2011, p.230). Through 'camatkara', Apu is able to apprehend the supreme quality of the train's beauty and achieves epiphany. It is this state of wonder that determines Apu's constancy of character. While Ray has faced criticism from various quarters for allegedly romanticising poverty in *Pather Panchali*, what they do not take into consideration is that it is Apu's perspective that dominates the film, and from the very first film of the trilogy Apu is established as an idealistic boy who is quite sensitive to the environment around him. This establishes him as a foil to other characters like Durga in *Pather Panchali*, Sarbojaya in *Aparajito* and Pulu in *Apur Sansar* which, in turn, maintains the constancy of character. Thus, for a spectator it becomes easier to follow Apu's journey throughout the course of the three films

and since Apu is essentially a romantic, this further enhances the effects of the changing landscape of Bengal.

Lastly, 'constancy of gesture' is the principle that deals with the theory of action and 'abhinaya' or gesture. It is that which makes the spectator empathise with the feelings and emotions evoked by the actor. When a hopeful Apu, for instance, goes in search of a job in a labelling factory, he recoils from the dehumanising monotony of factory work. This brief moment (which is driven solely through Soumitra Chatterjee's gestures allows the spectator to feel his inability to come to terms with the almost mechanical work culture. Once again, it is because of Apu's constancy of character that the abhinaya is able to perfectly convey the mood of the scene to the spectator. By maintaining these aspects of the rasa, Ray ensures that the spectators experience Bengal through the eyes of Apu, and what it subsequently does is strip away the generalisations and the orientalist perceptions that Hollywood had attached with films on India. While Renoir's presentation of India reinforces the orientalist notion, Ray systematically breaks it down in front of his spectators by an honest portrayal of the Indian experience.

Conclusion

Renoir's association of India with spirituality, a stand quite common to the orientalist discourse, is based on the concept of cyclicity of life. He attempts to present an authentic India to his Western spectators but reduces India and its various aspects to this notion of cyclicity while

completely turning a blind eye to the dynamic socio-political landscape of the country. The motif of the river in his film attests to this unchanging continuity that he links India with which gets reflected in Harriet's monologue at the end of the film, "The river runs, the round world spins. Dawn and lamplight, midnight, noon. Sun follows day. Night stars and moon. The day ends. The end begins" (1:38:34).

Ray, on the other hand, also presents the river as an important motif in the trilogy, especially in the last two instalments. *Aparajito* begins with a sustained shot of the Ganges from the inside of a train rushing towards Benaras, and the same shot is repeated later when Apu returns to Bengal with his mother. The river symbolises dislocation – a change not simply in terms of topography, but also a change in the lives of the characters experiencing the dislocation: Apu loses his father in Benaras, Sarbajaya loses the proximity she used to share with her only child, and Apu ultimately loses even his mother after he moves to Calcutta. In *Apur Sansar*, the river becomes a medium for Apu's eventual relationship with Aparna, and in the final scenes of the film, he walks away along the river bank where earlier he had moved hesitantly towards his marriage with Aparna. Thus, the river for Ray does not attest to the traditional overtones of the "river of life". Rather, as Wood points out, it "has something of the function of the railway in *Pather Panchali*: it is the way to Calcutta and the future" (98). The image of the river in Ray's films signifies the uncertainty that comes with 'change' in the personal as well as societal spheres, the

very idea that the West and institutions like Hollywood had robbed off of India and had compensated for it with an ahistoricity. Thus, Ray's work contributes to a broader decolonization of the cinematic narrative by deconstructing the perspective that Renoir presents in his film.

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ENDNOTES:

[1] There have been recent publications on Ray's and Renoir's cinemas like Stam (1984), Sawhney (2007), Younger (2013), Gupta and Roy (2024). The author's (Chakraborty 2024) contribution is unique it their application of the concept of orientalism. Please cite as: Chakraborty, A. Calcutta Through Different Lenses: Revisiting India in Jean Renoir's The River and Satyajit Ray's The Apu Trilogy. *CINEJ Cinema Journal*, *12*(2), 208–228. https://doi.org/10.5195/cinej.2024.656.