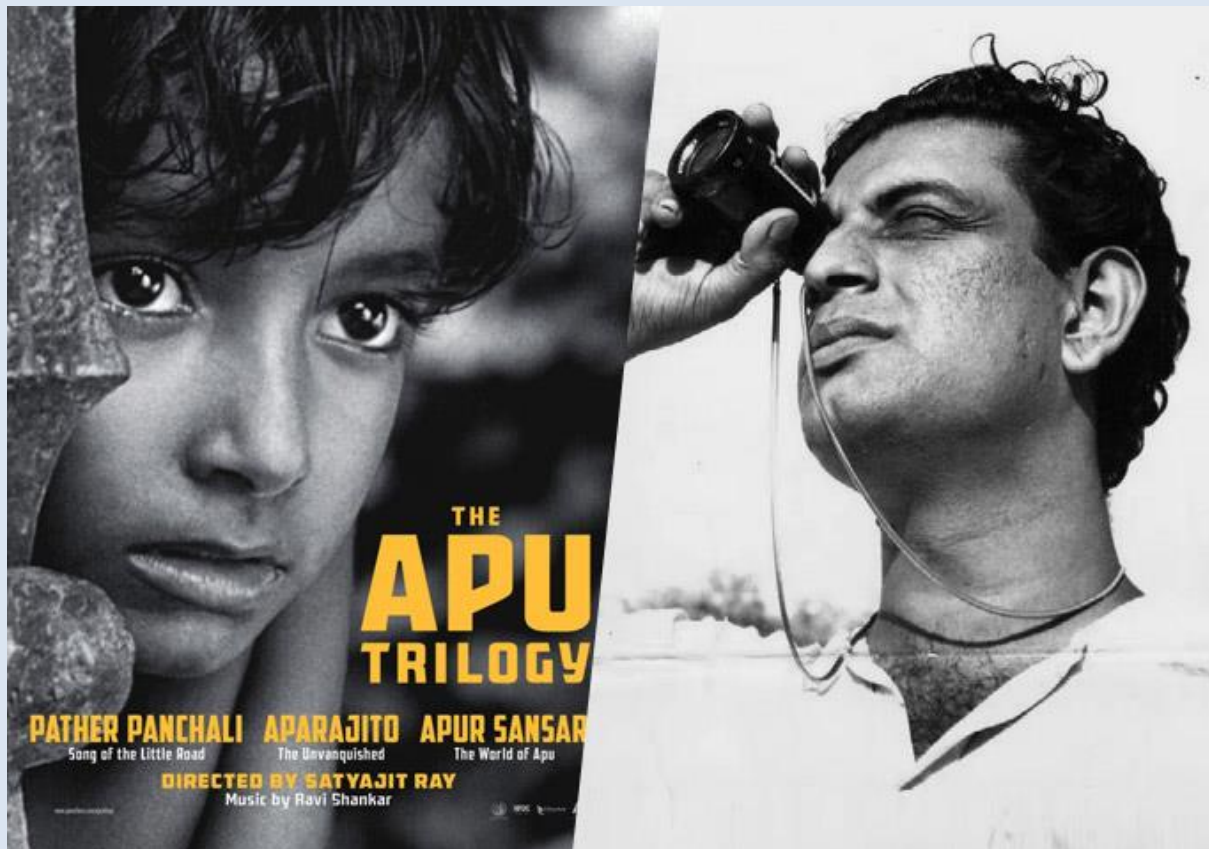


Article
Siladitya Sen

They Too Are Yearning For A Route To The Roots



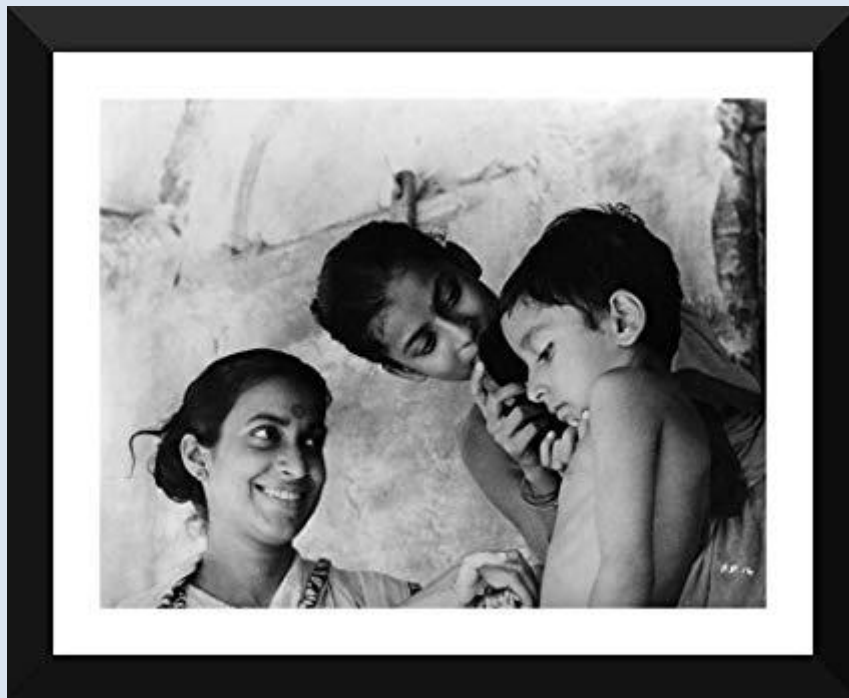
Apur Sansar (The World of Apu) was released on 1st May 1959. As it completes its 60th year in 2019, it is imperative for us to revisit, to rediscover *The Apu Trilogy*, and most certainly Apu — someone who embodies for the Bengali its transgenerational roots to self-knowledge.

Dwelling in displacements, it is the life of a migrant that Satyajit Ray's Apu inhabits since his childhood. Perhaps this is the reason why the western audience identifies with Apu at a deeper level. For at the heart of it, theirs is a modernity embedded in rootlessness.

On 4th May, 60 years of *Pather Panchali* was celebrated at New York's The Museum of Modern Art. Six decades ago MoMA had also hosted the film's

very first world premiere on 3rd May 1955. Ray had its release in Calcutta another three and a half months later on 26th August. This time at Film Forum, New York, *The Apu Trilogy* ran for eight straight weeks open for the general audience.

Peter Baker and Lee Kline have restored *The Apu Trilogy* for Janus Films and Criterion Collection. In a long interview, both revisited their early experiences of watching *The Apu Trilogy* in the eighties. To Peter, Ray's *Apu Trilogy* represents 'the first flowering of post-war globalization' — a strange observation it may seem. At the culmination of the Second World War a disintegrated Europe was coming to terms with a decaying world, where the oppressed and assaulted groups of people desperately searched for a home, where the disrooted mankind drifted from one corner of the world to the other in the final hope of finding some form of stability — perhaps for Peter this very stride towards a new world is what strikes the common chord between the postwar world with Ray's *Apu Trilogy*.



The events that shape the trajectory from *Pather Panchali* to *The World of Apu* take place long before independence in the colonial Indian setting of the twenties, apparently having no connection to the Second World War. However, the western audience may find some striking similarity with the film's narrative of rootlessness all the way from 1955 to 2015.

Did Apu have any home? Ever? In fact, he has been rootless since the very beginning — since his childhood. It is a rootlessness that has only amplified with time. The more time passed the more out of place he grew. After some minutes into *The World of Apu*, the final chapter of the trilogy, the audience realises that he has left his mess residence at Calcutta, and now lives in the wretched attic of a dilapidated house. Even there the rent is due for three months, and he had to sell off his books for money. On the night of his wedding, Apu tells Aparna whom he met for the first time a few moments ago — “I have no home. I have no means, no job... what kind of home shall I take you to?” Before arriving at Calcutta for studies, he was at Manasapota, and at Kashi before that. He was born at Nischindipur, his childhood was spent there in the first chapter of the trilogy — *Pather Panchali*.



Displaced in his own home since childhood, Apu grows up. His father Harihar, drifting randomly from one place to another in search of some job to eke out sustenance for his family, does not even come to know that his daughter Durga has expired. The more Indir Thakrun, Apu’s elderly aunt, tries to hold on to their ancestral home, the more homeless she becomes. Abandoned, she dies in the bamboo fields under a large, old tree like a primordial figure — her last few days spent far from home. Harihar too fails to earn an honourable living despite

his travels to distant places. Asserting to Apu that ‘at times, one must let go of her illusions of home’, Sarbajaya leaves their place of origin.

Ray made *The Apu Trilogy* after his own country was left fragmented in two halves, realising fully well the intense cruelty lurking under the term ‘homeless’. During 1955-1959 when the Bengali watched these three Ray masterpieces, our infantile independence nurtured the dream of building a new nation following its five-year plans. At this crucial juncture, Ray, however, realised how the stains of our tyrannical, pre-colonial past crippled our newborn independence — it was the era of development as well as decadence, of productivity and waste, of higher wages and higher inequalities, of expulsion and unemployment.

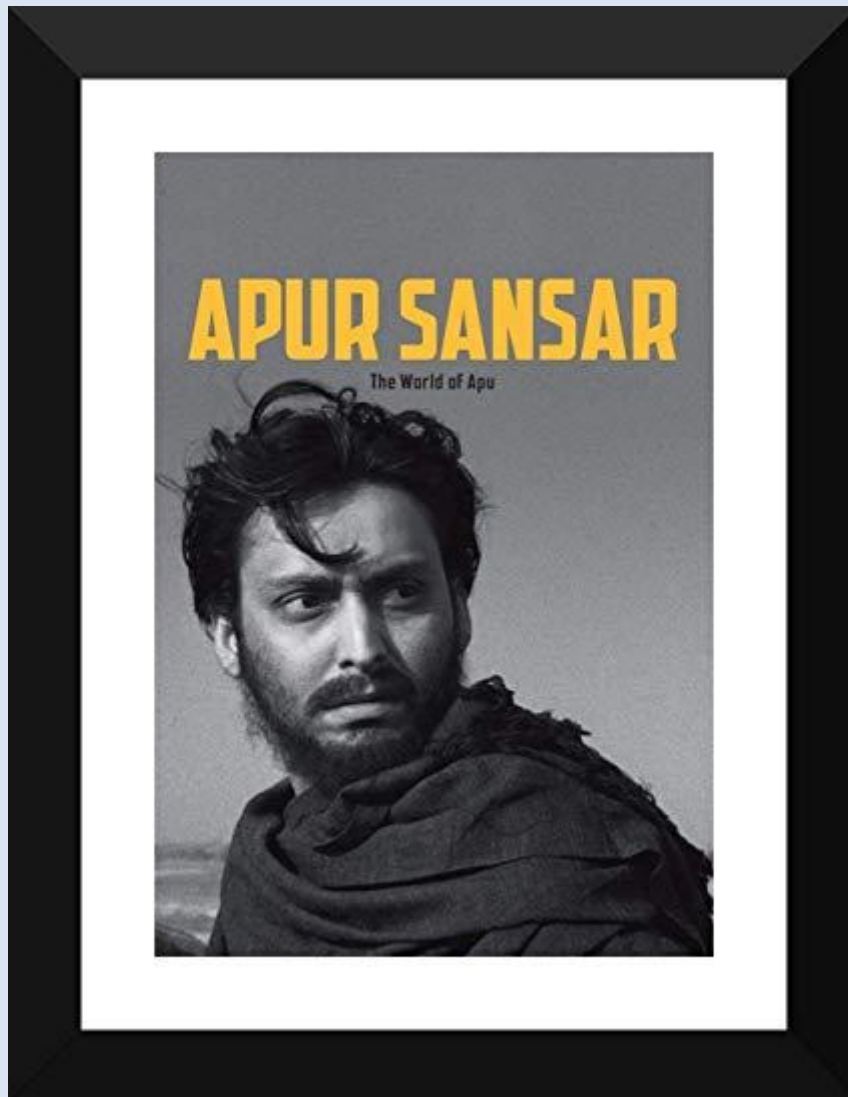
In his movies, Harihar, Sarbajaya or even Apu do not realise that their tryst with precarity — their desperate search for stability, for a home — would culminate only into further displacements. Not fully perceiving this permanent unsettlement, Harihar dies in Kashi. As far as Sarbajaya is concerned, facing imminent yet a slow, solitary death at Manasapota, she understands how a premature death perhaps saved Durga from this unbearable solitude of living in alienation.

Apu, however, has come to terms with his rootlessness. His school headmaster at Manasapota taught him that “we must not delimit our minds just because we are left at the remote corners of Bangladesh.” With this Apu rationalizes the idea that displacement is a consequence of progress, and therefore, precarity is inevitable. By this time, Enlightenment has reached his footsteps. Despite being a native subject, he is educated in English, in the western system. He speaks about himself to a friend:

The boy comes to the city. He doesn’t want to be a priest — He wants to study. He studies. In the process, I see him struggle. He sheds superstition and prejudices. He takes nothing on trust. He tries to be rational.

Apu wants to be an explorer of the Enlightenment. He wants to spread out to the whole world, wishes to become the preeminent manifestation of modernity. However, what lurks beneath the narrative of enlightened progress are the vast tracks of profound darkness. On his return at Manasapota, Sarbajaya tells Apu,

“Every evening I feel feverish and dizzy. I have no appetite at all. I've often thought of telling you — couldn't — obviously you can't upset your studies to stay with me — can you?” Apu does not answer. Sarbajaya understands that he has slept all this while. Bringing her chores to a halt for a few seconds, she heaves a sigh.



We heave a sigh too, at the constant faltering of Apu's ride to Enlightenment. An Intermediate with a salary of fifteen rupees who came to Calcutta with a toy globe in hand throws away the manuscripts of his long-cherished novel, attempts suicide at the very train which brought him to the city — the whole of *The World of Apu* is but an ever-splintering travelogue of rootlessness. This inconsistency, this self-contradiction, this systematic unrooting is perhaps an inescapable consequence of Enlightenment.

Europe claimed its colonies structuring its rationale on the pretext of Enlightened Reason, initiated slavery, and gave birth to Fascist forces. Due to this, Europe and America still bear the cross of a modernity embedded in disrooting. Perhaps this justifies why the people in the west identify themselves with Apu, why it brings them to tears. Perhaps, the closing scene where Apu returns to his roots carrying his son on his shoulders kindles in them a wish to return to the origins. Stephanie Zacharek, a prominent critic in a New York magazine, watched *The Apu Trilogy* for the first time in 1995 at Boston. She watched the films again 20 years later at MoMA this time and summarised her experience in a long write-up, “Apu Trilogy is inseparable from life... you can go home again. Just not back to your own.”

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