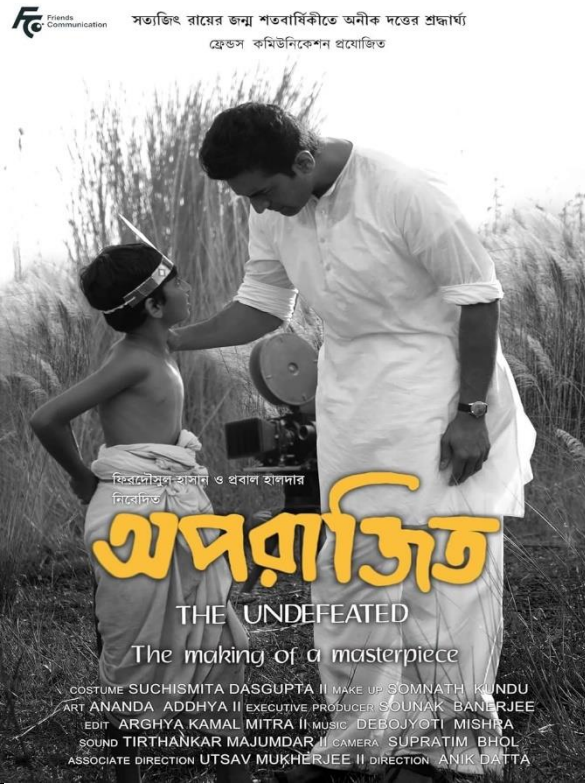
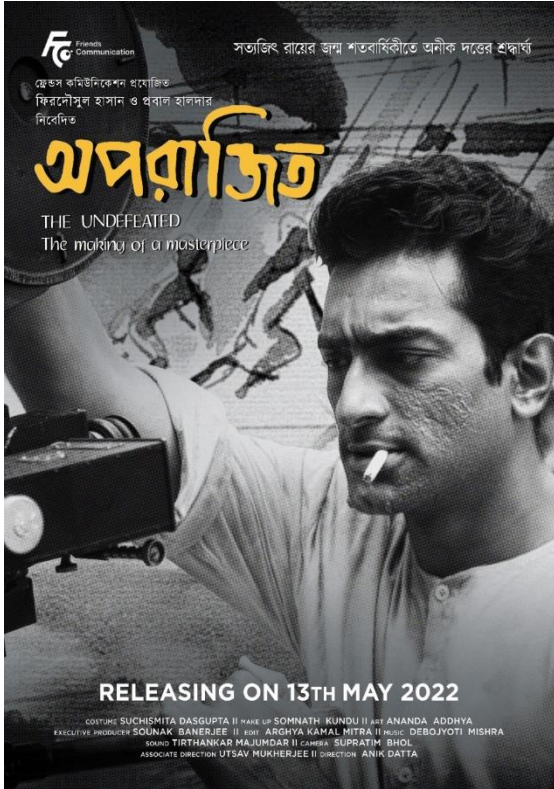


Critique

Mitesh Take

***Aparajito*: The Birth Saga of the All-Time Classic Movie!**

Satyajit Ray's debut masterpiece, *'Pather Panchali'* (1955), propelled Indian cinema to global acclaim. Revered as an all-time classic, this Bengali gem holds a unique position in world cinema. The challenging birth story of this film is depicted in the movie *'Aparajito'* (2022) by writer-director Anik Dutta, released on May 13, 2022.

Following *'Pather Panchali'*, Honorary Academy Award winner Satyajit Ray directed two more parts of the same story: *'Aparajito'* (1956) and *'Apur Sansar'* (1959). These three movies are popularly known as the *'Apu Trilogy'*. Director Dutta is a great admirer of this trilogy. As 2021-22 marked Ray's birth centenary year, Anik Dutta mentions that the

film has been crafted as a tribute. He also emphasises that the film serves as an inspiration, conveying the message that one can confidently transform dreams into reality.

Any film's narration begins with a poster. The posters and logos created for *'Aparajito'* encapsulate the movie's essence.

All the posters are in black and white. The first poster depicts a young Satyajit Ray with a camera, while in the background, there is a picture of the siblings going to see the train from the storyboard of *'Pather Panchali'*. The second poster portrays a young Satyajit Ray explaining a scene from *'Pather Panchali'* to a child actor portraying Apu, with a camera and grassland in the

backdrop. The film's title is inscribed as '*Aparajito* - THE UNDEFEATED - The Making of a Masterpiece'.

This indicates that the film revolves around the creation of Satyajit Ray's black-and-white masterpiece, '*Pather Panchali*'.



In the film's logo, the negative space within the letter 'A' features the siblings from '*Pather Panchali*', which form part of the Bengali word '*Aparajito*'. In the negative space of the letter 'P', Satyajit Ray's 'Mitchell Camera' used for the filming of '*Pather Panchali*' is depicted. At the same time, the famous train scene from '*Pather Panchali*' is incorporated into the letter 'ji'. The English calligraphy in the tagline is crafted in a font designed by Satyajit Ray himself, known as the 'Ray Roman Font'. The Bengali word '*Aparajito*' translates to 'unconquered' - one who no one can defeat. There were many difficulties, a lot of struggle, and much time wasted, but Satyajit Ray did not give up and finally made his first film, so the name is very apt for this film. The same sentiment is also expressed in the tagline in English so non-Bengali audiences can understand it.

Upon granting permission for the film '*Aparajito*' (2022), Satyajit Ray's son, Sandeep Ray, stipulated that real names should not be used. Consequently, all

significant names were altered. '*Aparajito*' replaced Satyajit, '*Pather Padaboli*' substituted for '*Pather Panchali*', and Uma and Manik were chosen instead of Durga and Apu from '*Pather Panchali*'. While the rationale behind Sandeep's condition remains unclear, it does pose a challenge for viewers familiar with '*Pather Panchali*', Satyajit Ray, and World Cinema, as the altered names may initially seem jarring and continue to feel annoying throughout the film.

The narrative commences with a radio interview featuring a young Aparajito discussing the international success of the film '*Pather Padaboli*' on All India Radio. This interview serves as the central thread of the film's story, presenting Aparajito's arduous journey through a series of flashbacks.

The film delves into various aspects of Aparajito's cinematic journey, including his film studies, the establishment and management of a film society, the conception of '*Pather Padaboli*', pre-production preparations, casting decisions, production challenges, and the film's reception both domestically and internationally. Additionally, the narrative highlights the unwavering support provided by Aparajito's wife, underscoring her significant role in the film's success.

It emphasises the protagonist's external journey more than his internal journey. The story showcases numerous qualities of Satyajit Ray, including studiousness, fascination, hard work, determination, readiness to take risks, effort, perseverance, patience, and unconventional thinking.

Although social and political dimensions are not extensively explored, the

narrative subtly addresses contemporary societal attitudes towards cinema and the progressive Brahma society's stance on gender equality. It also sheds light on political leaders' cultural apathy and opportunism in promoting their own agendas. Additionally, it offers subtle criticism of leftist ideologies.

Some events in the story do not significantly contribute to the film's value. It would have functioned adequately even without them. For instance, in the scene where Aparajito throws a party for his English boss after receiving approval for training in London.

The authors conducted thorough research before writing the script, consulting numerous experts to ensure accuracy. However, certain cinematic liberties, including fictional events and reinterpreting historical occurrences, were taken. For instance, the extended radio interview and Aparajito's dream sequence are purely fictional elements.

While searching for a girl to portray the character of Uma, an incident unfolds. A girl dressed in modern attire arrives at Aparajito's house with her mother. Aparajito rejects her, deeming her appearance unsuitable for the rural setting. However, Aparajito's wife intervenes, taking the girl to another room and adorning her in a saree to resemble a village girl. In a surprising turn, Aparajito sees Uma's essence in her. Interestingly, this incident mirrors an event during the casting of the film '*Apur Sansar*' (1959), not '*Pather Panchali*'! Furthermore, Satyajit's associate, not his wife, suggested seeking financial support from the Chief Minister to overcome the film's financial obstacles.

The character design in the narrative is commendable, with each main character exhibiting distinct and vibrant personalities, devoid of dullness. Through the film, the authors adeptly illustrate the multitude of talents Satyajit Ray and his wife possess, which play an integral role in his filmmaking.

'*Pather Panchali*' is pure cinema, so it defies the expectation that a film based on it will be the same. As much as '*Pather Panchali*' is a visual film, '*Aparajito*' is verbose. The basic principle of cinema, 'show, don't tell,' has been largely undermined. While it's acceptable in the case of the radio interview, in many other instances, the story is conveyed solely through dialogue.

The dialogue in the film is average. However, during the exposition of the characters, the dialogues are skilfully used to indirectly convey the characters' educational level, tastes, skills, etc.

A crucial aspect of producing a biographical film is casting lead roles and portraying them through acting, body language, appearance, etc. In this aspect, the movie '*Aparajito*' excels. Actor Jeetu Kamal's portrayal of Aparajito is remarkable.

Initially, Abir Chatterjee was selected to portray the role of Aparajito, but due to scheduling conflicts, the arrangement fell through. Continuing the search, director Anik Dutta encountered Jeetu Kamal on the street. Upon inquiry, it was discovered that Kamal was a television actor. After a successful makeup test resulting in a striking resemblance to Satyajit Ray, Kamal was ultimately chosen for the role.

With few exceptions, the main actors closely resemble their characters. The

majority of the actors deliver commendable performances. Jeetu Kamal, portraying Aparajito, particularly stands out in his role. He effectively embodies Satyajit Ray's persona, displaying a strong performance. He is well-supported by actress Saayoni Ghosh in the role of Aparajito's wife.

To achieve this level of performance, Anik Dutta conducted extensive workshops for the actors, who also undertook significant personal research to understand their characters.

The direction is satisfactory except for some verbose scenes. However, the blocking, the business given to the actors, the overall use of sets, and the performance of all departments have significantly enhanced certain scenes. For instance, in a scene set within the film studio, the older workers of the studio are seen mocking Aparajito and his crew. Meanwhile, in the background, Aparajito and his colleagues are engaged in a discussion around the camera. In the midground, a painter is depicted working on a large panel, while two artists dressed as sages are shown smoking on the other side. These workers are positioned in the foreground, with various studio-related tools scattered around. This meticulous arrangement exemplifies a perfect *mise-en-scène*, using the frame entirely.

The director has conveyed important concepts through subtle actions, such as depicting Satyajit Ray as an atheist. Although this aspect is not directly mentioned in the film, there is a scene where a man offers Aparajito to apply a holy 'tilak' after worshipping a deity, to which he declines.

After casting, cinematography and lighting stand out as the film's secondary

strengths. The cinematographer, Supratim Bhol, is a dedicated '*Apu Trilogy*' fan. He previously worked on the cinematography for the black-and-white film '*Avijatrik*' (2021), based on the '*Apu Trilogy*', for which he was honoured with the Government of India's National Film Award for Best Cinematography. Thus, selecting Supratim Bhol as the cinematographer was a fitting choice.

An essential aspect of '*Aparajito*' is its black-and-white presentation, reminiscent of '*Pather Panchali*'. This choice enhances the film's nostalgic appeal, transporting viewers back to the 1950s. Similar experiments have been conducted recently in Hollywood, such as '*Monk*' (2020), based on the writer and scriptwriting process of '*Citizen Kane*' (1941), which also utilised black-and-white cinematography.

Key characteristics of cinematography include eye tracing achieved through composition, framing, camera angle, lens focus, and the creation of visual depth using foreground, midground, and background, carefully considering all three axes.

Low-key lighting is prominent in many scenes, utilising contrasts between intense light and shadow to achieve a *chiaroscuro* effect.

One deficiency in cinematography is the lack of exterior shots showcasing the old cities of Kolkata and London. The majority of scenes set in these cities occur indoors, within buildings. Of course, the screenwriters are responsible for this limitation.

Actor Jeetu Kamal's portrayal of Satyajit Ray is achieved through the skilled application of prosthetic makeup. The transformation effectively captures the

contrast between the youthful, delicate Satyajit as a student in Kalaniketan and the matured Satyajit with a more seasoned appearance. The makeup overall is complimentary, yet there is a notable flaw where Nehru's fake nose is visible in a close-up shot, detracting from the otherwise seamless portrayal.



The characters' hairstyles and costumes fit their respective roles, periods, and socio-economic backgrounds. The art director has meticulously crafted a portrayal of the bygone era, with the 1950s ambience reflected in numerous small details like matchboxes. Each setting exudes its distinctive personality. For instance, the film club's claustrophobic room conveys the challenges of its operation and management. At the same time, Satyajit Ray's home reflects an affluent, cultured family deeply immersed in the worlds of art and literature.

In *'Pather Panchali'*, a ceremonial thread is tied on Apu's right hand but not Manik's hand in *'Aparajito'*. Similarly, when Durga gets drenched in the rain in *'Pather Panchali'*, there's no scarecrow behind her, but in *'Aparajito'*, a scarecrow is present. Many intentional differences from the original film are incorporated in *'Aparajito'*.

Some technical flaws are evident in the art direction. For instance, before filming the rain scene, despite the gusty wind scattering leaves everywhere and leaving the technicians bewildered, the leaves and branches of neighbouring trees failed to move accordingly in response to such conditions.

The film's music composer is Debojyoti Mishra, who previously contributed to the orchestra for a Satyajit Ray film's music composition unit and closely observed Satyajit's music composition process.

All the music in the film has been meticulously recreated from scratch, without borrowing from *'Pather Panchali'*. It incorporates both Indian and Western musical elements. The composer has skillfully achieved the delicate balance of making the music reminiscent of *'Pather Panchali'* while avoiding mere imitation.

Aparajito's dream sequence in the film is composed in the style of Russian composer Sergei Prokofiev. This was chosen because, as Debojyoti Mishra mentions, Prokofiev was a favourite composer of Satyajit Ray.

To promote the film, the song 'Amader Panchali' has been transformed into a folk song celebrating *'Pather Panchali'* and Satyajit Ray. The song is infectious and composed in the spirit of the 'Apu Trilogy' music. The accompanying video includes scenes from the film *'Aparajito'* (2022), behind-the-scenes footage, and recorded song scenes.

The sound design is exceptional, with meticulous use of ambient sound, foley sound, and room tone. Various layers of sound enhance the auditory experience. Chandrashish Ray dubbed Aparajito's voice.

Though some scenes become prolonged, the editor skillfully maintains the rhythm throughout. The pacing of events in this film is deliberate, which may not appeal to everyone and may lead some to perceive it as slow. However, each film possesses its distinct essence. This one exudes a sense of tranquillity as it gradually reveals itself, akin to the nature of '*Pather Panchali*'.

Crafting a 'Cinema on Cinema' based on a globally acclaimed timeless classic presented quite a challenge, yet Anik Dutta and his team have achieved up to a certain standard!

Title - *Aparajito - The Undeclared*

Year - 2022

Language - Bengali

Genre - Drama, Biography

Duration - 2 Hours 18 Minutes

Direction - Anik Dutta

Story, Screenplay and Dialogues - Anik Dutta, Sreeparna Mitra, Utsav Mukherjee

Starring - Jeetu Kamal, Saayoni Ghosh, Debashis Roy, Paran Banerjee, Barun Chanda

Producer - Prabal Halder, Firdausul Hasan

Executive Producer - Sounak Banerjee

Music - Debojyoti Mishra

Cinematography - Supratim Bhol

Editing - Arghyakamal Mitra

Production Design - Ananda Addhya

Art Direction - Manik Saha

Costumes – Suchismita Dasgupta

Makeup - Somenath Kundu

Hair stylist - Hena Munshi

Sound Designer - Tirthankar Majumdar

Visual Effects - Krishnendu Ghosh

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