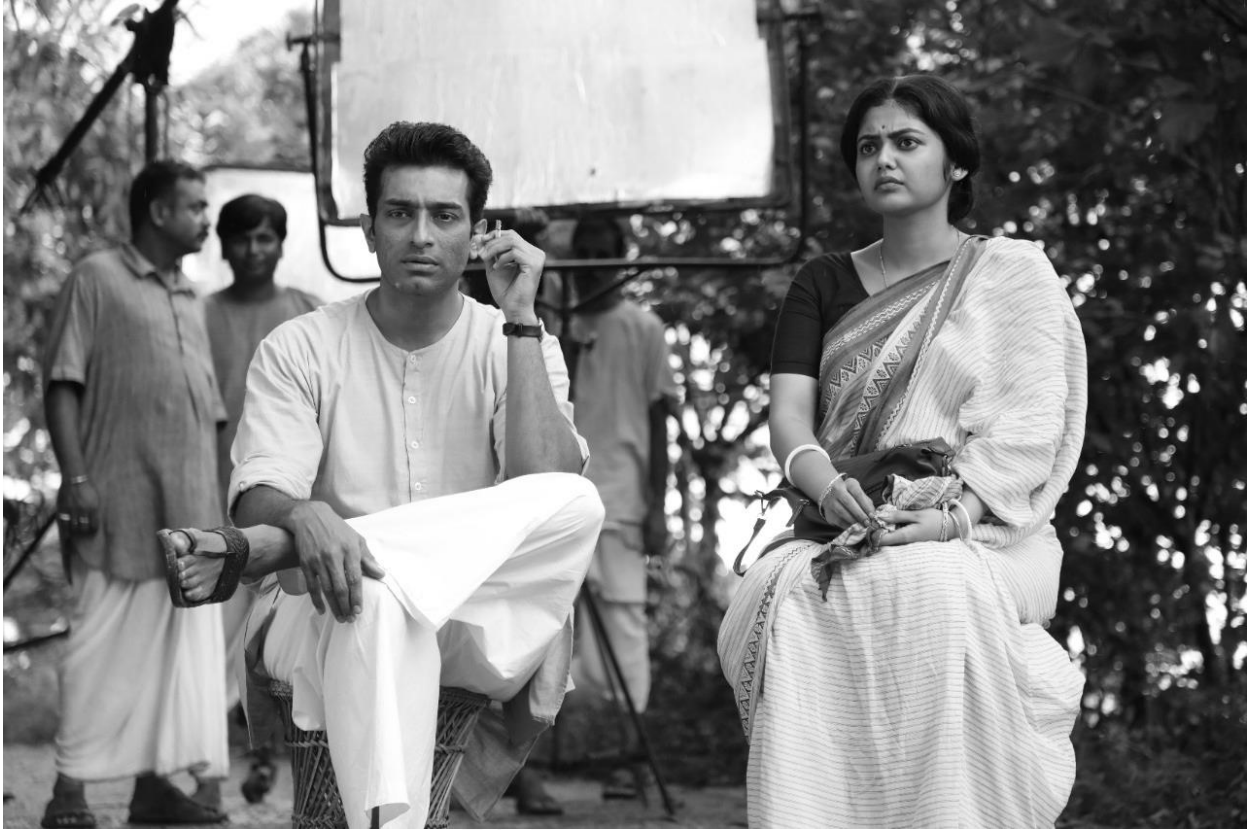


Article

Meghachandra Kongbam

When *Aparajito* Brings Satyajit Ray to Life



It was in the year 2022. I had the opportunity to watch biopics of two iconic Indian figures: *Aparajito*, which explored the life of legendary filmmaker Satyajit Ray, and *Mahananda*, centred on the renowned writer Mahasweta Devi. It is common for films and books to be released to celebrate the centenary of influential personalities, and both these works beautifully captured the essence of their respective subjects, honouring their lasting legacies. In a biopic, we seek to understand the essence of these remarkable individuals, examining how filmmakers delve into and present their subjects' souls using cinematic techniques. As we approach the centenary celebration of M. K. Binodini in 2022, I eagerly anticipate new books and films that will honour her contributions and elevate Manipuri cinema on the global stage.

I came across the monthly program for the year-long centenary celebration of M. K. Binodini,

organised by *Leimarol Khorjeikol* (LEIKOL), a literary organisation founded by Binodini exclusively for women writers. I was eager to see the books and films from writers and filmmakers that would uncover the inner soul of M. K. Binodini and highlight her immense contributions to Indian literature and her remarkable development of works across different genres. However, my anxiety and eagerness were calmed by the words of the departed poet Khwairakpam Chaoba, who said, “*Lairarabee Irolni, Khangdabana Haibani, Meitei Kavi Lakkhini*” (A language poor they call it / By those who are ignorant / Doubt not, Meitei poet is coming).

Mahananda (2022) is a Bengali-language biographical film directed by Arindam Shil, based on the life and works of the eminent writer and socio-political activist Mahasweta Devi. The filmmaker's perspective on the writer is portrayed in the film. In

the movie, Mahasweta Devi's character is named Mahananda Bhattacharya. The story revolves around Mohal Basu, an enthusiastic college student who wishes to pursue her PhD research on the writer and activist Mahananda Bhattacharya. She seeks out Mahananda, leading to events that profoundly impact Mohal's life and mental state.

Aparajito (2022), a Bengali-language biographical film directed by Anik Dutta, depicts the struggles of Satyajit Ray, the iconic figure of world cinema, as he endeavoured to create the film *Pather Panchali*. The locations and features of the film are largely realistic, and Satyajit Ray is vividly brought to life. The characters in the movie are true to life; however, their real names are not used. This choice was likely made to avoid legal issues and to allow the director creative freedom to deliver his narrative in a contemporary filmmaking style.

Anik Dutta has renamed all the characters: Satyajit Ray is called Aparajito Ray, alias Apu; his wife, Bijoya Ray is Bimala Ray; cinematographer Subrata Mitra is Subir Mitra; co-founder of the Calcutta Film Society, Chidananda Dasgupta is Sivananda Dasgupta; Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru is Jawhar Kaul; Chief Minister Bidhan Chandra Roy is Biman Roy; and music director Ravi Shankar is Surja Shankar. Even *Pather Panchali* is renamed *Pather Padabali*, and *Bicycle Thieves* is changed to *Bicycle Rider*.

Anik Dutta created the film's story, screenplay, and dialogue with Utsav Mukherjee and Shreeparna Mitra. The film, shot in black and white, stars Jeetu Kamal in the title role of Aparajito Ray and Sayoni Ghosh as Bimala Ray.

The film follows a non-linear narrative. After *Pather Padabali* achieves international acclaim, making its journey from New York to Cannes and earning accolades for Indian cinema, the story shifts to a scene where Samik Bandyopadhyay, a theatre and film scholar representing All India Radio, Calcutta, interviews Aparajito Ray.

At home, Bimala Ray turns on the radio. Her mother-in-law asks her to increase the volume while Aparajito's young son noisily runs around the house, prompting his grandmother to scold him to be quiet. During the interview, Samik asks, "Your interests

were in art, Western music, and illustration. Why did you suddenly become excited about making a film like this?" Aparajito responds, "I was an avid movie watcher, but I never thought of making a film. However, my fascination with films kept growing. I still remember, while working on a sketch of palash and silk-cotton trees at Kala Niketan, 'Citizen Kane' was released in Calcutta theatres. It was only there for seven days, and I missed it. Later, I began a fun exercise: whenever I learned a famous novel was being adapted into a film, I would draft a skeleton screenplay from the book before seeing the movie. Then, while watching the film, I would compare my ideas with the director's."

The film opens by depicting the unique character of Aparajito Ray and his journey to becoming a filmmaking genius.

Samik continues, "You used to watch movies, but how did the idea of a film society come about?" Aparajito explains, "We primarily watched Hollywood movies. However, incredible work was being done in various nations like Russia, Japan, and many European countries in their local languages, which we were missing out on. A few like-minded friends and I, who you could call cinephiles, became increasingly curious about these works. Around that time, I came across a book called 'Film' by Roger Manvell, which mentioned forming a film society. Inspired, we banded together to establish the Film Society of Calcutta."

The film effectively highlights the importance of the film society in promoting film culture and movement, reminding viewers of how the film society movement started in India.

The members of the Film Society gather in a room to screen a film. One member stretches a rope from one wall to another to hang a large white cloth as a makeshift screen. Aparajito prepares the 16 mm projector for the screening. As they set up, the members converse among themselves. "Movies were forbidden in my household during my childhood," one says. "Going to a cinema was like going to a bordello. Naturally, I became inquisitive about watching movies."

Another adds, "We were only allowed to see mythological films, never adult films. Even some

mythological films weren't entirely appropriate for kids. The way gods and goddesses were dressed, along with the divine dancers, wasn't much different from cabaret performers. The stigma associated with cinema still exists. Trying to find a place to watch films has brought us to this point."

The film delves into the relationship between cinema and contemporary society, illustrating the origins of film societies in India, which would eventually spark a cinematic revolution. As the cinephiles arrive individually, they introduce themselves, beginning a transformative movement in Indian cinema.

Satyajit Ray's entry into D. J. Keymer & Co., Calcutta, as a graphic designer in 1943 paved the way for the creation of *Pather Panchali*. He was recruited by D. K. Gupta, the manager, and Mr. Broom, the managing director. Notably, D. J. Keymer & Co. stood out for the freedom it allowed its employees to pursue other interests and its investment in their personal growth.

While working full-time at Keymer, D. K. Gupta started Signet Press, revolutionising the College Street publishing industry with innovative design and print techniques. He involved Ray in this venture, and Ray designed many book jackets for Signet Press while still employed full-time at Keymer. Satyajit Ray quickly rose and became the Art Director by 1949.

In the film, D. K. Gupta is renamed Dilip Das. He informs Aparajito about the upcoming publication of Bibhuti Mukherjee's children's book *Pather Padabali* and asks him to design the cover, providing him with the draft script. Aparajito, who had never read the novel before, reads the script attentively and sketches the book cover.

Fortuitously, Aparajito also receives the opportunity to undergo a six-month training program at their advertising firm in London. With his boss's approval, he travels to London, accompanied by his newlywed wife, Bimala Ray.

In the AIR interview, Aparajito recounts his journey to London. He states, *"It took us 16 days to reach London. I started work as soon as we arrived. Our training took place in the conference room of the Primordial London office. There wasn't much new to*

learn—more like going over the basics after understanding the complexities. Naturally, I grew impatient and spent my time on other pursuits.

I watched television for the first time in London and learned how to write scripts for TV commercials. Another significant skill I acquired was storyboarding, which later proved invaluable in my filmmaking. For 'Pather Padabali,' I preferred creating storyboards over traditional shot descriptions, simply writing the dialogues. Sometimes, I would underline words directly in the book with red ink.

Bimala and I travelled extensively in London and watched a lot of films. In six months, we saw 99 movies. One unforgettable day, our landlord and his wife took us to see 'The Bicycle Rider.' Watching that film felt like seeing the right movie at the right time. Afterwards, we strolled through Hyde Park, where I shared my vision for my film with my companions.

After six months, we embarked on the ship back to India. I had decided to draft the script for 'Pather Padabali' during the journey."

Aparajito's narratives are brought to life with captivating visuals in the film.

Aparajito is sketching something on the ship while returning to India. Approaching him, Bimala asks, *"Why are you so busy? Wow! You're drafting the entire movie like a comic strip."* Aparajito replies, *"This is called a storyboard. It helps a lot in making TV advertisements. I learned it during my visit to London."* Bimala chuckles, *"So your London training is coming in handy."*

To fund the film, Aparajito sells all his insurance policies, old gramophone records, and other items. He assigns his friend Subir, a photographer, to be the cameraman. Although Subir has never handled a movie camera before, Aparajito trusts his ability to capture images with a unique visual sense.

Aparajito meets with producers, financiers, and distributors seeking financial support. However, they turn him away, deeming the film script unprofitable due to its lack of songs and dances. With the bit of money he has, Aparajito begins shooting the film.

The film showcases how Satyajit Ray shot *Pather Panchali* and managed his crew members and actors. Some iconic scenes from the original movie are recreated, including:

- Apu and Durga are running through a meadow full of autumn Kaash (catkins) to watch a train chugging away, spewing smoke.
- The advent of the monsoon, where an old man angling at a pond realises it's raining when a raindrop falls on his bald head. He unfolds his umbrella as Durga enjoys the rain.
- Durga and Apu scamper after a candy seller with a stray dog following them, their shadows in the pond running beside the muddy road.
- Apu and Durga walking through the forest towards home, discovering their aunt Indir resting on the ground. Durga shakes her, only to realise Indir has died. Horrified, they run back home, dropping Indir's bowl in a nearby stream.
- The last rites of Indir Thakrun.
- The death of Durga, where Hari returns home jubilantly with presents for his family, including a sari for Durga. Sarbajaya throws herself at his feet, signalling that they have lost Durga. Hari becomes extremely distraught and cries out over his daughter's dead body.

These scenes highlight Ray's ability to direct non-professional actors. Some required more than ten takes to achieve the director's perfection. Capturing these scenes led to exciting situations that delighted the audience.

Due to financial problems, the shooting is halted midway for more than a year. Aparajito is particularly worried about whether the child actor playing Apu will experience a voice change and whether the elderly actress playing Indir Thakrun will pass away before the shooting is completed. His wife, Bimala, shares his concerns.

One day, Bimala sees a white owl perched on a tree branch and excitedly tells her husband, believing it to be an omen of impending success. However, Aparajito is sceptical of such superstitions.

Bimala, also worried about the unfinished film, encourages her husband to seek funding from the West Bengal Chief Minister. She suggests they be accompanied by Archana, the daughter of her aunt Shila, who knows the Chief Minister. Aparajito doubts whether the Chief Minister will be interested in supporting art and culture. Despite this, Aparajito and Archana meet with the Chief Minister.

The scene is exciting. The Chief Minister is busy with office files while the Chief Secretary sits beside him. In front of them, Aparajito and Shila are seated. Aparajito is reading a script concerning the film's final scene, explaining that Sarbamangla informs Harimadhav of Uma's death and that he wants this scene to be particularly impactful. Seeing that the Chief Minister is attending to office files, Aparajito pauses. Noticing this, the Chief Minister assures him, "*Continue reading, I am listening.*"

Aparajito narrates, "*And then Sarvamangala told their neighbours that they are leaving the village because there is no scope for livelihood here. If they stay, they won't be able to recover from the shock of Uma's death. The neighbours expressed sorrow, but they disagreed with them. The village elders came to Harimadhav's house, but he had already decided to go to Kashi. The packing was done, and the kitchen wrapped up. He couldn't even offer the guests tea and smoke. Harimadhav had decided to go to Banaras to earn a living.*"

The Chief Minister asks, "*Why Banaras? What's wrong with Calcutta?*"

Aparajito replies, "*Banaras is famous for priestly work. Harimadhav didn't even have the money to repair his home. He decided to sell whatever he had to pay back his debt. And in the scene, we'll show Harimadhav and his family leaving Shantipur village in a bullock cart. Sarbamangla's eyes are teary. Their house is in a dilapidated state, and a snake enters the house.*"

The Chief Minister asks, "*And then?*" Aparajito replies, "*That's the end.*"

The Chief Minister objects, "*What? Why would Harimadhav leave the village? There are so many community development projects in the villages. No, that can't be. Change the ending. Hari and the other villagers could apply for a government*

loan to run a tractor. He can't go to Kashi. The movie should end on a happy note, giving hope. The audience should leave the hall feeling uplifted. Yes, change it."

Aparajito, confused, asks, *"Can we make such a drastic change?"*

Archana explains, *"This is based on a very famous novel by Bibhuti Mukherjee. Almost everyone knows the ending. Changing it without the writer's consent seems impossible."*

The Chief Minister suggests interrupting, *"Request Mr Bibhuti to change the ending and mention my name. Otherwise, I can't allocate money from community funds."* Archana quickly argues, *"No, that's a bit difficult."* The Chief Minister asks, *"Why difficult?"* Archana responds, *"He passed away."*

The Chief Minister, embarrassed, says, *"I'm so sorry! I forgot about the death of such a renowned writer. Then what can we do? There are no funds available other than from the community."* His secretary interjects, *"May I suggest something, Sir?"* The Chief Minister nods, *"Yes, yes."*

The secretary proposes, *"The film is titled 'Pather Padabali.' We could potentially release funds from the road department, the PWD."* The Chief Minister, delighted, says, *"Excellent. Do one thing. Allocate the funds reserved for the highway project in Siliguri."*

The interesting dialogue in this particular scene entertains the audience.

Aparajito is sleeping and dreaming. In his dream, his assistant places a viewfinder on his eyes. Aparajito runs towards the shooting location where his crew is filming a scene where Rabindranath Tagore is writing his autograph for Aparajito. Aparajito shouts, *"Hey, this isn't part of the script. Why are you shooting without informing me? Stop the shooting. Can you hear me?"* He murmurs in his sleep. In reality, Bimala is trying to wake him, calling him, *"Apu, wake up!"*

In his dream, Aparajito sees Bimala, calling him, *"Apu, it's me, Vinku. Come."* Aparajito asks, *"Where? Where are you going, Vinku?"* Bimala replies, *"Look over there."* Aparajito, confused, says, *"Is this the owl you were talking about, Vinku?"*

As Bimala touches him to wake him, she says, *"Hey Apu, are you mumbling?"* Aparajito wakes up, saying, *"Just a nightmare."* He drinks a glass of water.

The director has created a captivating dream sequence.

Aparajito works tirelessly day and night to complete the film. The music is composed using the Shehnai, Flute, and Sitar. He receives an opportunity to screen the film at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Determined to finish, Aparajito works through the night, completing the film in ten days without sleep.

The film premiered on May 3, 1955, in New York, where it received critical acclaim. Later, it was shown in Calcutta, garnering various viewpoints from the Indian audience.

The Prime Minister of India, the Chief Minister of West Bengal, and Aparajito Ray are watching the film in a hall. In the final scene, the Prime Minister looks down somberly as Harimadhav and his family leave the village. Aparajito watches silently, observing the Prime Minister's reaction. The Chief Minister signals Aparajito to wait, anxious about whether the Prime Minister will have a negative comment on the film.

After the screening, the Prime Minister says, *"You funded the right film."* The Chief Minister responds, *"I told him to change the ending. It's a sad conclusion, but he disagreed with me."*

The Prime Minister replies, *"That would have been an absolute disaster. No, this is just perfect. This family from a small village moving out into the wider world is the perfect ending. Well done, young man! I have never seen such a wonderful film in my life. I am proud of you."* He shakes Aparajito's hand.

As they leave the theatre, the Prime Minister adds, *"This has been a wonderful experience. Ray, I will definitely speak with the I&B Ministry. The Bombay Film College has no idea what artistic cinema is. I will ensure this film goes to Cannes, Ray."*

The All India Radio interview is in progress. Samik asks Aparajito, *"Your very first film goes to a festival like Cannes and wins the prestigious award*

for *Best Human Document*. Can you share the taste of that success with our listeners?"

Aparajito replies, "Well, I couldn't attend Cannes at that time. I heard about it later, and it was also extensively written about. You should read it." Samik responds, "Of course I did. But could you share it with our listeners?"

Aparajito continues, "The movie was shown towards the end of the festival in a relatively smaller auditorium, where less important films are generally screened. Very few people watched it, as it was late, and the audience was restless."

Samik reads a rave review of the film from a magazine covering Cannes to give the audience a better sense of the scenario.

The film *Aparajito* truly showcases the multifaceted talents of the genius filmmaker Satyajit Ray. It depicts how he carved a niche for Indian cinema internationally. This film will captivate audiences of all generations and undoubtedly inspire budding filmmakers to create meaningful films and pursue successful careers. My mind drifts into a trance, taking me to the world of Manipuri cinema and the film *-Imagi Ningthem* (My Son, My Precious). I envision the producer and cameraman Kongbrailatpam Ibohal Sharma, who was also the President of Imphal Cine Club; the story and screenwriter Maharaja Kumari Binodini; and the filmmaker Aribam Syam Sharma. I think of their immense struggles in making *Imagi Ningthem* and the remarkable way they brought the film to life. Meanwhile, I hear the sweet theme music of the film. Khun Joykumar sits, fanning the bellow of the harmonium with one hand and pressing the keys with the other. His eyes are closed as he searches for the perfect tune for *Imagi Ningthem*.

Film society activist and critic Rajkumar Bidur, who is the Secretary of the Imphal Cine Club, is bustling tirelessly during the making of *Imagi Ningthem*. He continues his dedicated work at

Filmotsov, Calcutta, even as *Imagi Ningthem* is being screened in the Indian Panorama section. The team is anxious about their fate, as their film is

scheduled to screen right after Aparna Sen's acclaimed film *36 Chowringhee Lane*.

In Calcutta, the *Imagi Ningthem* team—producer Ibohal Sharma, screenwriter Binodini, actress Yengkhom Roma, and film society activist R.K. Bidur—is all worried. As the screening begins, the audience starts to leave one by one, and fewer than ten people remain to watch the film. Amidst the murmurs of the departing audience, someone who is attentively watching the film shouts for everyone to keep quiet. Three days later, a foreigner arrives at the Grand Oberoi Hotel looking for the *Imagi Ningthem* team. He introduces himself as Allen Jallandiu, the co-director of the Festival of 3 Continents, Nantes in France. They sit together on the hotel lawn, where Jallandiu hands over an invitation for *Imagi Ningthem* to be screened in the competition section at Nantes. The story doesn't end there. The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting festival authority instructs the team to contact NFDC, Bombay, immediately to secure their participation at Nantes.

Ibohal and Bidur travel directly to Bombay from Calcutta. At the NFDC, Uma Da Cunha asks them for the film script in English. Ibohal immediately says 'No,' prompting a stern response from Uma, who instructs them to bring it soon. Wisely, R.K. Bidur, who knows every shot and line of dialogue in the film, assures her they will submit it the next day. Bidur works throughout the night, preparing the script. The following day, they submit it to Uma Da Cunha. Bidur also meets the film society activist Sudhir Nandgaonkar and explains *Imagi Ningthem* to the members of Prabhat Chitra Mandal during the film screening.

Today, I wish to see the making of *Imagi Ningthem* just as I saw *Pather Panchali*. Then, I will proudly declare, "This is *Imagi Ningthem*, we make it through our own struggles, the first Indian film to receive the Grand Prix at Nantes." As I regain consciousness, I find myself seated alone in the theatre.