

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Stuart Blackburn, Ph.D.

JANA ARANYA (THE HUMAN JUNGLE or THE MIDDLEMAN) 1976 Satyajit Ray

(Bengali language)

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OVERVIEW

Jana Aranya, better known as *The Middleman*, is the third part of Satyajit Ray's so-called 'Calcutta Trilogy,' which has an underlying theme of a young man trying to make his way in the big city. Indeed, *Mahanagar (The Big City)*, might be added to the sequence, making it a quartet. However, while the first instalment (*Pratidwandi, The Adversary*) is a meditation on morality and death in the context of a violent revolutionary movement in Bengal, and the second film (*Seemabaddha, Company Limited*) examines the ethical compromises made when ascending the corporate ladder, *The Middleman* has a larger, sociological focus. Although it does not ignore individual dilemmas and family dynamics, it trains our attention on the more impersonal organisation systems of the 'company' and the 'market.' Based on a novella by Mani Shankar Mukherjee, the film tells the story of Somnath, a lower middle-class graduate, who must find a job in Calcutta without the advantage of 'business connections. Although a principled young man, he lands up as a broker ('middleman') in the cutthroat world of unregulated business. He is successful but at a terrible personal price. In the director's own words, it is the 'bleakest film' he ever made.

CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

The Middleman was produced a time in Indian history, when revolutionary Marxism was widespread in certain parts of the country, especially Bengal. No one had an answer to what today we would call 'radicalisation.' Somnath's father offers a fairly obvious explanation in the film when he says that social unrest comes from frustrated unemployed graduates. In the father's youth, those restless young men channelled their anger into Gandhi's campaign for independence. These somewhat lame explanations and the fact that the film nowhere articulates the economic basis for the revolutionary movement caused many critics to lament Ray's lack of political commitment. The film was dismissed by some as a typical elitist 'art-house' response to a real human struggle. These criticisms, however, miss the point that while there was, and still is, widespread support for the aims of the revolutionary movement, most people did not join it. Most people choose to lead fairly ordinary lives. One of those people is Somnath.

STORY

Honourable but no honours The film opens, with the credits rolling over a classroom scene at the University of Calcutta during the final-year examination in history. Everyone is openly cheating, but the proctors are either too stupid to notice or too bored to stop it. 'What's going on?' one of the proctors finally asks when the passing of notes is blatant. 'Exams, what else?' a witty student answers, throwing the whole room into paroxysms of laughter. Somnath, the main character, does not cheat but because his handwriting is poor and his exam is graded by a lowly-paid grader with poor eyesight, he only gets a 'pass' instead of 'honours.' His chances of getting a proper job, in a bank or big company, are slim. He has played the game fairly but comes out a loser.

Troubles at home Things don't improve on the home front, either. Somnath's father is angry at the pass instead of honours and threatens to contact the Vice-chancellor until the older son, Bhombol, points out that he can't see him because the V-C is locked in his office by student protestors. Bhombol appears sympathetic but is patronising toward the failure of his young brother. Although the whole family accepts that the system is corrupt, they can do nothing about it. Then Somnath gets a telephone call and leaves the house immediately. In a tearful scene, his girlfriend tells him that her family has forced her to marry a doctor.

Job hunting Somnath joins with his friend, Sukumar, on the hopeless task of landing a job. They go through the process of looking for advertisements, writing letters and going to interviews, all the time knowing that the ratio of interviewees to successful candidate is at least ten to one. The young men, however, keep up their spirits by making fun of salaried men as they pass by in the street. We also learn that Sukumar's family is worse off than Somnath's. His father is injured and can no longer work; he has no pension and used half his savings to pay for the older daughter's wedding. There is also a younger sister, Kauna, 'but you wouldn't recognise her,' Sukumar says. 'She wears lipstick and acts on the amateur stage.' After a string of meaningless interviews, the two young men have a meeting with a pompous MP, who supplies them with useless facts and self-serving clichés.

Becoming a middleman With no success at university, in love or getting a proper job, Somnath finds an alternative route to gaining a foothold in life. After another round of frustrating applications, he happens to meet an old friend, Bishu Bose, who runs his own business. Bishu explains how he rose from selling oranges on the street to being a relatively well-off private broker. He invites Somnath to join him in his independent enterprise. Somnath is impressed but says he wants to tell his family. Back home, his father tells him that a friend has proposed a marriage to his daughter. 'If you marry her,' his father explains, 'he'll put you in charge of the shop. Your problem is solved.' Somnath rejects the proposal, saying that it 'would be a kind of surrender.' Later, Somnath tells his father about his plan to join Bishu's business. 'What kind of business?' he asks. 'I don't know yet,' says Somnath. Although sceptical and believing that business isn't a respectable way of making money, the father agrees.

Learning the ropes Somnath joins the business, which turns out to be a group of individuals who pursue their own line of brokering deals. They obtain commissions, sell products to companies or just put one person in touch with another. This is the world of the middlemen, who are answerable to no one but themselves. Somnath's colleagues warn him that he can trust no one and that he must always count whatever money he is given. 'And if you get into trouble,' Bishu cautions him, 'you have to manage yourself—no one will help you.' It's all about whom you know, whom you can bribe and who will keep their mouth shut. Somnath's first deal is to buy high-quality stationery and sell it to a company whose purchasing agent will take a small cut. Meanwhile, Somnath visits Sukumar at his family's home, which turns out to be little more than a hovel. His younger sister, Kauna, is getting ready to go out and act on the stage, even though her low wages only just about cover the cost of her makeup.

The big deal The story rises to a climax as Somnath closes in on an important deal. He has managed to set up an arrangement in which he will sell a new kind of chemical 'whitener' to a textile firm owned by Mr Goenka. When the negotiations stall, Somnath brings in a 'public relations consultant' to close the deal. The consultant, Mr Mitter, specialises in discovering vulnerabilities in people's lives and using that to persuade them to sign contracts. He finds out that Goenka will sign off on the deal if he is provided with a prostitute. After a number of mistakes, misunderstandings and delays, Somnath procures a woman for Goenka. But his big success goes horribly wrong, when the woman turns out to be Sukumar's sister, Kauna. Disgusted, Somnath attempts to pay off Kauna with his own money, but Kauna says, 'No. This is the way I live now. You can't change me, and I don't want to change.'

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Ending In the final scenes, Somnath escorts her to his client's hotel room and goes home, where his father is overjoyed that he has closed the deal. Somnath, however, can only hang his head in shame.

THEMES

Individual freedom The main theme of this bleak film is the paradox of individual freedom. In the two-plus hours of *The Middleman*, we see how Somnath is thwarted by various kinds of groups and organisations. He is one of the few students who did not cheat and yet receives only a 'pass' due to institutional corruption and ineptitude. Then, his hopes for happiness with his girlfriend are shattered by her announcement that she has been forced into an arranged marriage. First, the education system and now the social system has crushed his future. Although he does not enter the world of the 'company', we are shown how its salaried employees are less than ambitious and follow a rule-book. It is only in the morally dubious sphere of the 'middleman' that Somnath flourishes. He has a desk and colleagues, he makes deals and earns money. But this world is rife with bribery, scams and deception. The Bengali word for 'middleman' is also a term for 'pimp,' who is the quintessential broker. Like a pimp, Somnath is free to arrange deals between two parties. He has his individual freedom, but he has lost the moral principles he displayed at the beginning when he refused to cheat on the exam.

Social unrest A second theme is the social unrest that is convulsing Bengal at the time of the film (1970s). As with the first instalment of Ray's 'Calcutta Trilogy,' the background to the action is a violent Marxist revolutionary movement, with widespread support in the city, especially among students, like Somnath. A partial explanation of this social unrest is provided by Somnath's father when he hears of an incident in which five people are killed and a dozen injured by revolutionaries. Having just heard about Somnath's poor exam results, he says that the boys are rebelling because the system is corrupt. He muses about his own school days when he joined Gandhi's campaign, when he was ready to die for his country. While none of the characters are themselves involved in the revolutionary movement, they are surrounded by it. As they walk through the streets, it is visible in the background, on posters and graffiti on walls, and audible in demonstrations in the near-distance. This, the father says, is the predictable result when a society breaks down, when its public institutions are corrupt and young people are without proper jobs. The literal translation of the Bengali title of the film is *The Human Jungle*, which does not appear to be an exaggeration.

CHARACTERS

Somnath Somnath is the young man at the centre of the film. Somnath is the moral centre of this story of corruption. Although desperate to find his way in the world, he is principled. He is also intelligent, jovial and kind, if a little sarcastic and increasingly cynical. Even when he joins the 'middleman' business, one of his associates says that his 'honest face' will be an asset in a cutthroat world. Caught up in a big city, he wants to make his own mark, but only succeeds in falling into a cesspool of corruption

Sarcastic Somnath has a sharp tongue, which he uses (like many people) to protect himself. A good example of his self-defensive sarcasm occurs in an early scene. His girlfriend breaks the terrible news that she is being forced into an arranged marriage with a doctor, that is, a man with a good salary. She explains that, when the prospective groom arrived, she locked herself in her room, but her father made a big fuss. 'And then?' Somnath asks in a mocking tone. 'Love at first sight?' 'No,' she says, 'you were always in my thoughts.' 'What thoughts?' he asks, 'Like, oh, poor boy, it'll break his heart?' Finally, when she goes to hand back the handkerchief that she has borrowed to wipe her tears, he says, 'Keep it. You might need it on the bus.' His sneering words are only a thin cover for the deep hurt he feels.

Independent Somnath strives to maintain his dignity in the tough world of unemployed youth in Calcutta. He is willing to take a salaried job, which doesn't offer much scope for ambition, but he wants to get that job on his own merit. This independence is illustrated in the middle of the story when he comes home one day and is told by his father that he has a marriage proposal for him. 'She's a daughter of my friend. Nice-looking, 18 and well-educated.' Somnath hesitates, saying that he can't get married because he doesn't have a job. But his father explains that the girl's father will make him manager of his cement shop if he marries his daughter. Still, Somnath is not ready to accept this offer. 'Why?' his father asks. 'Because it would be a kind of surrender,' Somnath answers. Ironically, in this respect, he is like his friend Sukumar's sister, Kauna, who also is proud to be making her own money, albeit as a prostitute.

Corrupted Somnath's moral fall is dramatised in the final sequence of the film. In order to induce Mr Goenke to sign off on a big deal, he has procured a prostitute for him. That is bad enough, but when

he discovers that the girl is his friend's sister, Kauna, he tries to call the whole thing off. Kauna, however, is just as fiercely independent as Somnath and explains that this is her business, her affair. Having escorted her to the hotel, Somnath returns home, where his father is anxiously waiting to hear if he has 'closed' the deal (about which he knows very little). Somnath enters the dark apartment and says, 'I've done it, father. The contract. It's come through.' His father's eyes light up as he says, 'At last. What a relief!' while Somnath stands in the shadowy background, head bent with humiliation. Not corrupt, but corrupted.

Bose Bishu is an old friend, who introduces Somnath into the world of the 'middleman.' Bishu Bose is an affable, genial and generous person. If you're on his side. He is a self-made man, in contrast to everyone else in the film, who is part of an institution, company or university. He offers Somnath a job, gives him lunch and sets him up with his own 'business'. This saviour figure, however, has a lack of principles. His only method is to bring a buyer and a seller together by quoting and misquoting prices and taking 10% commission. He cooks the books, keeps bogus accounts and lies whenever convenient.

Self-made Despite, or because of his faults, Bishu never finished secondary school. He explains his self-reliance in the very first scene in which he appears. Having bumped into Somnath and discovered that the young man is looking for a job, he says, 'I started on my own when I was fifteen. Went from pillar to post. Climbed endless stairs. Never used an elevator. Because I thought I'd have to pay.' He adds the last phrase with a chuckle at his own naivete. 'Then, one day, I borrowed ten rupees and bought some oranges,' he continues, 'sat down on the pavement and by night I had a two-rupee profit. Never looked back.' When Somnath tells him that he was born on 15 August, Bishu says, 'Independence Day! And you're looking for a boss!' Only a little later, in his office, when Somnath declines the offer of a cigarette out of respect, Bishu retorts. 'I'm not your boss. Nobody is a boss here. Everyone works for himself.'

Amoral At best, Bishu's business practices could be described as amoral, a clear display of which occurs in a scene of him talking to Somnath on the other side of his desk. He spreads his arms out wide in the air and says, looking at one hand and then the other, 'Buyer. Seller.' Then he brings the two hands together and says, 'And you, in the middle. Middleman.' 'But what do I sell?' asks the innocent Somnath. 'Sell? Anything.' He looks up at a calendar image of Ganesa, the elephant headed god, worshipped as the 'remover of obstacles.' 'Is anything sacred?' Bishu asks rhetorically. 'Don't believe it.' Then he leans across the table and tells Somnath about an elephant he once sold. A Bombay film company brought an elephant to Calcutta and then wanted to get rid of it. A man bought it on the advice of a broker who said that a circus would buy it. It turned out that no circus existed. 'So, I stepped in and got rid of it in a week. 10% commission. Study the market, find clients with a problem and exploit it. Simple.'

Father Mr Banerjee is Somnath's widowed father. Somnath's father is a pitiable figure. He has lost his wife and is now retired but feels that he no longer understands the world. He explains that he is even without any religious faith, after his wife suffered so badly before she died. His eldest son has turned out all right and his daughter-in-law, too, but he is anxious about Somnath. The father is a proud man with a very modest savings and no hope for the future. He is kind toward his two sons, and although he offers advice, he does not attempt to control them. Life has left him defeated, too weak to put up much resistance.

Proud The father's pride is illustrated in an early scene, when Somnath comes back from his first, accidental meeting with Bishu. After the bad news about his degree, the father listens to his son describe the business proposition made to him by Bishu. 'Business?' he asks, with a hint of worry. 'What kind of business?' When Somnath admits that he doesn't know any details, his father ponders the situation. 'No one in our family [Brahmins] ever went into business. No one even took a job until my grandfather's time.' For an upper-caste family, a proper job means a regular salary in government or a bank or big industrial company. Working for oneself is what others, without connections, do. To his credit, though, the father does not refuse to give his consent to Somnath's plan. He thinks a little more and says that he could give Somnath some money to get started. 'I don't know if business will suit you,' he says at the end, 'but I'll try to get used to the idea.'

Anxious The father appears anxious throughout the film (until the final shot when the news that Somnath has finalised the deal lifts his spirits). A characteristic display of this constant worry occurs early on when he mulls over Somnath's future. 'Graduates who don't get jobs,' he says to himself, 'they either turn into revolutionaries or go off the deep end.' A friend sitting with him then describes

life in America (where the friend lives), noting that sons and fathers are not close in that country. 'The sons leave as soon as they grow a beard. They don't think the two generations can live together. They create a wall between them.' At this point, Somnath comes into the house, enters his room and draws a curtain across the doorway. The father looks anxious, not sure that he really understands his son and fears that he is hiding something. As it turns out, his anxiety is not misplaced, although he is spared that knowledge.

- Bhombol** Bhombol is Somnath's older brother.
Kamala Kamala is Bhombol's wife.
Sukumar Sukumar is Somnath's young friend.
Kauna Kauna is Sukumar's younger sister.
Mr Mitter Mr Mitter is the consultant who helps Somnath seal his big deal.



(Somnath receives the phone call from his girlfriend)



(Bishu gives a lecture on business practices)



(Somnath learning how to be a middleman)



(Kauna, Sukumar's sister)



(The final shot, with the father seated and Somnath in shadow)