

ABHIJAN (EXPEDITION) 1962

Satyajit Ray

(Bengali language)

Contents (Overview – Plot – Themes – Characters)

OVERVIEW

As an overt melodrama, this film represents a significant departure for Satyajit Ray, who tended to focus on inner conflicts and subtle tensions within relationships. *Abhijan*, which was extremely successful at the box office, is adapted from a novel of the same name written by celebrated Bengali writer Tarashankar Bandopadhyay and published in 1946. It tells the story of Nar Singh, a taxi driver, who suffers from self-pity and failed ambition. Although born into the high- status Rajput caste, he makes a living as a driver for anyone who will pay him, regardless of their social position. He loses his wife, which seems to increase his already considerable misogyny. The only thing he possesses, it seems, is his beloved 1930s Chrysler. Nar Singh's 'expedition' brings him into contact with a variety of characters, creating several moral choices for him. In the end, he makes the 'right' decision, which pleased audiences but not necessarily the critics.

CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

Abhijan has often been compared with Martin Scorsese's *The Taxi Driver* for obvious reasons, but the Bengali film has a more specific cultural relevance in India. A taxi driver is one of those modern occupations that has no place in the traditional caste hierarchy. It is a free space that anyone can enter and leave. It is also noteworthy that Ray did not choose to tell the story of an untouchable (as in the novels of Mulk Raj Anand) or a poverty-stricken low-caste man (as was also popular in literature in the mid-20th century). Instead, he has chosen a man who is lower middle-class in terms of income but comes from a high-ranking caste. Nar Singh the taxi driver thus symbolises the topsy-turvy nature of Indian society in the decades after Independence. New machines have complicated established social patterns of interaction.

STORY

Nar Singh The film opens with a curious fixed frame shot that lasts for almost three minutes. It is a close-up of a man, a mechanic, who never appears again, talking to Nar Singh, who is seen only in a mirror. The man makes fun of Nar's pride based on his warrior (Rajput) blood: 'You think you're high status just because some ancestor, hundreds of years, ago fought some battle on horseback!' The man then advises him to get over the fact that his wife has run away ('She left because you don't have money, right?') and suggests that he join with him in a partnership. Finally, Nar speaks. 'No, no partnership. Everyone is a cheat, including you.' In the next scene, an angry Nar stops a driver from using his Chrysler to transport a family. Apparently, he won't allow female passengers in his car, even if they are married. Nar is at war with the world.

Reckless road trips This opening scene is followed by a long section in which we watch the frustrated Nar drive his Chrysler at high speed on poor country roads. By overtaking vehicles and even racing trains, he is trying to impress his passengers and, more importantly, himself. His reckless driving eventually costs him dear when it turns out that a passenger is a local official, who then revokes his taxi license. Nar is desperate, and says he would have lowered himself to beg the official to have mercy on him but that his proud Rajput blood prevented him. Defeated, he drives back to his home village.

New possibilities On his journey home, he meets a man named Sukhanram, who pays him to take him to another place. At first Nar refuses because Sukhanram is accompanied by a maid servant, Gulabi. But the money offered is good and he swallows his male pride. On the ride, Sukhanram says

he will help him set up a new taxi service in his area. A second new path opens up when Nar meets Josef, a distant cousin, who invites him to his home, where Nar is introduced to Josef's mother and sister, Neeli. Nar is immediately attracted to Neeli and decides to stay in the area, partly because of Sukhanram's offer.

The offer Nar goes to Sukhanram's house, where the shifty businessman explains the details of his deal. Nar merely has to deliver a tin can to an address, once or twice a week, and for this he will be made a full partner of a new transport company to be set up by Sukhanram. Nar smells something funny and asks if the contents of the tin will be illegal, to which Sukhanram responds, 'Well, it won't be butter.' Nar says he'll think it over and is given a place to sleep in Sukhanram's shed.

Gulabi That night he is visited by Gulabi, the maid servant, who it turns out is kept by Sukhanram as a prostitute for his clients. Nar is not interested in her sexually, in part because she is too low caste for him, but he allows her to spend the night in a corner of the shed where he is sleeping. Gulabi, however, believes that he is a virtuous man and offers to be his mistress. Nar, though, is more interested in Neeli, the sister.

Moral dilemma After more conversation with Sukhanram, Nar realises that the 'new service' he wants to set up will involve transporting illegal opium. Sukhanram uses his smooth talk to convince Nar that the money will be worth the risk. 'Your ancestors, the warriors, they took risks, didn't they?' he says. This appeal to Nar's past clinches the deal, and Sukhanram takes Nar to a lawyer to sign the business papers. Once there, Nar discovers that his partners want him to sell his beloved automobile and buy something new to give the business a good public image. Again, Nar reluctantly agrees.

Elopement Then Neeli asks him to help her elope with her lover, Ajay, a crippled Christian boy. Nar is shocked that Neeli has rejected him in favour of someone so low in social status. However, once again, he agrees and drives them to a river where they catch a boat to Calcutta.

Gulabi, the lover Returning to Sukhanram's shed, Nar tells the house servant to summon Gulabi for the night. Gulabi then tells him her life story: she was raped and sold into prostitution by her parents, after which she almost committed suicide. She stopped herself only because somewhere inside her a voice said that she would find a magical happiness. That happiness, she says, is Nar. Despite this and a charming song and dance by Gulabi, Nar remains indifferent to her. He stays around, though, hoping to make money through Sukhanram's opium trafficking. When Gulabi finds out about his plans, she is disgusted and rejects him. Josef, the cousin, does the same. Now Nar is left without any support. The two people who had showed him some respect have turned their backs on him.

Resolution In a pique of anger, Nar strikes Josef and knocks him down. As he walks away, though, he has second thoughts. In the melodramatic ending, he turns down the contract with Sukhanram to run drugs and rescues Gulabi from his pimping. Driving away in his battered but still serviceable Chrysler, he speaks to Josef and says they should meet in his home town.

THEMES

Caste Caste, or perhaps caste consciousness, is a major theme in the film. This is somewhat unusual in Ray's work, which typically examined the lives of urban elites, in which caste prejudice is obscured (though certainly not eliminated). Indeed, most of Ray's characters in his major films are, like him, Brahmins. In the rural and small-town setting of *Abhijan*, however, the protagonist's character is defined, in his own eyes, by his belonging to a Rajput caste of former warriors. This sense of having been brought low in the world (as a taxi driver), of not being given proper respect, fuels Nar's frustration and anger. Sukhanram, the wealthy man, also fits a caste stereotype. He is from a Marwari caste, of traders and merchants, often considered devious and immoral. Then there is Josef and his family, who are Christians, and more specifically Christian converts, who are close to untouchables in the social hierarchy. Josef explains to Nar that sometimes people will not accept food from them. Although caste is prominent in the film, Ray treats this theme in his inimitable way. Rather than present it as a social problem, he shows it as a personal problem. It is not social barriers that hold one back but one's self-perception based on caste.

Power of love Another major theme in the story is the redemptive power of love. It is given a melodramatic touch by the fact that Gulabi, whose love rescues Nar Singh, is a prostitute, or more

precisely a woman who is prostituted by Sukhanram. When Nar offers her a place to sleep rather than take advantage of her sexually, she sees his compassionate side, something unrevealed until that point in the film. From that point on, he is her hero, almost a divine presence that will change her life. Later on, when Nar does want her sexually, she willingly gives herself, performing a charming song and dance, after which she explains how she ended up as Sukhanram's prostitute. At the end, she provides Nar with the opportunity to display his compassion again when he rescues her from Sukhanram. Although the dialogue is sparse and the events not explicitly linked, it is suggested that Gulabi's tender and unconditional love for Nar opened up his own heart. Her devotion has given him the strength to make tough decisions that put him on the right path.

CHARACTERS

Nar Singh Nar Singh is the taxi driver at the centre of the film. Nar Singh is a frustrated taxi driver and a proud Rajput. His warrior ancestry, he believes, should be matched by a social position higher than a mere driver. He is a large, masculine figure, misogynistic, short-tempered and quick to blame others for his misfortunes. But he is capable of compassion and ultimately plays the role of saviour. When we first meet him, he has nothing, not even a wife, only his sleek 1930 Chrysler sedan. However, even that is denied him when his reckless driving causes him to lose his license to drive. He is a man defined by his machine, which he imagines is a modern-day replacement of the horse his ancestors rode.

Proud Nar's pride as a Rajput is the defining element of his character. Forced to be a mere taxi driver, he is filled with frustration and self-pity. The moment that best illustrates his pride occurs after he has lost his driving permit and returns to his sidekick, a mechanic who travels with him. Nar explains to him what happened at the local government office, when they revoked his licence. He is so angry that begins to hit the car itself, collapses in despair and launches into a tirade. 'They won't allow me to stand on my own two feet,' he says. 'The moment you stand up for yourself, they knock you down. I thought of begging him [the official who revoked the permit], but it wouldn't let me.' His companion asks, 'What wouldn't let you?' Nar says, 'Blood. My blood. I'm a Kshatriya [warrior, Rajput caste]!'

Competitive As a proud man, Nar is competitive. He constantly measures himself against others and demands their respect. He is determined to succeed in the world, a goal for which his vintage car is extremely valuable. A good illustration of his competitive nature occurs early on when he is driving a few passengers on a country road. Suddenly a train looms up beside him, and he pushes the gas pedal to the floor. Now, he is engaged in a race with the mighty locomotive along parallel tracks. The train driver notices this and gives him a curious look, which goads Nar even more. The race is over only when Nar is forced to stop at a barrier in front of a crossing. Climbing out of the car, he scowls at the disappearing train. Only later will he learn, from Neeli, that respect is found within and not achieved by defeating others.

Kind Even before the ending, when Nar shows his good side and rescues Gulabi, we have another display of his kindness. He is crouching as he shaves by the road side when a group of kids begin to taunt a man on crutches. 'Cripple! Cripple!' they scream as they trail behind him like a demonic mob, cruelly mocking his disability by hopping on one foot. Hearing them, Nar quickly springs to his feet and chases the boys away. Then he speaks softly to the man, reassuring him that he will protect him from the 'naughty boys' if they appear again. It is a brief scene—barely one minute—but it is significant in illustrating Nar's basic humanity. His reaction to protect the lame man was instinctive and immediate.

Sukhanram Sukhanram is a wealthy businessman, who turns out to be running illegal drugs and Prostitutes. Sukhanram is a man defined by his business. He is a Marwari, that is, a caste of trader and merchants, which means he is quintessentially a man who makes deals, who negotiates. He has no principles except those of buying and selling. To say he is a shady character would cast too much light on him. He is the ultimate hypocrite, sitting in his dingy room, filled with posters of the gods, while he runs illegal drugs and keeps women in prostitution.

Cynical Sukhanram's lack of moral principles is illustrated in a key scene, when he offers Nar a partnership in a 'business,' whose illegal nature he only slowly reveals to the unsuspecting taxi driver. When Nar raises objections about the illegality, Sukhanram chuckles and says, 'Listen, Mr Singh. Business means some straight work and some illegal. Any businessman who says he does only legal stuff is lying.' Nar is not convinced, and then Sukhanram undermines Nar's already weak objection by

pointing that we cannot always be moral. 'You sometimes drive on straight roads and sometimes on crooked ones,' he says, waving his hand in the air like a fish. Throughout the conversation, his swarthy face breaks into smiles of cynical satisfaction, as if he possesses the wisdom of the world, while Nar is the dupe of bogus morality. 'In three months,' he says, 'you'll have a lot of money. Get married and start a family. What else is there?' It is a convincing pitch from a man who knows how to seal a deal.

Genial A good businessman must put others at ease in order to win them around, make deals and establish alliances. That is precisely what Sukhanram does so well in this story. A clear example occurs in a scene when he takes Nar Singh to a lawyer, who will draw up the papers establishing the partnership for the transport of opium. Sukhanram and the lawyer have decided that Nar's old car must be sold off and a new one bought so that the company will present a good image. Nar is reluctant to part with his beloved Chrysler, but Sukhanram is equal to the task, convincing him that people must move with the times. 'After all, you'll get at least 800 rupees for your car, and you can invest that in the company, can't you?' After they sign the papers, Sukhanram shakes Nar's hand with a beaming smile and says, 'Mr Singh, this is the first time I've seen you happy.' But we suspect that his geniality will not prevent some unpleasant consequences arising from this deal.

Neeli Neeli is Josef's sister and a Catholic school teacher. Neeli, Josef's sister, is the moral centre of the story. She is a school teacher and a strict Christian, a Catholic, who provides a haven of serenity amid the anger, despair and brutality that surrounds most of the characters. She is soft-spoken and kind, but also reflective and perceptive. Neeli is a teacher, but her classroom seems to be the world since she offers advice to many people, not just her students.

Perceptive One of the key scenes in the film involves a conversation between Neeli and Nar. They happen to meet as she is walking to church one Sunday morning. Nar, who has just helped the crippled man, is in a good mood, perhaps because he is attracted to her. As they walk slowly down a path toward the church, they talk about religion, gods and divine punishment. Nar explains that he isn't very religious. 'I just bow to a temple or a mosque, if I see one in the distance, when I'm driving.' 'Not to a church?' Neeli asks, with a tiny smile. 'From now on, I will because of you,' he says, with a bigger smile. Next, Nar asks her to teach him English because 'no one respects you unless you know English. Everyone treats me as low.' At this point, Neeli gives him a little lecture in self-respect. 'If you act lowly, you'll seem lowly,' she says. This might be Ray's own voice, for this seems to be the idea he has about Nar.

Bold The calm and cautious Neeli is also capable of bold action, a quality displayed in a dramatic night-time scene toward the end of the film. She arranges the escape by asking Nar to meet her at an isolated place at midnight. Nar, who is attracted to her, wonders if she wishes to make love with him and readily agrees. But when Neeli meets her in the darkness, she is with Ajay, the crippled man (whom he protected from the taunting boys). Neeli explains that they need his help in order to elope. Her mother is against marrying a disabled man, and so Neeli has decided that they must flee and make new lives in Calcutta. The school teacher, like Nar, must take life into her own hands.

Gulabi Gulabi is Sukhanram's maid, who is kept by him for prostitution.

Josef Josef is a distant cousin of Nar Singh, who shows him some respect.

Ajay Ajay is a crippled Christian boy, with whom Neeli elopes.



(Opening scene, with Nar Singh's face reflected in a mirror)



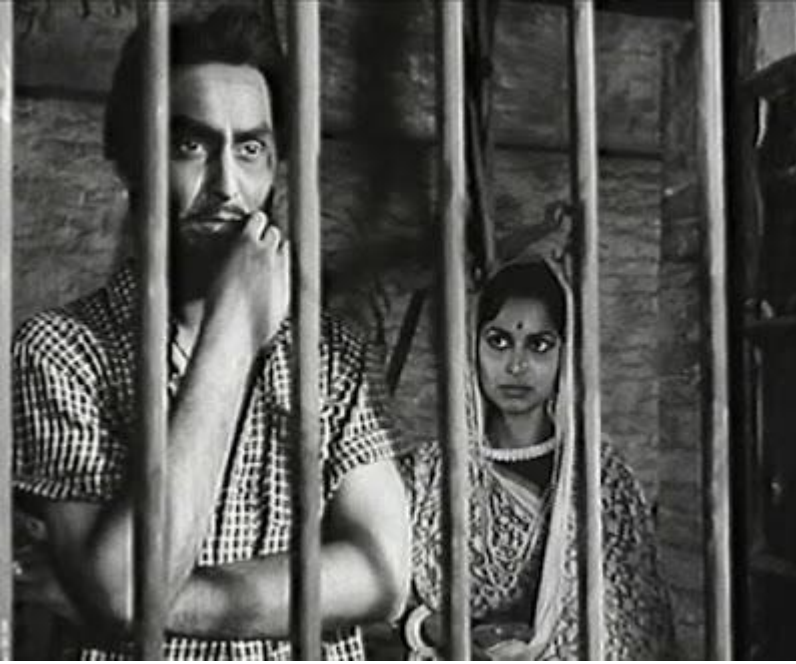
(Nar Singh at the wheel, with his sidekick)



(Nar Singh and Neeli)



(Gulabi)



(Nar Singh and Gulabi)



(Sukhanram 'sells' his deal to Nar Singh)