

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Stuart Blackburn, Ph.D.

MRIGAYAA (THE ROYAL HUNT) 1977

Mrinal Sen

(Hindi language)

Contents (Overview – Plot – Themes – Characters)

OVERVIEW

This film is based on a short story by Oriya writer Bhagbati Charan Panigrahi. Set in the 1930s, during the ongoing movement for Indian independence, it shines a light on a relatively unknown chapter of those times, the struggle of tribal people against both local elites and British colonial officials. The story reveals a complex relationship between the Santhal tribe, Indian money-lenders and a British administrator. Affecting them all is the force of the natural world that surrounds them, which is shown in glorious beauty and wonderful sound, especially the birdcalls. The protagonist is Ghinua, a young tribal man, who forms an unlikely friendship with the British official, later kills the man who kidnaps his wife and is then hung for murder. The use of folk dances and song, long shots of rivers and forests, plus historical flashbacks, create a poetic, almost allegorical, atmosphere in which terrible events take place.

CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

Tribal communities, which comprise almost 10% of India's total population, represent an embarrassing example of colonial and national failure. They have been exploited by money-lenders, timber companies and mining conglomerates. Their lands have been stolen from them by Indians and Europeans, and their diverse cultures (including more than 100 separate languages) have been marginalised. A few writers, journalists and activists have highlighted these injustices, but without much effect. Mrinal Sen dedicated this film to the 'martyrs' who died fighting for the rights of India's tribal people. He claimed that the story shown in the film 'could have happened anytime, anywhere' among India's tribes. For that reason, he inserted a short flashback to the 1850s, when the Santhals rose up against colonial/Indian exploitation and were brutally suppressed.

In focusing on the theme of hunting, however, he highlighted a more contemporary issue. Today, there is a vigorous public debate in India about the conflict between the need to protect indigenous culture (which includes and sometimes depends on hunting) and the need to protect wildlife. National parks, effectively animal sanctuaries, have been established all over the country, often over the protests of local tribal communities who have historically used that land, especially forests, to hunt for food. *The Royal Hunt*, filmed in 1977 and using old-fashioned equipment, is still relevant today.

STORY

Danger in paradise The film opens with a long, wordless panorama sequence showing the forested hills and fertile fields where the Santhal tribe lives in eastern India. Young women carry stacks of firewood on their heads, men plough the fields and older women prepare food. Night falls. Suddenly a man awakes to cries of 'Wild boar! Wild boar in the fields!' Now, he beats his tin drum in order to alert others to the predator who can ruin their crops. This is the world of the Santhals, always threatened by the powerful force of nature. The section ends when we are introduced to Ghinua and his young wife, Dungri, who roam through the forest, hunting for the wild boar that decimated some of the community's crops the night before.

British colonial officer Back in the village, the local British officer arrives on horseback accompanied by a retinue of servants and assistants. Through his translator, he speaks to a crowd of villagers assembled in the centre of their small settlement. He learns that they are concerned about the wild boars attacking their crops. His hunting instincts stimulated, he enquires about other animals in the hills nearby. 'Cheetah, tiger, boar, antelope and more,' he is told. 'Who is the best hunter among you?' he asks and when Ghinua is pointed out, the British *sahib* (term for an officer or superior) orders him to meet him at his bungalow. Ghinua, accompanied by Dungri, then practices his skill with the

bow and arrow.

Male bonding Carrying a live deer on his back, Ghinua goes to the British officer's bungalow and explains how he trapped the animal. The officer is impressed, and, through his broken Hindi, he and the young tribal man share their passion for hunting. Next, the officer takes Ghinua into his bungalow and proudly shows him the photographs on his wall. The tribal man gazes at images of the foreigner with his hunting trophies, tigers, elephants and antelopes. This rare instance of intergenerational and cross-cultural male bonding is cut short when another tribal man arrives at the bungalow. He presents the officer with a human skull, which he says he found while working his fields. He has brought it because he knows that the officer is interested in hunted heads, not realising that the white man makes a distinction between human and animal heads. The officer then shows the skull to Ghinua and asks him if he could hunt a man. Ghinua is shocked and makes it clear that he could not.

The money-lender In a scene that parallels the earlier arrival of the British officer, the money-lender comes to the village carried in a palanquin and accompanied by servants. In a tense exchange with the tribals, he makes it clear that he will punish anyone who doesn't repay their loans on time and in full. One of the people deep in debt to this hated man is Dungri's mother.

Flashback Next, there is a brief flashback to the 1850s when a Santhal uprising against colonial rule was brutally suppressed. The reconstructed footage shows thousands dying when bow and arrow were no match for guns.

Sholpu That violent flashback segues into a sub-plot in the present about Sholpu. He is a young man who has joined a Marxist revolutionary movement that was popular among tribals in the region at the time (and still is). Sholpu slips into the village unobserved in order to visit his sick mother. He is seen, however, by a police informer, who leads a crowd to the house where Sholpu is hiding. The informer wants to get a reward, but the villagers turn against him and he remains silent.

Murder Someone breaks into the local government treasury and steals money, causing a riot in which a policeman is killed. Other police officials come and investigate, but the villagers remain silent, not wanting to incriminate anyone. Eventually, perhaps inevitably, the blame for the death falls on the politically radical but innocent Sholpu. When the government offers a large reward for any information, the informer kills Sholpu and claims his reward.

Abduction During this time of tension in the village, the money-lender abducts Dungri because her family has not repaid a loan. In another instance of 'hunting,' Ghinua tracks him down and murders him to rescue his wife.

Trial The film cuts quickly to a courtroom scene, where the British officer gives evidence. Ghinua, the accused, watches the proceedings from an enclosed, cage-like space, in which he prowls back and forth. The officer describes what he knows, which is shown in a flashback. Ghinua came to his bungalow and said that he was offering him 'big game,' a wild animal that he has killed: the money-lender. In a moving speech, Ghinua points out the discrepancy between the informer killing a good man (Sholpu) and getting a reward, and him killing a dangerous animal (the money-lender) and getting punished by death. The village and especially Dungri are devastated by the death sentence and by the fact that they will not be allowed to see Ghinua die. 'We should be with him when he dies,' they say. At the gallows, Ghinua himself screams 'I want to see' when a hood is placed over his head.' Justice is blind.

THEMES

Hunting Film-maker Sen uses the theme of hunting, focusing on the hunter and his prey, to dramatise the lives of the Santhal tribe who live under the control of the local Indian population and the colonial administration. The protagonist, Ghinua, is a hunter just like his British counterpart. Early scenes demonstrate the prowess of both, albeit in very different contexts. Ghinua uses his bow and arrow in the jungle, while the colonial officer used a gun on highly formalised hunts (the 'royal hunt' of the title). But there are other predators, as well, especially in the form of the villainous Indian money-lender. As Ghinua says in the closing scenes, he is the 'most dangerous animal in the jungle.' For the money-lender, the unsophisticated tribal people are easy prey. There is also the sub-plot of a tribal man, a political revolutionary, who is hunted down by the police and tracked to his liar (his mother's hut in the village). Hunters kill, and there are several killings in the film. Most of the victims are the wild boars that threaten the people's crops, but there are also two human victims: the revolutionary Sholpu and the hated money-lender. One murder brings the hunter a monetary reward,

while the other sends the hunter to the gallows. Predation may be universal, but the consequences of hunting are determined by an unjust political system.

Cross-cultural interaction Another theme at the heart of this innovative film is the relationship between Ghinua and the British official. Alternating between realistic documentary and poetic allegory, the film represents their interaction as a misunderstood communication between an innocent savage and a man of the world. They live in utterly different worlds, yet they share a passion for hunting. The scene in which the British man invites the half-naked Ghinua into his comfortable bungalow is a wonderful study in cross-cultural interaction. Ghinua is wary but curious; the British man is self-assured and gracious. But when he begins to talk about the hunted animals in the photos on his wall, any cultural distance melts away in the rapport between hunters. That affinity, however, is ripped apart in the other key scene, when Ghinua is on trial for the murder of the money-lender. The partners in the hunt are now opposing parties in the courtroom. As far away from the jungle as is possible, they face each other in a legal system brought to the tribal region by a colonial power. One law has been replaced by another, and there is only one winner. Until his death by hanging, Ghinua cannot understand why one man is rewarded and another punished for the same action. The hunter in the jungle becomes prey in the courtroom.

CHARACTERS

Ghinua Ghinua, a young tribal man, is the protagonist. Ghinua, the main character, is portrayed as the epitome of tribal innocence. His expressive eyes flash a variety of emotions—curiosity, pride, anger, joy and despair. The young tribal man glides through the film like a sleek and swift deer. He is warm-hearted toward everyone, from his wife to the British officer, but he explodes into murderous rage when his wife is stolen. He is bright and articulate, even though he is unable to understand the white man's legal system.

Innocent Ghinua's innocence (which might be criticised as a stereotype of tribal people) is evident from the very opening shots, when we watch him hunting in the forest. He blends in with the foliage so completely that he appears to be a part of the natural landscape. A more dramatic example, played out in dialogue, occurs when he goes to the bungalow of the British official carrying a live deer on his back. He places the animal at the feet of the *sahib* (a word used to denote a superior person), smiles up at him with his excited eyes and describes how he caught the animal in the jungle. Impressed, the British official invites him into his house to view the pictures on the wall of 'big game.' Now, his eyes grow even larger in admiration of the white man's shooting prowess. Unaware or unable to consider the vast gulf in power between them, the naïve tribal boy imagines a brotherhood between himself and the 'big ruler.' And when the kindly man offers to pay him a reward if he brings him 'big game,' Ghinua feels that they have transcended the artificial barriers erected between tribal and British society. Such an innocent thought is encouraged by the sincerity of the older man, but it will soon come up hard against reality.

Angry Part and parcel of Ghinua's 'tribal' nature is his spontaneity and untrammelled emotion. That passion, however, turns to anger and indignation in the moving courtroom scene toward the end of the film. Ghinua has been arrested for the murder of the money-lender (who had kidnapped his wife). The British official gives his testimony, stating that Ghinua admitted that he had killed the man. When Ghinua is given a chance to speak, he bursts forth into an angry, yet rational, defence. 'Yes,' he says, 'I did kill the most bloodthirsty animal in our jungle.' But why, the judge asks him. 'Wild animals come out of the jungle and destroy our crops. They come into the village and kill people. They are our enemies. We kill them.' And then he changes tact and addresses the British official. 'You said you would reward me if I brought you big game, but now you are ready to kill me. And now, I want to ask you a simple question.' Everyone in the courtroom stops chattering and listens as Ghinua puts the question that lies at the heart of the film: 'Sholpu, a good man, was killed by a bad man [the police informer] and you gave him a big reward. But now I have killed a bad man, a dangerous animal, and you want to kill me. Why?' Even the following morning, when Ghinua stands on the gallows ready to die, he rages with indignation against the injustice of this double standard.

British officer The unnamed British officer is the local administrator. The British official is never given a name, which might suggest that the director wanted him to represent a 'category' rather than be an individual. He is certainly a typical colonial administrator with his hunting interests, his limited Hindi and his loyal wife. But he is not presented as the villain of the piece, a role reserved for the rapacious Indian money-lender. The administrator is a proud man, satisfied that he is doing the right thing in trying to rule the uncivilised natives and even more uncouth savages called Santhals. He is

kind toward his wife, and he is friendly toward Ghinua, whose hunting skills he admires, as long as he acts like a good tribal boy.

Proud The colonial administrator displays his pride in the crucial revealing scene when Ghinua brings a live deer to his bungalow. After talking man-to-boy about the techniques and joys of hunting, he sweeps the youngster into his bungalow. There, with his face beaming as he recounts his exploits, he points out various photographs on his wall. 'Look,' he says, gesturing toward the image of a large tiger, 'I shot that one in '26.' Ghinua is impressed, and the Britisher leads him toward more photographs, trophies from his past years. His reminiscences of the old days are encouraged by the admiring Ghinua, and no one can fail to recognise the immense pride that he feels. It is a feeling that extends beyond hunting to his administrative job. He may be serving in a fundamentally unjust colonial system, but he nevertheless derives satisfaction for a job done fairly and done well (according to his judgement).

Ashamed His immense pride in his life is shattered in the courtroom scene at the end. At first, he stands tall and takes an oath, promising to 'tell the truth and nothing but the truth.' It is his truthful evidence—that Ghinua admitted to killing the money-lender—that convicts the tribal boy. So far, so good. But then Ghinua explains why he killed him, that the money-lender had taken his wife and that he hunted him just like he would any other 'dangerous animal.' Finally, Ghinua turns on the British man and asks the unanswerable question of why he (Ghinua) is being killed for murdering a man, while another man (the police informer) is being rewarded for the same thing. At this point, the British official hangs his head in shame and appears unable to listen to the truth. One hunter is explaining to another hunter that he killed a wild animal and yet is himself hunted to death. That immoral and illogical double-standard, explained in the language of hunters, is the final blow. The British administrator is no longer able to hold up his head in a court of law.

Dungri Dungri is his wife.
Gobind Sardar Gobind Sardar is the money-lender.
Sholpu Sholpu is a tribal man and a political radical.



(Two hunters enjoy a hunting story)



(Dungri)



(Ghinua and Dungri in the jungle)