

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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# NAYAK (THE HERO) 1966

Satyajit Ray

(Bengali language)

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## OVERVIEW

This is Satyajit Ray's film about the cinema, stardom, audiences and train journeys. As such it is one of his most personal creations, and one for which he also wrote the screenplay and the musical score.

## CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

Although this is not among Ray's most popular films, it is highly regarded by many critics and members of the public because it examines film as a cultural activity. This is a subject that most Indians can relate to and many are obsessed by. Cinema is second only to religion as the thing for which India is best known across the world. Indeed, India is the largest producer of films in the world, with over one thousand new films coming out each year. Within the country, films have a cultural status that rivals religion. And sometimes the two are conflated, as exemplified by the number of film stars who have become chief ministers of a state in India and by the number of films with strong religious themes. In the mid-1960s, when the film came out, televisions were still a luxury item and cinema was the entertainment for the great majority of the Indian population. Films were shown during the whole day, and even small towns had at least one cinema. Today, in the 21st century, films are seen in many more ways, in different settings, and film stars compete with cricketers for the nation's attention. In the 1960s, however, the film stars viewed in the cinema were in a galaxy of their own.

## STORY

### Plot

Film star Arindam goes on a long (17 hour) train trip from Calcutta to New Delhi, during which he is forced to interact with his 'audience,' whom he usually keeps at arm's length. In particular, he is interviewed by a magazine editor, Aditi, which leads to personal revelations and, eventually, to a deeper self-understanding for him and greater sympathy for her.

### Scenes

*Setting off* The story begins with three scenes. First, Arindam, the main character and film star, prepares to leave his flat in Calcutta to go to New Delhi to accept a major film award. As he packs his suitcase for the train trip, he talks with his brother. We learn that the star's new film has just been released and that there is anxiety about how it will do at the box office. It's also clear that Arindam is supremely confident, bordering on arrogant and expresses contempt for the movie-going public who have made him a star. Then, as he leaves the room, he casually throws a newspaper to his brother and tells him to look at the bottom article: 'Film star involved in brawl.'

Second, Arindam has breakfast with his business manager, who wants him to sign a new contract. In his usual nonchalant fashion, Arindam tells him about the brawl. 'It's a good day for travel,' he says, 'but not for signing a contract.' Finally, he takes a call from his 'heroine' and has a mysterious conversation about excuses and blame.

*Strangers on the train* Next, we see Arindam settling into his train compartment, which he shares with a wealthy industrialist, Haren Bose, his wife and their teenage daughter. Here, we see Arindam as an ordinary, pleasant person, despite his ever-present dark sunglasses. He helps the father open a bottle, and the wife congratulates him on his award.

In a nearby compartment, a religious holy man is travelling with an advertising executive, Pritish Sarkar, and his young wife, Molly. Another passenger in this first-class sleeping carriage is a

magazine editor, Aditi Sengupta, who turns out to be a key character. All the passengers are excited to learn that the big star Arindam, whose face is well-known, is travelling with them. They are also aware that is he in that day's news for fighting with a man in nightclub. But they have other things on their minds.

Sarkar, the advertising man, attempts to persuade Bose, the industrialist, to sign a contract with his company. Bose is reluctant. But when Sarkar senses that Bose is attracted to his young wife, he tells her to flirt with him in order to bring him around. Molly, the wife, is horrified but agrees when her husband promises to give her something special for her next birthday.

Then we are introduced to Aditi Sengupta, the editor of a female magazine, which is written and read by women. She approaches Arindam's for an autograph, 'for my cousin,' she says icily. In the brief exchange, it is clear that she does not have a high opinion of movies or actors, and Arindam gives one of his characteristically sarcastic replies: 'Quite right. Young ladies shouldn't burst into song at the slightest provocation.' To which she retorts, 'And film heroes shouldn't act so God-like.'

Aditi is then persuaded by one of star-loving ladies in the train to interview Arindam in order to get his side of the disreputable story in the newspaper. 'Publish it, and you'll get a lot of sales,' the woman urges her. Meanwhile, Arindam takes a snooze in his compartment and has a nightmare. He is walking through piles of money when he falls into a quicksand of the notes and is about to be buried.

*Interview with Aditi* Arindam's long conversation with Aditi takes up most of the central section of the film. Against her better judgement, but persuaded by a fellow female passenger who is a fan of the 'hero, Aditi interviews Arindam. She wants her women readers to discover the hidden side of the public figure, to learn about his childhood and experiences as a young man before he became a star. The conversation lasts just under forty minutes, which Ray makes possible by using flashbacks to show the events Arindam describes to the magazine editor. He begins with his nightmare of the money-quicksand and then describes his early stage-acting training.

*Flashback 1:* His mentor, Shankar, opposed his shifting from the stage to the screen, saying that film-actors are mere 'puppets' and that they lose that crucial close relation with the audience. After Shankar died suddenly, Arindam explains, he decided to go into films.

*Flashbacks 2 & 3:* Arindam tells Aditi how he had to play second fiddle to more famous actors, which forced him to 'overact.' He also behaved badly toward his rival actors, sometimes preventing them from getting good parts.

*Flashback 4:* Arindam shows further ill-will when he refused to help a close friend, who was a social activist. Once again, Arindam explains that he withdrew from engagement with the world and preferred the safety of films, distant from the public.

Meanwhile, Molly and Bose have a gentle flirtation that ends with polite words only. Molly's husband, who has set up this escapade with the hope of signing a contract with Bose, is disappointed that nothing has come of his plan.

*Flashback 5:* With the interview over, Arindam returns to his compartment and reminisces about his helping a pretty young actress get a part on a film. He was, it seems, ruthless with male actors but more malleable with attractive women.

*Coming to terms* Now, Arindam has another surreal dream, involving the woman with whom he is having an affair and who was the probable reason for his fight in the nightclub. Disturbed by all these recollections and dreams, facing the existential emptiness of his stardom, he gets extremely drunk and thinks about suicide.

He approaches Aditi and wants to tell her about the secret love affair, but she takes pity on this man, whom she had despised, and tells him she doesn't need to hear his confession. In a rare moment of drama in the film, she tears up her notes and promises that she will not print anything that he has revealed to her. In the final scene, the train pulls into Delhi and all the passengers go their separate ways. The last shot shows the hero, surrounded by admirers and the press, loaded down with flower garlands around his neck, smiling beneath his dark sun glasses.

## THEMES

**Fame** The dominant theme of the film is the paradoxical nature of fame, as represented by a film star. There is money, lots of money, as well as public adulation. But there is also public scrutiny, so that minor misdemeanours (his brawl) are blown up into major moral failures. As dramatised in Arindam's case, the star creates his public fame by hiding his private life. As a result, his inner life, his true self, becomes hidden even from himself, and retrieved only by flashbacks and, accidentally, by giving an interview to a hostile magazine editor. In the movie industry, as we all know, one becomes successful only by successfully becoming someone else. Is the price worth the prize? The answer in this film is a resounding negative.

**Audience** In this film about films (a popular genre with other famous directors), Ray also examines the other side of the equation: the role of the audience. The 'hero' does not, and cannot, achieve stardom by himself; he needs fans. The audience in this film is mainly comprised of women, young and old. A disabled teenage girl moons about whenever Arindam is in sight, but middle-age, married matrons are equally besotted with the status if not just the face of the star. When the stern Aditi criticises the star's status—'He's a champion at tennis, and in cricket, and in romance. It just isn't plausible'—a married woman says, 'I know. But when I'm watching, I just don't care.' Her husband adds, with a sheepish smile, 'He's a modern Krishna. And all the ladies are his secret devotees.' Like religion, Ray seems to suggest, film provides us with something that we feel we need.

**Train journey** One also must mention the theme of the train journey, which appears in so many of Ray's films (*Pather Panchali*, *Apur Sansar*, *Sonar Kella*,) and those of other auteurs (most notably Hitchcock). One can see why it appeals to film-makers: as a closed space in which random people interact, it opens up many dramatic possibilities (just as the country house weekend does for mystery and crime novelists). When combined with the theme of the cinema in this film, it is especially fertile because in the train the hero cannot keep his distance from his audience and must interact with them.

## CHARACTERS

**Arindam** Arindam Mukherjee is the 'hero'. As the titular 'hero,' the character of Arindam is one of Ray's great cinematic achievements. He is detestable and sympathetic, often in the same scene. Affable to his fans, kind to the teenage girl who wants his autograph, disdainful of his audience, confident of his success, afraid of his failure, he is a person with a kaleidoscopic personality. At the core, though, he is a man who hides himself away from the public, who values distance and fears engagement. This is the paradox of the character, since he is the personification of an industry that survives by the close-up.

**Vain** We first meet Arindam in the opening scene of the film, when he is preparing to take the train to New Delhi. He is talking with his brother, who has his doubts about the box office success of his new film, which has just opened. 'Times have changed,' the brother says, 'can't be sure how it will do.' To which, Arindam says in his suave way, 'Oh, we can be sure.' Asked the reason for this, Arindam says, 'Simple. Because I'm in it.'

**Sarcastic** Arindam uses more than sunglasses and a smug smile to keep the public at a distance. He also employs sarcasm to hide his inner turmoil from them. One very effective example occurs early on in the film, when he settles into the compartment and meets the family he's travelling with: stern father, and the mother and daughter, both big fans of the star. The father makes a little speech about how the film industry is going to the dogs, that quality doesn't matter anymore, it's all about quantity. 'Just produce more, and more rubbish,' he says, satisfied with his condemnation. 'Quite right,' Arindam says, in a mocking tone. 'And that's why family planning is so important.'

**Lonely** As the train trundles along on its 17-hour journey, we learn more and more about the emptiness that haunts Arindam. There are the flashbacks of his disreputable behaviour and his cutting comments about the mindless fans. Then, he goes to Aditi and wants to tell her about the reason for nightclub brawl that appeared in that day's papers. She says she doesn't want to know, that she can guess the reason anyway. But he insists that he needs to tell her because 'I have to tell someone. It's all piled up inside, here [he points to his chest]. And I can't tell anyone, not those who flock around me.' There is a powerful and touching scene, in which the god-like hero is stripped naked and shown to be a pathetic man, lonely, unable to communicate with anyone and disgusted with himself.

**Aditi** Aditi Sengupta is the feminist magazine editor who interviews him. While not as complex as

Arindam, Aditi is equally central as a character. It would not be lost on the audience that she is played by Sharmila Tagore, a beautiful actress who had appeared in several of Ray's films and went on to become a sex symbol in Hindi films. Here, she wears glasses and plays a high-minded feminist editor. She has no interest in vulgar cultural obsessions such as film stars and their silly fans. And yet, as the film unfolds, and as she learns more about the inner life of the 'hero,' the more she finds herself reconsidering her attitudes. By the end, she has become the only person to whom Arindam can reveal his secrets, and his fears.

*Critical* As is often the case for lead actors, the first scene in which Aditi appears establishes her character. We see her in the dining car, talking about her magazine to a middle-aged couple, who sip coke-cola through straws from bottles. 'Yes,' she says, 'I do it all on my own. With other women.' 'Yes,' she says again, 'everything is written by women. And we have high standards.' Then the wife of the couple she's talking to spots Arindam at the next table and persuades the reluctant Aditi to get his autograph and an interview to publish in the magazine and boost its sales. When Aditi asks the film-star for his autograph, he graciously agrees, his vanity stroked by a pretty young woman's interest. Then she says coolly, 'It's for my little cousin' and his smile turns sour. 'I don't suppose you have the bad habit of seeing Bengali films,' he says sarcastically. 'Not many,' she says, 'they're too removed from reality.' 'Quite right. Young ladies shouldn't burst into song and dance at the slightest provocation,' he says, again with a smug smile. Hearing this, Aditi says, 'Yes, and heroes shouldn't be so God-like.' With that comment, she has punctured his defence and landed a blow that rocks his smug self-assurance. Aditi is the critical voice drowned out by the chorus of adulation that surrounds the star.

*Compassionate* Aditi, the sharp-witted feminist and cultural critic, undergoes a transformation on the long train journey and ends up showing deep compassion toward the 'hero.' Egged on by one of Arindam's female fans, she does an interview with him, during which he reveals (through the flashbacks) several painful memories. Toward the end of the film, he offers to divulge one more incident from his past, about a failed love affair, that would certainly make her little-known magazine fly off the shelves. But after she understands how unhappy he is inside, she decides not to print the sensational details of his life. In a moving scene toward the end, they meet once again in the dining car. She smiles warmly toward him and asks how he is. 'You must know,' he says. 'You know everything about me.' Instead of replying, she opens her large purse and pulls out the many sheets of paper, on which she has taken notes from the interview. Looking at him, she slowly tears them up. 'What?' he says. 'Will you write it from memory?' 'No, I'll keep it in my memory.' Those are the last words spoken by anyone in the film.

<b>Haren Bose</b>	Haren Bose is the father of the family with whom Arindam travels.
<b>Mrs Bose</b>	Mrs Bose is his wife.
<b>Bulbul</b>	Bulbul is the daughter of that family.
<b>Pritish Sarkar</b>	Pritish Sarkar is an advertising executive on the train
<b>Molly</b>	Molly is his wife.



(Sarkar tells his wife, Molly, to flirt with Mr Bose)



(Arindam's nightmare in which he falls into a quicksand of money)



(Aditi interviewing Arindam)



(Flashback 4: Arindam turns down a request from his friend)



(Arindam bares his soul to Aditi)



(Aditi)