

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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YOUTH (YUVA) 2004

Mani Ratnam

(Hindi)

OVERVIEW

This complex story begins with an incident involving three young men on a bridge in Calcutta: Lallan, Michael and Arjun. Lallan is hired to shoot Michael, and this unsuccessful murder attempt is witnessed by Arjun. The film then unfolds in three extended flashbacks, covering the backstory of each of these three apparent strangers. The main drama involves radical students struggling against a corrupt establishment, laced with heavy doses of romantic misunderstandings and sexual frustrations. Everything, in other words, that you would expect of 'youth.' After showing us how each man ended up on the bridge that day from separate trajectories, the film then moves forward with their intertwined lives. The story involves a strong dose of violence, leavened with tender love scenes, and a series of action-packed scenes. The story comments on social and psychological problems well-known in India, and the seemingly upbeat ending is, on reflection, ambiguous.

CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

This film, like most of those by Mani Ratnam, combines social realism with elements of a thriller and a romance. In highlighting male violence and political corruption (the two themes discussed below), the story holds a mirror up to Indian society. Not so obvious is another thread woven through the story, that of male loyalty. Each of the three male leads is involved in a bond of trust with another man: Lallan with his older brother Gopal; Michael with a politician; Arjun with his father. In fact, when the politician explicitly tells Michael to treat him like a brother, Michael asks permission to address him as 'brother,' which means using a term of affection that carries great emotional weight in Bengali. The cultural significance of these fraternal relationships goes very deep in Indian history, right back to the classical epics of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, both of which feature brothers as lead characters.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Lallan	Lallan is the petty criminal who tries to kill Michael.
Michael	Michael is a radical student who struggles against corrupt politics.
Arjun	Arjun is the son of a wealthy government officer.
Gopal	Gopal is Lallan's older brother and also a criminal.
Prasanjit	Prasanjit is the corrupt politician who employs Gopal.
Meera	Meera is Arjun's girlfriend.
Sashi	Sashi is Lallan's wife.
Radhika	Radhika is Michael's lover.

STORY

Lallan's story

Hoodlum After the extended scene of the failed assassination on the bridge, we are introduced to Lallan Singh, the assassin. Lallan is a rough street-wise hoodlum who survives in Calcutta by sheer toughness in running an extortion business. He also does favours for his slightly more refined older brother, Gopal, who is in the employ of a corrupt politician, Prasanjit. We first see Lallan in prison, where he terrorises both fellow inmates and guards with his brute strength and ruthless disregard for others.

Sashi Upon release, he picks up his girlfriend, Sashi, who leaves her parents to live with him. When Sashi persuades him to give up his criminal life, he somewhat reluctantly takes a job arranged by her father. At work, however, he threatens extortion and is fired before he begins. Next, he is dragged into the politician's dirty tricks campaign against a group of radical students who oppose corruption. In accepting the job of beating up the students, Lallan argues with his wife and hits her.

Assassin Lallan proves to be an effective 'enforcer,' not worrying about the use of violence if it stifles the students' protests. Prasanjit, the politician, is impressed and sets him up in a business selling gas cylinders. When the struggle between the radical students and the politician escalates, Lallan is ordered to kill the student leader, Michael. Driven in a car on the bridge, Lallan pulls out his gun and shoots at Michael on a motorcycle.

Michael's story

Student Michael is a radical student, ready to use violence to defy the unjust laws that prop up a corrupt establishment. In his first scene, he and his friends beat up a group of men connected to Prasanjit, the politician. Back home in his middle-class family, he jokes with his mother, who worries that, just like with his father, she never knows if he'll end up in a hospital or a police cell. It turns out that Michael's father was himself a political radical in the 1960s. When Michael goes to college that day, he finds that he and his group have been suspended, which prompts a conversation with the principal about the value of education in a world that requires political action.

Campaigner Free from the burden of classes, Michael leads his group on a sustained campaign to help people in poor area on the outskirts of Calcutta. Using violence and threats, the young ex-students are successful in getting a local woman elected head of the local council. Now, the council will no longer be controlled by outsiders, who are under the thumb of Prasanjit.

Scholarship Michael is a brilliant physics student, who wins a prestigious scholarship to study in the US. Prasanjit, who would be happy to see the back of Michael, explains to him that the scholarship is a golden opportunity, a 'once in a lifetime' chance. Michael says he prefers to stay in Calcutta and reform society. It is a tense exchange, in which the meanings behind the spoken words are clearly understood by both men.

Radhika Michael is in love with Radhika, a lecturer in French at his college. True to his radical views, he proposes to her—not to marry him, but to live with him. Both their families are violently opposed to this unorthodox arrangement, and the matter is suspended. The next day, Michael rides his motorcycle across the bridge, unknowingly pursued by Lallan in a car.

Arjun's story

Carefree Arjun arrives in Calcutta by train and is met by his father, who is a member of India's elite government service. Arjun pretends that he will pass his exams and also become an officer in the Indian Administrative Service. Secretly, he has plans to go to the US for graduate study. Unlike the other two men in the bridge incident, Arjun is not involved in politics or crime. He's a happy-go-lucky man from a rich family, who is trying to enjoy life.

Meera Then he meets Meera, who is already engaged to someone else, and he becomes serious. This section of the film is closer to Bollywood romance than the previous two sections, which have the grit and thriller elements typical of most of the director's films. To make a long story short, he falls in love with her and she with him, but she is already engaged and so cannot marry him. In order to forget his pain, Arjun plans to go to America to study. At the end of this section, she runs away from him and jumps in a taxi to escape from this impossible situation. Arjun then hails the first motorcycle that comes along and asks the driver to follow the taxi.

The bridge That motorcycle is driven by Michael. Arjun catches up with Meera's taxi, gets off the motorcycle and flags down the taxi, on the bridge. Meera also gets out and they declare their love. At that moment, Lallan shoots Michael, who falls off his motorcycle and over the bridge into the river.

Arjun jumps in after him, drags him to the riverside and takes him by taxi to the hospital. Michael survives.

Composite story

Three men At this point, the film goes forward and tells the story of these three men whose lives have intersected on the bridge. Lallan has disappeared and Sashi, his wife, is desperate to find him. Meanwhile, Michael lies in the intensive care unit, with his girlfriend grieving. Arjun arrives at the hospital and is amazed at the large crowd of Michael's supporters, who are anxiously waiting outside. 'He's a hero, our Michael,' one of them explains. Then Arjun spots Lallan, who has also come to the hospital, and chases him. Lallan beats up Arjun and might have killed him except that a nurse interrupts him.

Lallan and Sashi Abandoned by Lallan, Sashi has had an abortion. A tearful Lallan tells her that he shot a man but he survived. Lallan decides to leave his life of crime and go with Sashi to her parent's village, but the corrupt politician has other ideas. Afraid that Lallan will be arrested by the police and tell too much, he orders Gopal, the older brother to murder him. Lallan is on the way to the train station to buy tickets for himself and Sashi, when he meets Gopal and, realising his brother's intention, shoots him before he can be killed himself. Although he has come out of the encounter alive, Lallan misses the train and Sashi travels alone, not knowing what happened.

Meera and Arjun When Meera and Arjun meet, each has a confession: she has not married and he has not gone to America. They pledge their love and plan to get married.

Michael Michael is released from the hospital and tells the politician that his students will continue to fight his corrupt regime. But when the still-bandaged Michael tries to rally his group to stand in the local elections, they all decline to join him. Except Arjun, who has joined the group. He and three others decide to stand with Michael. When those three are kidnapped and beaten up, Michael confronts the politician and threatens him if he doesn't release his friends. It turns out that Lallan has kidnapped the men, but they escape.

Finale In a furious finale, which parallels the opening scene on the bridge, Lallan chases Arjun until Michael intervenes. Lallan and Michael have a violent fight while cars whiz by on either side on the road. At one point, Michael drags Lallan from the path of a lorry, saving his life. He says, 'I don't have an argument with you, only this corrupt political system.' At the very end, Michael and his friends win the local elections and take their seats in the state government. Lallan is thrown in prison and goes on trial, facing the death penalty.

THEMES

Violence One of the main themes of this complex and engrossing film is violence or, more accurately, male violence. There are numerous killings, beatings and intimidations by men against men (and sometimes against women). What makes the film interesting is its suggestion that violence is not simply limited to the criminals. Lallan, the low-life criminal, is brutal in the extreme; he is more than once called 'an animal.' He kills two men and tries to kill two others, while dishing out near-fatal injuries to several more. He comes from a 'bad background,' a poor family in a rural part of the country, with a brother who leads him into crime. His story is typical, common, understandable. But then there is Michael, the highly intelligent son of a middle-class family. And he, too, is violent, every bit as physical and ruthless as Lallan. The relationship between these two apparently opposite characters forms the spine of this long film. In the first scene, Lallan attempts to kill Michael on the bridge; in the last scene, he tries again and this time Michael fights with the brutality of an animal. The film is also bookended by another kind of male violence: an Indian version of wrestling called *kabbadi*. Lallan plays this game with intensity in prison both at the beginning and end of the story. But it is a game played all over India, in every kind of context. In other words, violence does not have a sociological explanation and is not correlated with a particular kind of family or background. It is a deep-seated habit, if not instinct, in many men. Even if they are not brutal, most men are capable of fighting furiously.

Corruption The other toxic ingredient in this bleak vision of humanity is the corruptibility of politicians. The mastermind behind all of Lallan's (and his brother's) criminality is Prasanjit, a minister in the state government of West Bengal. He is more purely evil than his violent henchmen since, as a wealthy man, his venal actions are not necessitated by him having to make a living. He is corrupt because he wants to stay in power. That corrupt power is what Michael, the leader of the other faction, wants to eliminate, and it is that tension that propels the narrative. At the end, Michael and three associates enter the state parliament, which appears to signal a change in the political weather. The young radicals march in wearing jeans and open-neck shirts, surely an indication that the long overdue shift toward a more egalitarian system has arrived. But has it? In their tart verbal exchange with the (still surviving) Prasanjit, the film plants a doubt. Prasanjit welcomes his erstwhile enemies with open arms and a smile. 'I've seen many other rebels come into this assembly to change the world,' he says genially. 'And before long they either leave or conform.' With this final line of dialogue, Mani Ratnam's film delivers a bleak vision of the country. Violence is endemic, corruption inherent and the only thing likely to change is how men dress.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Lallan

Character Lallan is a large, physically strong man with a dark, scowling face. He is brutal, like a hunted animal, and does not hesitate to kill to save his own skin. Yet, he is capable of showing tenderness to his wife. In the early sections of the film, he also appears jovial, optimistic and fun-loving. Is he a 'gentle giant'? A kind man scarred by mistreatment as a child? Or is he just a killer who is also tender?

Illustrative moments

Fun-loving Lallan displays the jovial element of his personality in the opening scene of his section of the story. When he is released from prison, he speaks flippantly to the guards, refuses to accept the 200 rupees he's earned for making a rattan chair and raises his hands in a mock salute to the warden. He swaggers out the door and is met by someone sent by his brother (who arranged his release). When this man says he should smell the fresh air, Lallan says, 'Same in there. All prisoners' farts.' Riding free in a taxi, he ogles the women on the street. 'Ah, Bengali chicks are like tasty mutton!' Here is a man who loves life, who will joke with anyone and enjoys a good meal.

Violent In the following scene, however, we glimpse the violence of which he is capable. He directs the taxi to the house where his wife, Sashi, lives with her parents. He rushes up the stairs and calls her. When her father says he won't allow her to leave, Lallan grabs the old man by the throat and threatens to break his arm. Compared to what comes later, this is a mild example of his violence, but it is disturbing because it demonstrates how little it takes to trigger his brutality. He does not break the father's arm, but we are left in no doubt that he would if he had to. We also see that his violence is triggered because he cannot get what he wants. In this case, it is his wife, but it might be something as trivial as a meal or a cigarette.

Threatening Related to his violent nature is his threatening manner. Even if he does not strike someone, he can terrorise him. A good illustration of this comes later when Lallan has agreed to take a legitimate job that her father has arranged for him in a printing factory. He goes to see what this legal employment as a night watchman will entail and is shown around the plant by the floor manager. As they pass large, modern printing machines, the size of small cars, Lallan asks how much the machines are worth. One machine alone, he is told, is worth 20 million. 'You expect me to work for 2000 a month to protect stuff worth that much?' he asks with a sneer. When the manager doesn't reply, Lallan digs a little deeper. 'I mean, what if your machines caught fire? Then what?' The floor manager understands: if Lallan is the watchman, he would demand a higher salary or else damage the property. In this case, his attempt at extortion fails, but we sense the menace in his character.

Macho Lallan is sometimes tender with his wife, Sashi, but not in front of other men. In those situations, he seems to feel that he must show others that he, and not his wife, is boss. This machoism is on display when Sashi comes into a room where Lallan is playing cards with other thugs.

A man tells him that his brother wants him, and everyone knows that means he will be asked to 'take care of someone.' Sashi pleads with him not to accept this job, but he tells her not to 'butt in' and to shut up. She desperately asks him not to go back into crime, but he loses his temper and hits her. Only then does he relax, having established his supremacy over a woman in front of his comrades.

Confused But Lallan is confused about his love for Sashi and abuse of her. Unable to understand the deep forces that drive him, he vacillates between compassion and violence. His confusion is dramatically illustrated in the scene when he is being driven in a car on his mission to kill Michael on the bridge. While the driver weaves in and out of traffic, trying to keep Michael and his motorcycle in sight, Lallan indulges in a monologue. 'Never give in too much to a woman,' he mutters. 'She'll trample you. Useless women. Especially the educated ones. Love them, sleep with them, but never live with them.' The driver is exasperated with this babbling and tells him to focus on the task in hand. But Lallan wants to know something. 'Tell me,' he asks, 'should I live with Sashi or not?' These are the thoughts running through the mind of a man who is only seconds away from assassinating someone. He may be a killer, but he is not without self-doubt.

Michael

Character At first glance, Michael is everything that Lallan is not. His family is middle-class, he is a brilliant scientist and he has a pretty girlfriend who is a lecturer. But he, too, is violent, albeit it in pursuit of a good cause. He is committed, passionate and mentally strong. Just like Lallan.

Illustrative moments

Violent Michael's capacity for violence is evident from his initial appearance in the film. We see a group of tough-looking young men march toward a building. Inside, they survey the crowd and identify their target. Michael, the leader, confronts the man. 'You're Prasanjit's [the politician's] cousin?' he asks. When the man confirms this, Michael says, 'Your uncle's been bringing politics into our college for a while. Now we're bringing students into politics. For every one of us you beat up, we'll beat up five. Got that?' Before the other man can answer, Michael lunges forward and smashes him with his closed fist, sending the man sprawling over a table. The scene could be out of a gangster movie, except that Michael and his 'thugs' are middle-class college students.

Populist Michael's radical politics are never clearly defined, but they are populist. His chief goal is to dismantle the corrupt system and elect local people to control their own affairs. This goal is illustrated in a scene when Michael goes to a village and speaks to a crowd in an open space. He tells the villagers that they must take matters into their own hands. One man asks why that's necessary when they, meaning Michael and his friends, are already there to help them. 'That's today,' Michael answers, 'tomorrow who knows? We'll get our degrees and go off to work somewhere.' A woman stands up and says, 'Tell us what to do.' Michael smiles and replies, 'You must put up someone to stand in the election.' Others in the crowd pour cold water on this idea, pointing out that the last person who did that 'disappeared overnight and never returned.' Michael then launches into a little speech: 'How many can they kidnap? Two of you? Three? What if you all stand together and fight? Then what can they do? Nothing!' He inspires the people to collectively fight for their share of water and electricity.

Confident Michael also has the confidence of an intelligent student, a quality that enables him to stand up to the corrupt politician, Prasanjit. This part of his character is on display when Michael wins a prestigious scholarship to study in the US. His college invites Prasanjit, who is on the college executive board, to make the announcement to Michael in the Principal's office. Prasanjit is full of pomposity as he tells Michael about his good fortune in getting the scholarship and revels in showing off his own power. 'Now, just tell me what you want,' he says. 'Would you like to meet the Chief Minister? Anything you like, and I'll do it. I'm proud of you.' Michael returns the man's smarmy smile and says, 'I'll tell you what I don't want. I don't want the scholarship.' The politician is perplexed and asks why. 'Because I want to stay here,' Michael says. Again, the politician asks why. 'Because I want to change the political system.' Now Prasanjit gets agitated and advises him to stay away from politics because there are very few good men in politics. Michael stares at him and says, 'I know.'

Arjun

Character Arjun, the unwitting witness of the assassination attempt, is unlike the other two men. He has no physical or mental strength. He is an idle, flirtatious, fickle young and privileged man without direction or principle. But he is charming and becomes a hero.

Illustrative moments

Charming Arjun is a hopeless romantic, a Don Juan of Bengal, as is evident when we first meet him kissing a girl on a train. 'Will you marry her?' someone asks. 'Of course not,' he says. 'College love ends with college.' But his charm is illustrated when, days later, he meets Meera. It is a casual encounter in a dance club. Next day, he telephones her and asks if she will meet up with him for a coffee. When she reminds him that she is engaged to someone else, he says, 'Hey, one cup of platonic coffee. Is that wrong?' She agrees and they meet at a café. Now, he really turns on the charm. Meera insists that she will pay for her own coffee. 'As you wish,' says lover boy. 'I never say no to a girl. You see it all started when I was born and placed between two girl babies in cots on either side.' 'How many girls have fallen for that story?' Meera asks. '42 ½. You're the half,' he says. Whether this is a rehearsed 'chat up' line or not, it works and Meera is charmed.

Contrite Later, we discover that Arjun has some depth beneath his pursuit of superficial pleasures. He has a genuine love for his father and feels contrite when it is discovered that he has been hiding something from him. The scene is set inside Arjun's family home. His father is waiting for him to come in one night and tells him to sit down. His father has found that he has been lying to him about wanting to follow in his footsteps and become an IAS officer. Instead, Arjun has been planning all along to go to the US and study there. 'If I'd told you,' Arjun explains, 'you'd have been angry for three years. Now, you're just a little disappointed. I didn't want your blood pressure to get worse. I did it for you.' His father is very angry, and Arjun goes down on his knees in front of him (sitting in a chair). 'How can I explain?' Arjun says. 'I'm a simple person, who just wants to have fun. I'm not like you, a principled man.' Arjun is stricken with guilt and with awareness of his own triviality.

Heroic That self-effacing assessment turns out to be wide of the mark when Arjun shows his true character. That moment is the most dramatic in the whole film—the shooting on the bridge. When Michael takes three bullets and falls into the river, everyone on the bridge is screaming in panic, but Arjun simply leaps off the high bridge and rescues Michael by dragging him to the riverbank. He carries him into a taxi and then staunches the blood by pressing a cloth over the gunshot wounds in his stomach. It is a horrific scene, with blood everywhere and cries of agony, but Arjun stays focused. When the taxi screeches to a halt outside the hospital, he takes charge, orders someone to bring a trolley and gets Michael quickly admitted to a ward. It is Arjun's instinctive courage that saved Michael's life.



(Lallan and Sashi in one of their reunions)



(The politician Prasanjit)



(Michael and Radhika)



(Michael addressing a crowd in a village)



(Arjun 'chats up' Meera)



(Michael speaks to the press after escaping the attempt on his life)



(Lallan takes orders from Prasanjit)



(The incident on the bridge)



(The student radicals enter the state parliament after their election)