

# HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

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## TWO ACRES OF LAND / Do Bigha Zamin (1953)

Bimal Roy

### OVERVIEW

**Auteur** Bimal Roy (b. 1909 – d. 1966) was an award-winning Indian film director known for his realistic films reflecting the conditions in newly independent India. His first film as a director was *Bengal Famine* (1943). Many of his films, such as *Two Acres of Land (Do Bigha Zamin)* (1953), *Parineeta* (1953), *Naukri* (1954), *Devdas* (1955), and *Bandini* (1963), won awards at national and international film festivals. Reportedly, Roy was inspired to direct *Two Acres of Land* after watching Vittorio De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* (1948) in 1952. Bimal Roy simultaneously directed two films in 1953, the first one being *Two Acres of Land* and the second one being *Parineeta*. In *Two Acres of Land*, Roy reflected on the common man's struggle to survive against the odds. *Two Acres of Land* won the inaugural Filmfare Award for Best Film and Best Director at the first Indian Filmfare festival in 1953.

Balraj Sahni, the actor who plays Shambhu Maheto in the movie, was a proponent of method acting. In his memoir, his son Parikshat Sahni recalls his father's painstaking efforts to adopt the tastes and mannerisms of his characters. For Balraj Sahni's role as Shambhu in *Two Acres of Land*, he observed rickshaw pullers in Calcutta and even practiced pulling a rickshaw cart for a week in Calcutta. His dedication and efforts are well-captured in this timeless classic.

**Film** *Two Acres of Land* draws some ideas from the famed Bengali Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore's poem "Dui Bigha Jomi," written originally in Bengali. The poem celebrates the peasant's love and connection to the land against the infringing industrial and urban influences. In the movie, the tragic hero Shambhu Maheto and his family demonstrate the life of a farmer rooted in traditional farming practices and facing changing times and customs.

**Background** The film alludes to the different and contradictory visions of postcolonial India. While Gandhi believed in the village economy, India's first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru strongly supported urbanization and industrialization. Thus, the farmer's plight at the juncture of tradition and modernity is a central theme in *Two Acres of Land*. Furthermore, this classic film offers an interesting perspective to consider the recent farmer protests in India. Since 2020, farmers' associations all over India have staged demonstrations protesting the government's high-handed policies designed to reform conventional trading practices of agricultural produce. Unlike the farmers in *Two Acres of Land*, their modern-day contemporaries unionized and demonstrated in numbers to challenge unfair practices and make their voices heard in policy-making.

### MAIN CHARACTERS

#### Village

Shambhu Maheto	The protagonist who is a hardworking farmer
Kanihya Maheto	Shambhu's and Paro's young son who strives to emulate his father
Parvati or Paro	Shambhu's wife, a devoted wife, mother, and daughter-in-law
Gangu Maheto	Shambhu's aging father who often falls ill
Harnam Singh	The local zamindar (land-owner) who aspires to build a mill out of greed
Accountant	A lecherous man who is in the land-owner's employ
Mrs. Mishra	Paro's friend in the village who helps Paro with her letters

#### City

Landlady	A middle-aged woman who owns the Lala Babu settlement
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Uncle            A neighbor who is a rickshaw cart puller  
Rani             A neighbor who always helps Shambhu and Kanihya  
Lalu             A shoe-polish boy who becomes Kanihya's friend  
Pickpocket boy    A pickpocketing boy whom Kanihya meets on the streets of Calcutta

## SYNOPSIS

The land-owner plans for a new mill to be constructed in the village make his tenant farmers fear for their livelihood. One of the tenant farmers, Shambhu Maheto, protests selling his two bighas of land (approx. 3.2 acres), located at the exact spot where the mill is to be built. The impatient land-owner forces Shambhu to sell the land by leveraging Shambhu's outstanding loans. Shambhu begs for more time to repay the loans. A case is filed, and Shambhu is given three months to repay the loan. Shambhu's friends in the village advise him to work and earn quickly in the big city of Calcutta. Although Shambhu and his son struggle and work hard in Calcutta, their family meets many misfortunes and setbacks and is ultimately unable to save the land. The closing scene shows Shambhu and his family bidding a heart-breaking adieu to their ancestral land.

## PLOT

**Farmers' life: Drought and rain**    After many months of devastating drought, the farmers worriedly seek rain in the skies. The gathering grey clouds and thunder bring hope and joy to farmers. Shambhu calls Paro and Kanihya to see the darkening sky. As the rain falls, everyone sings and dances, vocalizing the turn of fortune and their hopes for the future.



### **The proposed Mill**

In the next scene, men from the city arrive and discuss the proposed mill. The farmers notice the newly arrived and tense up. The businessmen pitch to the land-owner about the mill and its prospects of modernizing the village. They promise wealth, electricity, and modern amenities to every household. They insist that it is time for the land-owner to upgrade to an industrialist. The land-owner is convinced and promises to procure the land from Shambhu to build the mill.



### **The Overdue Loan**

The next day, Shambhu is summoned to the land-owner's house and asked to sell his land to begin mill construction. Shambhu is distressed at the prospect of giving up ancestral property and explains his deep connection to the land owned and tilled by more than seven generations of his ancestors. When Shambhu declines, the land-owner demands that he immediately repay his loans. Shambhu begs for more time to gather the owed money.

Shambhu returns home and confides in his family. His father, Gangu, is saddened by the possibility of losing their land. Since Shambhu is illiterate, his son Kanihya helps him calculate what is owed to the land-owner. The loan amounts to 65 rupees. Shambhu decides to sell every valuable asset at home to gather the money.



### **The Courtroom Trial**

When Shambhu hands over 65 rupees to the land-owner, he is told that the amount due is 235.50 rupees. The land-owner rejects Shambhu's request for more time and files a case in court demanding legal action against Shambhu. At court, a flustered Shambhu struggles to answer the lawyer's questions and is ridiculed by those in the courtroom. The judge rules that if Shambhu is unable to pay in three months, his land will be auctioned to pay the land-owner.



### **A Job in Calcutta**

Over the next few days, a Shambhu wanders the village in despair. His friend listens to his woes and advises him to temporarily find a well-paying job in a big city like Calcutta. Shambhu shares the idea of moving to Calcutta with his father. Kanihya is excited about Calcutta and wants to go to the big city with his father. Shambhu rejects Kanihya's wish because it would be hard to find a job and care for Kanihya in a strange place. Although the family agrees with the plan, they are worried about the period of separation. Paro is pregnant with their second child and does not want Shambhu to go far away. She offers to find a job in their village to earn money for the family. Shambhu rejects it saying, "no lady has ever worked outside in our family." Instead, Shambhu promises to work harder for the sake of their unborn child. The next day, Shambhu bids farewell to his family. However, Paro is unwilling to let him go, and she cries pitifully.

Shambhu's walk to the train station is coupled with a song interlude. The song's verses remind viewers that each person needs to leave behind their mark before their time runs out. On board the train, Shambhu discovers that Kanihya has followed him onto the train, wanting to go to Calcutta. Back home, Kanihya's disappearance is discovered. His friend arrives to explain the situation to Paro and Gangu. They fear for the father and son's safety in the big city.

**Big city of Calcutta**

Upon arriving in Calcutta, Shambhu and Kanihya are wowed by the bustling city and its architectural landmarks, including the famous Howrah Bridge. However, a job is not easy to come by. Kanihya sees a boy working and polishing shoes on the street corner. The boy introduces himself as Lalu. Upon learning about Kanihya and his father's fresh arrival in Calcutta, he invites them to stay with him and other street dwellers on the footpath in front of the Grand Hotel. That night, the father and son are robbed of their meager belongings. The following day, Shambhu realizes his son is burning up with a fever. Shambhu is advised to seek a place to stay at the Lala Balu Settlement, a low-rent housing complex for poor people.



### **New friends**

Upon first meeting, the landlady of Lala Balu Settlement refuses to let them rent a room. However, a young woman, Rani, convinces the landlady that Shambhu and Kanihya deserve their sympathy and need their help. The landlady finally relents but informs that the rent (2 annas) must be paid promptly. They thank her and move into their room. Shambhu settles his son and leaves immediately to find a job. Rani steps in to care for the feverish Kanihya. She shares that she had lost her family and a younger brother and wishes to care for Kanihya like an older sister. Kanihya expresses his gratitude by saying, "You are very good, Rani *behen* (older sister)."

On the first day, Shambhu works as a Coolie, carrying and moving heavy things for a fee. At the end of the work day, Shambhu encounters a singing troupe made of working-class folk. They sing of their painful existence in a strange world, where "we made everything, but nothing is ours."



**New jobs for the father and son** That night, Shambhu is awoken by heavy coughing noises next door. Upon investigating, Shambhu finds that his neighbor, an older man, is ill and feverish. The man requests a favor of Shambhu to help return his borrowed rickshaw carriage to the stand to avoid a day's rent. On the way to returning the borrowed rickshaw cart, Shambhu serves a passenger and earns eight annas. Shambhu returns the money to the sick older man and offers to take over the rickshaw business for the next few days. The rickshaw puller man becomes a friend and the father-son duo call him "uncle."

Uncle teaches Shambhu to pull rickshaw carts and helps procure the license. At the end of the day, Shambhu is happy with his earnings and buys a new shirt for Kanihya. Seeing his hard-working father, Kanihya is inspired to follow the example. Like Lalu and his friends, Kanihya decides to work as a shoe-polish boy. Uncle and Rani help Kanihya prepare the shoe-polish box with the necessary tools. When Kanihya shares his earnings with his father, Shambhu assumes that it is stolen money and scolds Kanihya. On learning from uncle that it was earned honestly by shoe-polishing, Shambhu tearfully apologizes to his son.'

The father-son duo make sacrifices every day to save more money. For example, Shambhu opts to ply his rickshaw cart barefoot than sparing the 2-3 rupees to buy shoes and protect his feet from tar roads on hot days. Following Shambhu's example, Kanihya opts out of spending money on sweets and ice creams when he is out with friends. At the end of a fortnight, they save and send 48.50 rupees home. In the accompanying note, Shambhu mentions that Kanihya also worked and contributed to the savings. Gangu and Paro receive the money and feel pride over the father-son duo's hard-earned money.



**Paro wards off hunger and lecherous men** Back in the village, Paro gathers water chestnuts for daily meals and almost falls sick herself from standing in water too long. The land-owner's lecherous accountant drops by and hints that if Paro visits him privately at his home late at night, the family will get some grains and food. He also attempts to sow discord by doubting Shambhu's efforts in the city and commitment to send money to the family.

A local woman, Mrs. Mishra, expresses interest in buying water chestnuts from Paro. The sale allows Paro to meet expenses and buy medicines for her ailing father-in-law, Gangu. At Mrs. Mishra's house, Paro watches her singing a lullaby to her baby daughter and longs for her own son, Kanihya. Mrs. Mishra offers to help Paro read and write her letters to Shambhu and Kanihya in the city. As the days grow closer to the three-month mark, a worried Paro visits the post office daily, hoping for a letter. With no letter forthcoming, she takes the advice of a friend and works in construction alongside other workers in the village to make up the 50 rupees still needed.



**Paro works in construction site** As the days grow closer to the deadline for paying the loan to the land-owner, a worried Paro visits the post office daily, hoping for a letter. With no letter forthcoming, she takes the advice of a friend and works in construction alongside other workers in the village, trying to make up the 50 rupees still needed.





**Paro's accident**

The looming three-month deadline forces Shambhu to get back to work despite his pronounced limp. A helpless Kanihya writes to his mother, asking her to come to Calcutta and save Shambhu. Kanihya's plaintive letter moves Paro to travel to Calcutta. In Calcutta, Paro gets tricked into following a strange man claiming to know Shambhu into an abandoned house. When he tries to rob her, she attacks and flees him. She is hit and injured by a fast-moving car in her haste to get away. The onlookers gather and decide to send her to a hospital. Shambhu happens to be passing that way and is roped into driving his own wife to the hospital. Upon closer look he realizes with horror that it is his own wife.

**Kanihya the Pickpocket**

Soon after, Kanihya loses his shoe polish kit and the source of his livelihood. While worriedly pacing the street corner near his home, he witnesses a boy pickpocketing a stranger on the street. The boy replies to Kanihya's moral outrage by saying: "Everybody is a thief here. Their pockets are my bank." Unable to bear to see Shambhu wasting away from injuries and worries any longer, Kanihya is driven to pickpocket. But Shambhu refuses to accept the fruits purchased with dishonestly earned money. He bemoans his failure in bringing up a morally upright son worthy of being called a farmer's son.

**Kanihya's guilt**

The three-month deadline weighs heavily on Kanihya's mind. After a tearful prayer to the goddess Kali requesting forgiveness for one last act of thievery, he steals a lady's purse near the main thoroughfare. He finds 100 rupees and runs home. At home, Uncle tells him about Paro's arrival and takes him to see her at the hospital. Kanihya's guilt over thievery erupts anew on seeing Paro's bandaged face and unmoving body. He blames himself for his mother's accident, saying it was his God-given punishment for stealing money.



**Shambhu's Accident and aftermath** In a sudden turn of misfortune, Shambhu meets with an accident and is severely injured. The doctor instructs that Shambhu needs rest, good food, and medicine for recovery. With no income, the father-son duo are unable to send money or write home. Shambhu refuses to let his son spend their savings on his recovery. When he tries to stand and go to work after a few days of rest, he collapses to the ground and is helped back into bed by Rani and the landlady.

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**The Land is lost** He immediately tears up the rupee notes, willing his mother to open her eyes. When the family returns to their village well after three months, their land is already fenced up, and mill construction is underway. Meanwhile, Gangu has lost his mind from the loss of land and is seen mindlessly laughing. When Shambhu attempts to pick up a handful of dirt from the land as a keepsake, he is shooed off by guards posted on the property. The trio walk away slowly with their backs to the camera.



## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**SHAMBHU MAHETO** Shambhu is the protagonist of the story and is a tragic hero. He is a farmer and the primary breadwinner of his family, supporting his wife, son, and old father. He owns two acres of farmland that have been passed down generations of Mahetos. In the film, Shambhu symbolizes the common man placed against the odds besetting man in the fast-paced changing world order. He is crushed by the burdens of drought, land-owner's oppression, and capitalists' intrusions in his village. When he moves to the city, he is still beset by abject poverty, lack of opportunities, and unforeseen misfortunes.

*Love of land* Shambhu derives pride and purpose in being a farmer and celebrates a farmer's connection to the land he cultivates. He experiences a deep connection to the family's land. In the film's opening scene, he welcomes the rain because it signals the beginning of the planting season. When the local land-owner demands Shambhu's land to build the mill, Shambhu is distressed and finds it impossible to eat until a solution is found to save the land. Even in Calcutta, he never forgets that he is a farmer and plans to return to farming at the end of three months. In the closing scene, he is seen picking up a handful of soil from his ancestral land, now lost to the land-owner.

*Sincere* Shambhu has a firm moral compass dictating right and wrong. When he earns money from pulling uncle's rented rickshaw cart, he brought back the earnings to uncle because he believed the earnings were not his own. Shambhu takes his responsibility as husband/son/father very seriously. He tries his best to take care of his family and shoulder all the burdens, refusing all offered help. When the burdens fall on others in the family, he blames himself for not being strong enough. When he catches his son pickpocketing, he condemns him strongly despite knowing that Kanihya was forced into it to meet Shambhu's medical expenses and save up for the loan amount. He blames himself for failing to teach his son about right and wrong.

*Stubborn* Despite his good qualities demonstrating devotion and hard work, he is rigid and self-righteous throughout the film, ultimately leading to his downfall. He refused to accept the changes happening all around and was fixated on the work and vision inherited from his forefathers. When Paro offered to join the workforce and contribute to the family's income, Shambhu rejected her offer saying, "No woman has ever worked for pay in our family." Ultimately, he doomed his family to a future of misfortune because he failed to foresee and adjust plans accordingly.

**KANIHYA MAHETO** Kanihya is Shambhu and Paro's only son. He is the only literate member of the family. He is deeply respectful of his elders and struggles to balance walking in their steps while being sensitive to the changes seen in the world around him. As a young boy exposed to the hard realities of the world, Kanihya's character development conveys the tussles between good and evil and the ultimate triumph of evil.

*Curious* As the youngest member of the family, Kanihya displays a lot of curiosity and openness to the world around him. His spirit of adventure nurtures positivity and an abundance of hope for the future. He often encourages his family members and brings delight to those around him with his questions and funny antics. When he is new in Calcutta, he is unafraid to explore, experience the world, make friends, and ask endless questions to understand the new world.

*Industrious* In addition to his curiosity, he is also a hard worker. Taking inspiration from Shambhu, Kanihya finds work as a shoe polish boy to contribute to the family's savings. When Shambhu is injured and unable to work, Kanihya makes the difficult choice to steal money to meet expenses rather than allow his father to succumb to injuries.

**PARO or PARVATI** Paro is Shambhu's wife and Kanihya's mother. Others in the village envy the love and care between Shambhu and Paro. She is described as the village belle by many people in the story. As a woman, she is victimized by both patriarchy and capitalism. As a poor and illiterate woman with no

experience in the outside world, she becomes the target of lecherous men's gazes and harmful intentions.

*Submissive* Although she is resourceful, her love for Shambhu and her deference to his authority prevent her from being decisive and taking charge in crucial situations. When he asks her to give up her jewelry to save the land, she gives them up. Although she did not like Shambhu's plan to move away from the family to Calcutta to earn more money, she reluctantly agreed and trusted his decision.

*Resilient* She demonstrates courage, resilience, and creative thinking in three distinct moments. When the family's finances are dwindling, she capitalizes on her ability to gather wild water chestnuts. She feeds herself and her father-in-law and makes some money from selling them. Towards the three-month deadline, her awareness of the shortage in funds motivated her decision to work outside for pay. She defied Shambhu's conservative ideas about women's confinement within domestic spaces to assert herself and realize her potential to contribute to the family's finances.

**UNCLE** Uncle is a rickshaw cart puller and Shambhu and Kanihya's elderly neighbor at the poorhouse. He becomes their friend and mentor and helps them find a job in Calcutta. Uncle's guidance and wisdom are valuable tools in catalyzing their transition to city-dwellers. They respectfully call him 'Uncle,' a term often used by young people to refer to an older man, even when they are not related by blood.

*Caring* When Shambhu expressed an interest in becoming a rickshaw cart puller, Uncle gave him the first lesson and helped him get acclimatized to Calcutta roads and passengers. Uncle was also Kanihya's best advocate and adversary. He supported Kanihya's wish to contribute to the family's financing by arranging the kit used by shoe-polish boys.

**LAND-OWNER** The land-owner is the wealthy landlord in Shambhu's village. He is looking to secure his traditional position of privilege and advantage in the evolving social and economic class hierarchy. Therefore, he readily defers to the capitalists from the city and supports their ideas of modernity while oppressing and exploiting his tenant farmers.

*Authoritarian* As the wealthiest man in the community, land-owner has a financial hold over his tenant farmers. He takes advantage of his authority to browbeat those below into obeisance. Despite the tenant farmers' apprehension over the construction of the new mill, he proceeds with the proposed plan without conferring with those below. When Shambhu fails to comply, the land-owner does not hesitate to pressure Shambhu with the pending debt.

*Greedy* When the capitalists dazzle the land-owner with their projected future involving a modern mill, his greed is stoked. He falls prey to their compliments and promises about becoming an industrialist instead of being a mere land-owner. When asked about potential problems from Shambhu's land ownership, he confidently claims that he can ensure Shambhu's compliance.

## THEMES

**Family** The family and its hold upon individuals are strongly expressed throughout the film. The members are willing to put aside their own needs and welfare for the family unit and their parent/child/spouse. The family's collective respect and devotion to family and ancestors drove them to take extreme measures to save their two acres of land. Individually, each member displays selfless devotion toward one another. When Shambhu learns that his wife is pregnant with their second child, he feels doubly sure about going away to Calcutta to earn and secure the family's land for future generations. Kanihya displays a similar devotion towards his parents. Despite being a mere boy, Kanihya labors to contribute to the family's finances. When Shambhu is injured and unable to pull rickshaws and earn money, Kanihya's filial piety trumps his sense of morality, and he pickpockets to make ends meet.

**Morality** Shades of morality are discussed at length in the film. Characters such as Shambhu, Gangu, uncle, and Rani embody honest and sincere hard work. Two little girls become Shambhu's regular customers during his stint as a rickshaw cart puller. When the girls' family is unable to afford rickshaw pulling services for the little girls, he continues to offer them for free because of his high sense of morality. On the other hand, characters such as the land-owner and pickpocket boy embody dishonesty, thievery, and corruption. Morality is weighed against money and might. While Shambhu and uncle's morality seems to cost them the ability to survive and thrive, the ability to discard morality seems to reward the land-owner and pickpocket boy.

**Modernization** The film displays a model of haphazard modernization that elevates a narrow elite class while oppressing the masses and creating a clear class divide. It is a direct result of newly postcolonial nations' desire to advance and experience exponential growth in the face of years of exploitation and mismanagement under colonial rule. The stark contrast between cities and villages is a clear indicator in the film. Alongside modern architecture, tar roads, and motorized vehicles of Calcutta, the film also shows shanty buildings, crooked and narrow lanes, and hand-pulled rickshaw carts. At the film's end, the land-owner has achieved his capitalist dream and built the modern mill with its promise of wealth and prosperity. However, the farmers are nowhere to be seen. When Shambhu and his family arrive for a final look at the land that was formerly theirs, they are shooed off by guards at the now fenced premises.

**Social Class** The social inequality perpetuated by economic and social class in newly independent India is accentuated in the film. In the village, there is a clear contrast between the skeletal and impoverished farmers battered by waves of droughts and famines and the rich, fat, and well-dressed land-owner and his city-dwelling industrialist collaborators. In the city, the daily struggle of the working class to earn a living is captured poignantly. At the end of a work day, daily wage workers sing a song capturing Karl Marx's theory of workers' alienation from the products of their labor.

**Poverty** On the lowest rungs of society, Shambhu and his ilk are constantly buffeted by rich and powerful people's calamitous decisions in which they have no say. The ravaging effects of cyclical poverty are unavoidable in the village and Calcutta. The years of drought caused many farmers to pledge their lands for loans from the local zamindar. Although Shambhu has overdue loans, he has managed to hold off on selling the land. Being poor in the village predisposes Shambhu to poverty in the city too. From their arrival in Calcutta, they are beset by misfortunes, such as getting robbed of their meager possessions, accidents, and unforeseen medical emergencies. The film does not shy away from showing the stark reality of poverty and its lingering effects on people from lower socioeconomic classes. From the initial threat to Mahetos' land-ownership to the ultimate loss of land, poverty unavoidably dictates the Mahetos' present and future prospects.