

TRUTH-SEEKER (SATYANWESHI) 2013

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Bengali Language

Contents (Overview – Plot – Themes – Characters)

OVERVIEW

This complex and entertaining murder mystery is set in colonial-era Bengal. A detective (Bomkesh) and his novelist friend (Ajit) are summoned to a palace in the countryside in order to solve the mysterious disappearance of the royal librarian. The story combines the best of crime fiction with the languid atmosphere of a nineteenth-century Bengali novel. Suspects are plentiful. We have a tight-lipped king, a suspicious queen, an old Brahmin herbalist and a handsome minister. The mood is dark and the atmosphere is tense, with flitting shadows and animal cries in the night. There are also red herrings, such as the missing family tree. The etymology of the dynasty's name of Balabantapur ('quicksand') proves decisive. It is Agatha Christie meets Rabindranath Tagore.

CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

The central narrative element of the film (dynastic succession in a feudal family) is similar to that of a famous Bengali novel of 1878 (*Krishnakanta's Will* by Bankim-Chandra Chatterjee). Indeed, the resemblance between novel and film is reinforced by the fact that the film's heroine (Aloka) is an actress who was about to appear in a stage version of the novel before she was married. Other references to classical Indian literature are numerous. For instance, a famous episode in the *Ramayana*, when Laksmana is fooled by a fake deer, is used to explain a bogus animal call in the film. Another example is the song sung by the librarian to entertain Aloka, the queen of the palace. It is taken from the *Meghaduta*, a poem by Kalidasa (c. 5th c. CE), which is suffused with the agony of separated lovers. Still, these and other cultural references, play second fiddle to the brilliant plot, of which the 'Queen of Crime' herself (Christie) would be proud.

STORY

Itinerants The film opens with an old Brahmin man and his two daughters wandering across desolate countryside. They are on their way to Balabantapur because its maharaja is reputed to be compassionate and they have lost everything. As the older daughter and her father consider the route, they see something (off screen) and begin to scream. The younger daughter is trapped but they can't go to her because, as the father says, 'that place is deadly.'

Maharaja The ruler of Balabantapur reads about student unrest concerning the Partition of Bengal (which places the story in 1905). He is also brought a letter from his son Himangshu, the prince, who is studying in London. The letter hints at his sexual adventures with English women. Then, a servant says a poor Brahmin and his daughter have come and seek shelter. 'Put them up for now. I'll think about it later,' says the Maharaja. He requests an update on the search for a bride for his son.

Aloka A young woman named Aloka is rehearsing her part in a play about tragic love. Her mother interrupts her and scolds her for getting lost in fantasy and not learning how to do household chores. 'You'll be married soon,' she says, 'and you don't know the first thing about a wife's duties.' The daughter laughs and says, 'I'm not going to marry, mother. I'm going to be a courtesan.'

Brahmin When the old Brahmin is brought before the maharaja, he explains that his house was burnt down. In replying to the king's questions, he explains that he comes from a special caste of Brahmins whose ancestors used to accompany kings on hunts. They would imitate the calls of birds in order to draw them into nets or close enough for the kings to catch them. The old man has dedicated himself to studying old manuscripts that describe that special art and to reviving it. The maharaja is impressed and grants him shelter in his palace.

Dying wish When the aging king is on his death bed, he announces to the Brahmin, a doctor and his

minister, Chandrasekhar, that his son, Himangshu, is his only heir. But if he marries a foreigner, he forfeits his inheritance. Then he delegates to Chandrasekhar the responsibility of finding a suitable bride and of seeing that a son, a legitimate son, is born within three years of the marriage.

Detective and companion Two men are travelling in a train to the maharaja's palace as guests of the Himangshu. One of them is a private sleuth, named Bomkesh; the other is a novelist named Ajit. Bomkesh, who is reading Jim Corbett's *Man-Eaters of the Kumaon*, says to his friend, 'Have you ever noticed the resemblance between hunting stories and crime novels?' The novelist looks perplexed and Bomkesh explains: 'For example, there is an injured or slain person, a hunt for the beast or perpetrator. Tracking it, footprints, cornering it. That's the detective job's too. Same as the hunter.' The novelist talks about the rules for naming a kingdom after its founder: the first or the last letter of the offspring and the progenitor must match. So, Balabanta, the first king of the dynasty, must have had a son named Ananta or Diganda or Sumanta. But not Himangshu. It doesn't fit the rule.

Tiger? As the friends sit with Himangshu, they hear a tiger's roar in the nearby jungle. Himangshu says that it is rare. He's been hunting since a young boy and never seen a live tiger. They also hear singing, the voice of Himangshu's wife, Aloka, the aspiring actress we met earlier.

Missing librarian Ajit asks to be shown around the palace. After seeing the worship room for the goddess of the dynasty, he is introduced to the old Brahmin, who prescribes herbal medicine for his aching back. He is then shown the family library with considerable holdings, but it is locked. Ever since the librarian went missing, it has remained closed. Every inch of the estate and grounds has been searched. He has vanished without a trace.

Leela Bomkesh notices a woman roaming the palace grounds at night. A servant informs him that she is Leela, the old Brahmin's daughter. But she should be on leave; the queen, Aloka, sent her away for a long time. Why is that? Bomkesh wonders but does not ask.

Flashback In a flashback, we see the librarian singing to Aloka about a man suffering from separation from his wife. Himangshu enters with a book, and the librarian asks if he has registered the borrowed book in the ledger. Later, Himangshu compares the librarian's song with the printed version in the old book and finds that they match perfectly. 'He was dedicated to his work,' Himangshu says.

Confidences Aloka visits the old Brahmin in secret and confides in him that she believes the palace, and specifically her husband, are responsible for the disappearance of the librarian. Aloka also confides in Ajit about her unhappy marriage, but she says that she did find solace with one person in the palace, the now-disappeared librarian. Meanwhile, Himangshu confides in Bomkesh that Aloka thinks he murdered the librarian out of jealousy and begs him to prove to her that this is not true. He also reveals that Aloka 'has sexual aversion disorder. The marriage has not been consummated.'

Male heir In despair that she is not fulfilling her role as wife and not fulfilling her late father-in-law's wish for a child, Aloka tells Himangshu that she will arrange for a concubine to be brought to him. He forbids this and says that they can adopt a child.

The search Bomkesh asks questions and picks up clues regarding who is responsible for the disappearance, and probable death, of the librarian. He and his friend (like Holmes and Watson) prepare a set of questions. Why did the late maharaja make such a strange will? What is the real problem between Himangshu and Aloka? Why did Leela come back unexpectedly?

Games Himangshu takes Bomkesh on a tiger hunt, and the next day they all go on a picnic. After playing some silly games, there is a tense moment when Himangshu holds a gun to Bomkesh's head and orders him to tell Aloka that he has come not to find him (Himangshu) innocent but only to find the truth. Aloka cries out that she trusts him and the threat is withdrawn.

Revelation After Bomkesh learns that the librarian and Leela were lovers, a crucial fact is revealed. When Himangshu went on a hunt a few weeks earlier, Aloka refused to accompany him and sent Leela instead. Everyone knew what would happen: 'If *ghee* [butter] is close to fire, it will melt,' as Aloka puts it. Aloka is hoping that Leela will bear her husband a son and fulfil the terms of her father-in-law's will.

Brahmin The next person to divulge secrets is the old Brahmin. He tells Bomkesh about a deserted lodge in a jungle, where lovers used to meet, and suggests that it holds the answer to the librarian's disappearance. He invites them to meet him there at midnight. When Bomkesh, Ajit and Himangshu

go to the lodge, they hear what they think is a tiger. Himangshu shoots and hits the Brahmin, who dies. Inside the lodge, they find Leela with a young baby.

Denouement Bomkesh conducts a final meeting of everyone (save the Brahmin and the librarian, both of whom are dead) and explains everything. The Brahmin was a great actor, who imitated the tiger's roar to frighten everyone. He hid the pregnant Leela in the deserted lodge and planned to have Himangshu adopt the baby and thereby solve the inheritance problem. But the librarian found Leela and decided to marry her. That would mean that the child, when it was born, would be his and not Himangshu's. In order to prevent that marriage and to protect the dynasty, the Brahmin did away with the librarian. He told him to return to the palace by a specific path that ran into quicksand, where the librarian was sucked down and died.

The end After this dramatic revelation, Aloka swoons unconscious. Leela puts the baby in Himangshu's arms and tells the men to leave the room, while she cares for Aloka.

THEMES

Mystery As an Agatha Christie-style story, the dominant feature of the film is mystery. Uncertainty lurks from the very beginning, when the old Brahmin and his older daughter watch in horror as the younger daughter dies off-screen. The old man cries, 'It's a dangerous place,' but we know nothing more until the final scene when the other disappearance (of the librarian) is explained. Both involve quicksand, which is also the solution to the riddle of the etymology of the royal name 'Balabanta.' Other questions soon emerge about the origins of the dynasty and its rulers' names, about the presence or absence of tigers and then, of course, the disappearance of the librarian. Every scene seems to introduce another puzzling piece of the puzzle. How does Aloka know a recent film song if, as she claims, she hasn't been to Calcutta recently? Why did Leela go on leave? Why don't the hunting dogs do not bark when a tiger roar is heard? There is also deception and disguise: the Brahmin was an accomplished actor as was Aloka. And there are secret places, like the locked library and the deserted hunting lodge. Many scenes occur at night, or in a fog, which contributes to the mist of unknowing. Witchcraft, mental instability and divine retribution are all invoked at some stage as explanations for the deepening mystery. Suspicion spreads from character to character, like damp stains on the palace walls. Red herrings are scattered along the trail of detection. But the riddle is only solved by seeking the truth, like tracking game on a tiger hunt, following footsteps and lying low to spot your prey.

Dynastic succession The primary narrative theme is the importance of dynastic succession. As with the Tudors and the Mughals, the purity of the blood-line must be maintained. This is the dying wish of Himangshu's father: Himangshu must marry an Indian (not an Englishwoman; he's studying in England) and must produce a male heir within three years. If not, he will be disinherited. These all-important conditions drive the story forward. Himangshu marries Aloka (cutting short her acting career), but finds that she has an aversion to sex. That problem is then solved by the Brahmin's older daughter (Leela), who replaces Aloka by accompanying Himangshu on a hunt and getting pregnant by him. When the child is born, it is adopted by Himangshu and the continuity of the dynasty is assured. The importance of the succession is also indicated by the complicated rules for naming the male heir: either the first or last letter of his name must match that of the dynasty. Patrimony, inheritance and the blood-line—these notions shape nations, and explain crimes.

CHARACTERS

Himangshu Himangshu is the king of Balabantapur. Like many of the characters, Himangshu is something of a mystery. He was educated in England and comes back to inherit his father's throne. He appears to be kind and thoughtful, but is that just a mask for devious aims? Certainly, he is proud of his ancestry and cares for his wife, but, again, do those emotions provide motives for something sinister?

Reflective Himangshu is an educated and thoughtful person. He may not always inspire confidence, but he is capable of understanding others. Especially his wife, whom he loves deeply. This quality is illustrated in a conversation with Bomkesh. Bomkesh puts it to him that he might have killed the librarian out of jealousy since the dead man and Aloka were close friends. Speaking slowly, with bowed head, Himangshu confides in Bomkesh. 'You see,' he says, 'Aloka loves singing and dance and theatre. But I can't provide those things here, not in this rural place. She got those pleasure by talking with the librarian.' Bomkesh then asks if she had more rapport with the librarian

than with him. 'No,' is Himangshu's firm answer. 'Their kind of compatibility lasts only a few days. Whereas our compatibility is stronger.' Then Himangshu has to divulge his deepest secret to explain the situation: Aloka has an aversion to sex. He does not complain about it, he simply states it like a medical condition (which it may be). In this long scene, Himangshu displays an ability to judge others without prejudice.

Proud Himangshu is born a prince and becomes a king. He takes pride in his family, in his ancestors and in the dynasty that he represents. He also carries on the tradition of the royal hunt. That attitude is illustrated in an early scene, when he and his visitors stand before his painted portrait. It is a large canvas, in a gilded frame, and the king wears the full royal regalia, including a turban. As he gazes at his own royal image, he brings himself up tall and smiles in admiration. Bomkesh comments, 'You are truly the heir of this kingdom,' and Himangshu bows slightly to acknowledge the accuracy of that statement.

Desperate Himangshu's desperation to be trusted by his wife reaches a climax during the picnic. The group play a series of harmless games, but then they also engage in a little target practice with a pistol. Even when blindfolded, Himangshu is able to hit tea cups dangling from a tree branch at some distance. Suddenly, though, he turns the gun and holds it to Bomkesh's head. 'Tell Aloka,' he says calmly, 'that you have come not to prove my innocence but only to discover the truth.' Bomkesh shrinks and Aloka cries out that she trusts her husband. It is a dangerous moment in what otherwise seems like a cosy mystery story. But just as an Agatha Christie's story hides sinister elements, we see here that Himangshu is a dangerous man because he wants so badly for his wife to believe him.

Aloka Aloka is Himangshu's queen. Aloka is the most complex character in the story. She was an aspiring actress who became the queen of Balabantapur. In the palace, she wanders around the spacious rooms, bored and languorous (like the title role in Ray's film the *Lonely Wife, Charulata*). She only found rapport with the now-vanished librarian and suspects her husband of foul play. Although petulant and moody, she is also generous and honest.

Free-spirited Before her arranged marriage, Aloka was a cheeky, ambitious, fun-loving young woman. We see this attitude illustrated in an early scene, when she is alone and rehearsing a part for a play. She is a scandalised woman (in the play), abandoned by her lover and considering suicide. As she rehearses the role, she is interrupted by her scowling mother, who says she deserves all the grief she is suffering (in the role) because she has been pampered by her father and knows nothing of household duties. 'You must learn, Aloka,' she says. 'You're old enough to be married.' Hearing this Aloka pouts, flings herself on her mother in a theatrical swoon and says, 'No, mother. I will never marry.' Her mother looks aghast. 'No. I've decided that I'll be a courtesan.' It is the wilful play-acting of a young girl, not a young woman, and it reveals the strong currents that flow within her.

Unfulfilled After her marriage to Himangshu, Aloka becomes a frustrated and unfulfilled wife. It is not that her husband is cruel or distant, but they are not compatible in temperament. As a result, she has to play a role she does not like in a play she detests. She is the queen in a palace in the countryside, far from the cosmopolitan delights of music and theatre that she loved in Calcutta. This feeling is expressed during a conversation with Ajit, one of the visitors. 'When I got married,' she says, 'the actress became a queen. I needed a friend in this exile. I didn't find one in marriage. And when I found one, he went away.' She is referring to the librarian, with whom she shared a love of poetry and music.

Suspicious That is also why Aloka is so convinced that her husband is responsible for the librarian's disappearance. She thinks he is jealous of their rapport and removed him from the scene. That suspicion is expressed throughout the film but most forcefully in an early scene with her husband in their bedroom. She is upset because he has summoned a detective to prove his own innocence. He is adamant that there has been no foul play, pointing out that the river has been dragged and the jungle searched. 'I see,' Aloka says sarcastically, 'this is just another hunt for you?' He says she must trust him, but she replies. 'You haven't even filed a case with the police.' He says that his minister has met with the police. This does not convince Aloka, who says, 'Oh! But the police station is just an extension of this palace, and all the townspeople are your subjects.' Nothing he can say will remove her suspicion that he is responsible for the disappearance of the librarian.

Generous Among Aloka's admirable traits is her generosity. The best example of that quality occurs during another one of her conversations with Ajit. She tells him a story of the jewels left to her by her late father-in-law, the maharaja. 'It was a large box,' she says, 'filled with diamonds, pearls, rubies—

all the most precious gems. Real ones! Enough to marry off ten girls from a poor family such as mine.' Ajit asks if she is wearing some of that jewellery now, and she says that she hasn't touched it or anything else given to her. She explains that she also gave back the gold ornaments given to her by her mother at her wedding. In a brief flashback, her mother explains that she shouldn't return the jewels because it is a tradition for a mother to give gold to her daughter on her marriage. But Aloka says, 'You've honoured tradition, mother, so there shouldn't be a problem if I return them willingly. Please, take them so that you can arrange good marriages for my two sisters.' The spoilt actress and suspicious queen is, deep down, a kind person.

Dutiful Another of Aloka's virtues is her sense of duty, if not to her husband, at least to the dynasty of which she is queen. This somewhat unexpected display of responsibility occurs in a scene with her husband. He is sitting on the bed, back turned, while she slouches on the floor, one arm resting on a large wooden chest. It is obvious that they have been having an argument and remain emotionally distant from each other. Because the scene follows Himangshu's revelation to Bomkesh that the marriage is still unconsummated, we assume that the lack of an heir is the flashpoint of their argument. Aloka says, 'I have sent out someone to find a girl for you. She should be here in a few days.' When Himangshu says that he doesn't want that solution, she says, in a haughty tone, 'As queen of Balabantapur, I, too, have a responsibility to its throne. Let me bring a concubine for you.' He suggests that they adopt a child (which is what happens in the end), but Aloka replies, 'No. Then, I would bear the burden of my failure for my whole life.' Aloka, the actress, is good at playing the part of the tragic female, but this seems to be a genuine expression of responsibility.

Bomkesh Bomkesh is the detective. Bomkesh is the cerebral character of the story. His 'little grey cells' are never at rest, observing, cogitating and searching for the truth. One suspects that he might not be a barrel of laughs as a husband, though.

Observant As a detective, Bomkesh is bound to be observant and he does not disappoint us in this expectation. Numerous examples could be cited, but the one that stands out, because it seemed so trivial at first, is his observation that the hunting dogs on the estate do not react when they hear the sound of a tiger or a jackal at night. This comment seems to be irrelevant to the solving of the mysterious disappearance of the librarian. What could it possibly mean? The answer is provided by Bomkesh at the very end, when (like Hercule Poirot) he gathers the main characters together and provides them with a spectacular explanation of how he solved the mystery. First, he noticed that the 'tiger' tracks in the jungle were not real: the front and back paws were not differentiated, as they should be. That led him to inspect the Brahmin's trunk, where he found tiger paws of papier-mache. He dug into the man's background and discovered that he had been a great actor. Now, he put it all together. The dogs didn't react because the 'tiger' roar was not from an animal but from the Brahmin. And that conclusion led him to suspect the man and later discover that he had done away with the librarian.

Shrewd Being observant, though, is not sufficient for a master sleuth, like Bomkesh. He must also be clever, and again Bomkesh fills the bill. A characteristic illustration of his shrewdness occurs during the picnic. Bomkesh introduces a silly little game, in which each of the main characters must write down three names within fifteen seconds. That means, as Bomkesh explains later to Ajit, that each person will write the names of people who are on his/her mind. When, back at the palace, Bomkesh and Ajit look at the lists of names, they find that two names are common to all: the Brahmin and the librarian. That pairing was not expected and leads Bomkesh to correct conclusion that the first killed the second.

Probing A third feature of Bomkesh's detection is his ability to ask probing questions. He is not abrupt or impolite, but he is candid once he has established a certain rapport with an interlocutor. This talent is displayed in a long conversation that he has with Himangshu one evening. Bomkesh begins by asking why Aloka suspects that he (Himangshu) caused the librarian to disappear. Himangshu answers that she thinks that because she believes that he (Himangshu) is jealous of her friendship with the librarian. This is sensitive territory and Bomkesh treads lightly but does ask the probing question: 'So, you agree that she had more rapport with him [the librarian] than with you?' This leads to another delicate question about the nature of the marriage, which, in turn, results in the crucial revelation that the marriage is unconsummated. Bomkesh is patient but his candid questions eventually uncover this essential part of the puzzle.

Ajit Ajit, a novelist, is his companion.
Librarian The librarian is the keeper of the royal books.
Brahmin The old Brahmin is a herbalist.
Leela Leela is his daughter.
Chandrasekhar Chandrasekhar is the minister of the king.



(Bomkesh, right, interviewing Himangshu)



(Bomkesh, right, with Ajit)



(Aloka at the picnic)