

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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DISTANT THUNDER (ASHANI SANKET) 1973

Satyajit Ray

(Bengali Language)

Contents (Overview – Plot – Themes – Characters)

OVERVIEW

This is as close as Ray ever came to documentary film-making. The film, adapted from a novel by the same name published in 1944, tells the story of how a village in Bengal is affected by World War II and specifically by the famine of 1943-44. We see the villagers' suffering largely through the eyes of a young doctor and teacher, and his wife. There is hunger and starvation, which creates opportunities for some and forces others to make terrible choices. The story has no narrative arc, as it is called, and proceeds without the usual drumbeat of increasing dramatic tension. Instead, it contains a series of horrific episodes and ends with a statement: 'Over five million died of starvation and illness in Bengal in what has come to be known as the famine of 1943.'

CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

The Bengal famine of 1943-44 is one of most hotly debated events in twentieth-century Indian history. Although neither the source novel nor the film itself makes a political statement, the film was severely criticised in India when it was released in 1973 as too critical of the villagers and too indulgent toward the colonial British government whose policies many believed caused the famine. The scale of the tragedy raises questions, even today, like those of the Holocaust. How could it have happened in the modern world? Why did no one stop it? Why didn't the people rise up in revolt? Ray's film does not offer any definitive answers, but it remains a talking point in today's media and public sphere.

STORY

Setting The film begins with shots of a sinister-looking sky above a rural landscape. The clouds are massive and dark. Then we see two young women bathing in a river. One looks up and says, 'Look! Flying boats.' A squadron of Japanese planes are overhead. 'How beautiful. Like a flock of cranes,' one says.

Ananga This is Ananga, who then becomes afraid when her friend dives under the water and doesn't surface for a while. 'You scared me,' Ananga says. 'Don't worry,' says her friend. 'I live a charmed life. Cholera killed eight people in my family, and I survived.' Ananga and her husband, Gangacharan have only just come back to live in the village, where Gangacharan, an educated Brahmin, has agreed to act as teacher and priest. 'Things are livelier since you came,' says one woman to Ananga. 'You're so beautiful. You cheer us up.'

Expectations As the two women walk back to the village, they see a man watching them. He works in the brick-kiln and has a badly burnt face. 'His face gives you nightmares,' says one woman. Ananga reaches home and talks with a lower-caste girl, saying how happy she is to be back. The girl says everyone is happy, that so-and-so had a baby and that everyone is waiting for her, Ananga, to have a child. This makes Ananga hesitate before saying, 'All in good time.'

Gangacharan Next, we meet Gangacharan, Ananga's husband, the kind Brahmin who comes home with a nice, big fish. He smiles and comments on the flourishing garden. She feeds him, and he tosses leftovers to a stray dog. There is enough food to go around. Gangacharan is respected throughout the village. He announces his plan to open a school, and the village headman agrees to support him. He begins to teach and continues to treat illness. A man comes from a nearby village and asks Gangacharan to do a ceremony to drive away cholera. Gangacharan agrees, for a price. He draws up a list of necessary items, including a red sari (which he will later give to his wife) and performs the elaborate ceremony.

War On his way back home, a poor Brahmin stops him and asks for some food. The price of rice is rising and he can't afford it. He explains that the Japanese have taken Singapore and the papers

predict more price rises. Gangacharan gives him some food, and back at home, he tells his wife that prices may rise. 'What is this war?' she asks. 'Our king is fighting the Germans and the Japanese,' he says. 'You see those planes? They're going to war.' 'Oh, I love them,' says Ananga. 'Beautiful.'

Troubles Slowly, the economic situation worsens. There is no kerosene in the market. 'Strange,' Gangacharan says. 'I have money but can't buy any kerosene.' People talk of a rice shortage. The old Brahmin who borrowed food from Gangacharan comes to his house and begs for food. Gangacharan turns him out, but Ananga demands that he call him back. He does, and the man becomes part of their household. Next, Ananga suggests that she could earn some rice by working at a rice-mill. Her husband is scandalised that she should consider working alongside low-caste women.

Riot When the price of rice skyrockets, some villagers raid the headman's storehouse and steal bags of rice. Gangacharan tries to stop them, but he is pushed aside. Back home, he reluctantly agrees that his wife can go work in the rice mill. 'If we are to be humiliated,' he says, 'let's be humiliated together.' With little to eat, Ananga asks the other villagers how to cook snails, a food forbidden for Brahmins, but the old rules no longer hold.

Desperation The man with the burnt face propositions Chutki, a married woman, by offering a handful of rice for sex. She refuses but then then gives in, in order to feed her family. The food shortage becomes severe, and Ananga gives her gold bangles to Gangacharan, who takes them to a distant village hoping to exchange them for rice. Meanwhile, Ananga goes with Chutki and other women into the forest to forage, digging roots and gathering nuts. A strange man sees them and tries to rape Ananga, but fortunately Chutki strikes him with the iron digging bar and kills him.

Tainted food Gangacharan meets with disappointment in the village he has travelled to. The man with the rice will not sell it to him. 'What do I want with your money? I can't eat it. If I sell it, I have nothing to eat.' On his way home, however, he meets a charitable woman who gives him some food. Faced with starvation, Chutki once again buys rice with her body. She offers some of the rice to Ananga, but Ananga refuses to touch the tainted food.

Hoarding The villagers suspect that the village headman is hoarding rice, but he swears that his storehouse is empty. Gangacharan believes him. Later, when the headman is beaten and possibly dying, he offers bags of hoarded rice to the doctor if he treats him.

Death Next, a low-caste woman dies of starvation, the first in the village. Breaking with taboo, Gangacharan touches her in order to check that she is dead and later he agrees to perform her cremation.

Uncertain future In the final scene, the married couple look out and see the old man whom they sheltered coming toward them, with all his relatives. 'What will we do?' Ananga asks. 'Well,' Gangacharan says, 'we'll be ten instead of two.' She corrects him saying, 'No. Eleven.' He takes a moment before it sinks in and then smiles. More mouths to feed, but they will not turn them away. They have a future and a strong bond between them to give them hope.

THEMES

Interconnected world A key theme of this film is the interconnectedness of the world. Today, we would call it 'globalisation,' but in the 1970s, it was enough to show that the lives of people in a village in Bengal were affected, indeed ruined, by events occurring thousands of miles away and over which they had no control. The film begins with shots of a rural landscape, recalling the opening of Ray's famous *Pather Panchali*. But this is no longer (and never was) a self-contained village society, connected only to other villages in the region. This is 1943, World War II, the conflict that did involve the 'world'. This is total war, when the economies of widely separated countries are tied together through trade and when people in this Bengali village can suffer from decisions taken in London or Berlin or Tokyo. This linkage is indicated in the opening scene, with a shot of bombers flying overhead. Ananga says they look like a flock of cranes, which they do. When the food shortage bites and prices rise, people say it's because of the war. Gangacharan is told that Singapore has fallen (which actually happened in February 1942), and he knows enough to explain to Ananga that 'the King is fighting the Germans and Japanese.' But, although he is educated, he has little idea of where Singapore is or why the war is raging. The thunder is distant, or it appears to be. Before long, the war will penetrate every aspect of Gangacharan's and Ananga's life.

Local causes The causes of the Bengal famine are a matter of ongoing debate and controversy.

Many historians blame the British colonial government for redirecting food supply from civilians to the military (Japan conquered Burma in 1942 and threatened to take eastern India, including Bengal). Other scholars point to more localised causes: deficiencies in the supply chain in the region; hoarding; and crop failure due to weather. Other film-directors, notably Mrinal Sen, have made films that are unambiguous in their criticism of British policy, but Ray is more interested in exploring local realities. Nowhere in the film is any blame directed toward the colonial government (probably because the villagers would have been able to make such an accusation). Rather, Ray focuses on internal flaws, problems within the local society. Chief among these is the division of caste, personified here by the arrogance of Gangacharan toward the 'ignorant' villagers. There is also the greed of the headman, who hoards his rice supply and lies about it. Another local problem is the sexual exploitation of women. Taken together, these three flaws (caste, greed and gender inequality) make village society fragile, easy to fracture and break apart when the food crisis hits. A more cohesive society, the films suggests, might have weathered the food shortage by fighting it shoulder to shoulder.

Artificiality of divisions A third theme, which follows from the second, is that the divisions that separate the village society are artificial. They are, like the famine itself, man-made. For example, the traditional hierarchy between Brahmin and non-Brahmin collapses under the strain of the food crisis. What might seem to be old, stable, time-honoured habits are swept away in a matter of weeks. A revealing instance occurs at the beginning of the film when Ananga is greeted by a low-caste woman, who bows down to touch Ananga's feet. 'Don't touch me,' Ananga says. 'I'll have to bathe again.' She says this matter-of-factly, without any anger and the woman does not take offense. This is the way it is. Before long, though, Ananga is working alongside these low-caste women in a rice mill and going out into the forest with them to forage for food. Similarly, Gangacharan has a transformation when, at the end of the film, he touches the hand of a dead Untouchable and then performs her cremation, things prohibited by the laws of caste. It may be heretical to say this, but Ray seems to hint that the Bengal famine had at least one positive effect: to reveal the artificial nature of caste divisions.

CHARACTERS

Gangacharan Gangacharan, a Brahmin, is the protagonist. Gangacharan is a Brahmin, a fact which dictates much (but not all) of his character. He is educated and respected, but also takes advantage of his elevated position in ways that are less than ethical. He is kind toward his wife and, in the end, shows generosity to others. The complexities of his character lie at the heart of the film.

Mercenary Gangacharan is not an altruistic man. Sought after for his medical and priestly knowledge, he knows he is in a good position to bargain and uses that advantage to increase his income. A clear illustration of his mercenary nature occurs when a man comes to him from a distant village. There is a cholera outbreak in the neighbouring village, and he has come to ask Gangacharan to perform a ritual to prevent the disease from spreading. Gangacharan's first words are 'It'll be expensive.' He says he will draw up a list of the things he needs, and then asks his wife what kind of sari she wants. He performs an elaborate ceremony, provides advice (relying on preventative measures for cholera found in a medical book), pockets the large fee and buys her a new sari. He's not greedy or unkind, but he does look after 'number one.'

Arrogant Another flaw in his character is his arrogance. One might say that this is a built-in flaw, a design fault in a caste-defined society, but he certainly exemplifies it in the extreme. A good example is his behaviour toward another man who comes to him for help. This man is low-caste and has been ill. Confronted with this peasant, Gangacharan is put out. Another stupid villager wanting his advice. 'Practicing medicine is hard work, you know,' he says grumpily as he takes the man's temperature and smokes on his hukkah. 'What?' he cries angrily when the man describes his habits. 'You ate rice! Rice will make it worse.' He goes inside to get some medicine and mutters to himself, 'Stupid peasant. No sense at all!' He hands the man a little packet of powder and the man leaves, but not before Gangacharan says, 'Do you have any mustard seeds?' The man says he has. 'Good. Bring me some.' Again, his speech and behaviour are not atypical and would not be considered reprehensible within the village, but for Ray and his sophisticated audience the arrogance would be clear.

Compassionate Despite these shortcomings, Gangacharan is no villain, and he sometimes shows compassion. The most significant example occurs in the final scenes, after the famine has claimed its first victim. An Untouchable woman had died of starvation and lies on the open ground. He finds her on his way home and feels her pulse to confirm that she is dead. Touching her in life would have

been polluting, but now he doesn't seem to care anymore. He tells Ananga, who says, 'Untouchable, even in death. The jackals will come and eat her.' Gangacharan says, 'I will cremate her. You don't care, do you? [about the pollution].' Ananga shakes her head. As he goes out to perform the cremation, he sees a large family coming toward their house. It is the old man, Bhattacharji, and his relatives. He accepts them into their house. This is the final shot of the film, which ends on a note of hope. Gangacharan has shown compassion to an Untouchable woman and will share what little food he has with others.

Ananga – Ananga is Gangacharan's young and beautiful wife. She is innocent, carefree and kind-hearted. She is also practical, able to change her habits if necessary. She has a sense of self and, while deferring to her husband, offers valuable advice to him. Her strength of character, which contributes to the unbreakable bond with her husband, gives this tragic film its only ray of hope.

Innocent Ananga is a young woman without pretension or selfishness. We see this in the opening shots, when she is bathing in the river. She takes a simple pleasure in water, saying that she 'loves to swim'. Then she comments that the bombers flying overhead are 'beautiful' and 'like a flock of cranes.' Soon, she is at home with Gangacharan and begins to giggle. 'What is it?' he asks. 'Nothing.' He persists in coaxing her. Ananga waits, twisting her the end of her sari, and says, 'Madhu told me today that I'm so beautiful it makes people happy.' She uses her hands to cover her blushing face. As viewers, we, too, think she is beautiful or, at least, has an unblemished character. This is the person whose life will be nearly crushed by the events to come.

Traditional Ananga is extremely personable, but she is also a product of her society and exhibits all the traditional habits of a Brahmin woman in a village. The best example of this comes in a scene that precedes the one described in the paragraph above. Ananga has just finished bathing with other women, of different castes, and walks back to her home. At the gate to her front garden, she meets a low-caste woman, who bows down to touch her feet as a greeting of respect. 'Don't do that,' Ananga says, instinctively. 'Then, I'll have to bathe again.' She gives a little laugh and passes into her house. Neither she nor the other woman gives it a second thought. This is normal behaviour in the village: a Brahmin avoids polluting touches from the lowest castes.

Practical Ananga is also a practical person, who forces herself to adjust to the changing times. This pragmatic side of her character is well illustrated by a scene in which she is shown working alongside other women, helping them to pound rice. Days before this, she had mentioned to her husband that she could bring back some husked rice if she worked at the mill, but he forbade it as 'humiliation.' So, now the scene takes on a special significance. We see her operating a foot pedal that makes a heavy wooden beam move up and down, pounding the rice to remove the husks. She is like the other women there, sweating and wiping her brow. It is hard, physical labour, and we sense that she would like to stop, but on and on, she goes, straining and groaning. When the food shortage is acute, traditional attitudes are a luxury.

Strong-willed Innocent and traditional, Ananga is nevertheless a strong person. She will change her habits, ignore old customs and do what is necessary to survive. But there are limits. Lines she will not cross. This strength is illustrated when she refuses food. The shortages are beginning to become severe and she and her husband are hungry. Chutki, her friend, comes to her door and offers her a few handfuls of rice. Ananga realises that the food has been given to Chutki in exchange for sexual favours, and so she refuses it. She is desperate, and perhaps this is sheer stubbornness, but one cannot help but be impressed by her will power.

Chutki Chutki is a low-caste woman who helps Ananga.

Biswas Biswas is the village headman.

Bhattacharji Bhattacharji is an old Brahmin, to whom Ananga and Gangacharan show hospitality.



(Chutki is propositioned by the man with the burnt face.)



(Ananga, in the opening shot of the film)



(Ray on location during the shooting)



(Gangacharan and Ananga learn that a woman has died of starvation)