

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Anwasha Maity, PhD

MENAGERIE / Chiriyakhana (1967)

Satyajit Ray

(Bengali language)

OVERVIEW

Auteur and film While waiting to secure funding for his next film, Satyajit Ray took on the *Menagerie* project at the request of his assistants. His assistants had secured the copyright for the original novel and a contract with the superstar Uttam Kumar, but they lost confidence and Ray had to step in. This is the only film he made on a detective character not of his own creation, as well as the first of the only three detective films he would make in his career.

The plot of the film is based on Saradindu Bandyopadhyay's ever-popular and critically acclaimed literary series featuring the "truth-seeker" Byomkesh Bakshi (1932-1970). The literary series continues to be loved today, both in fiction and a slew of recent films. Ray's film certainly draws from the popularity enough to change major plot details and still remain relevant. The film rides largely on Uttam Kumar's stardom and his rarely explored machismo, comparable to Humphrey Bogart or Robert Mitchum. Like his other films, Ray heavily adapted the novel's plot, but in this case, unfortunately, the film is much less impressive than the novel. Perhaps Ray thought that the forensic details so central to the novel's plot would be too complex to accurately portray in film; Ray's fascination with Alfred Hitchcock's work also influenced the tone, atmosphere and the relative simplicity of the murders and motives. Ray himself did not consider it a "true Ray film" and it was not released outside Bengal, though it won the State Award for Best Director in 1968.

CHARACTERS

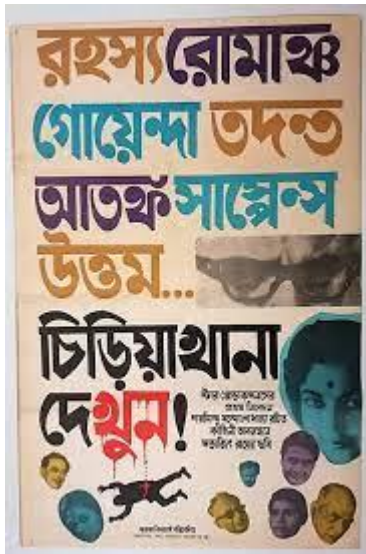
Byomkesh Bakshi	A renowned detective
Ajit Chakraborty	Byomkesh's friend and sidekick
Romen Mallick	An influential ex-producer
Inspector Barat	A police inspector
Nishanath Sen	A retired judge who founded Golap Colony

Inmates at Golap Colony

Bijoy	Nishanath's nephew
Damayanti	Nishanath's live-in partner and Laal Singh's wife
Dr. Bhujangadhar Das	A medical doctor who lost his license after performing illegal abortions
Sunayana/Banalakshmi	A film actress at the heart of the mystery
Braja	Nishanath's manservant and reformed thief
Panugopal/Paanu	The deaf-and-mute gardener who is murdered
Nepal Gupta	A convicted ex-professor of chemistry

SYNOPSIS

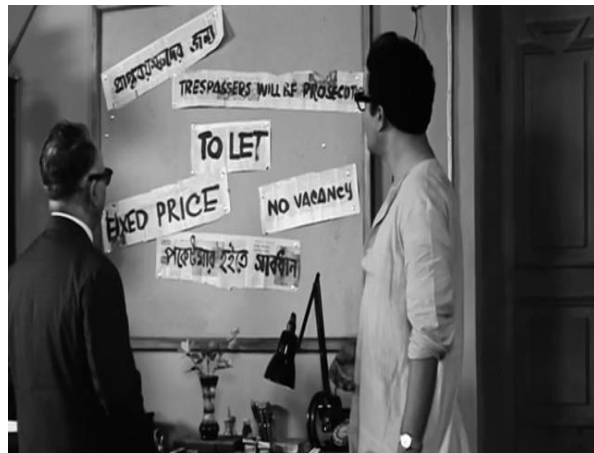
Byomkesh Bakshi, a renowned detective, and his friend Ajit get a new client one day, a retired judge named Nishanath Sen. Nishanath asks Byomkesh to track down the singer-actress of a film song that haunted him. He suspects that the woman might be hiding at Golap Colony, a farm he established, which houses "social outcasts". Byomkesh agrees to take the case and visits the farm on the outskirts of Kolkata in disguise. Nishanath and his gardener, the deaf-and-mute Paanu, are soon murdered. Initially, Byomkesh cannot find strong clues or motives, but the local Police Inspector Barat, in contrast, is overconfident that he will arrest the criminal in two days. There is a blackmail subplot involving Nishanath's live-in partner and her convicted husband, which complicates matters. Finally, from a few small clues, Byomkesh gathers evidence against Golap Colony's doctor, Bhujangadhar, whose medical license was revoked for performing illegal abortions. He and his wife were hiding in colony away from society's scrutiny because of a previous murder. It is revealed that his wife, Banalakshmi, is the actress who sang the song Nishanath wanted to track down. But she had plastic surgery on her face to change her appearance. Finally, all leads come together and the murdering doctor is caught red-handed.



PLOT

Opening scene From the view of a busy Kolkata intersection, we see the interior of Byomkesh's living room, with some unusual objects such as a skeleton, a pin-up board and a demon mask. Byomkesh, holding his pet snake, asks Ajit what he should name it; Ajit is annoyed. Ajit, a novelist, wants to write a sweet romantic love story; Byomkesh says those are passé and there has to be some dramatic twist or death.

A retired judge, Nishanath Sen, arrives. He has established Golap ["Rose"] Colony on the outskirts of town to house "social outcasts"— some have physical defects and most have a criminal history. Nishanath says he sentenced 22 convicts to death by hanging in his 12 year career; Golap Colony is his way to repent for the guilt of taking other humans' lives. "All roses have thorns" Byomkesh says, but Nishanath does not have a case to solve there. Rather, he is in search of the actress who sang a film song from a few years ago and wants Byomkesh to track her down. He invites Byomkesh and Ajit to visit Golap Colony the next day. He gives Byomkesh an advance payment and requests him to wear a disguise lest the inmates recognize him.



Visiting Romen Mallik Byomkesh and Ajit visit Romen Mallik, an “encyclopedia of cinema”. After some light humor about detective stereotypes, Byomkesh asks about the song Nishanath is searching for. Romen tells him all the details of the film *The Poison Tree* and the name of the actress, Sunayana, who sang the song. That was her only film, as she was wanted for murder afterwards but couldn't be found. The man who was murdered was Romen's friend and her lover; after his stabbing, Rs 20,000 also went missing from the room they were staying at. She was a fantastic actress with impressive sex appeal.



Byomkesh's disguise On the train journey to Golap Colony, Byomkesh disguises himself as a hard-of-hearing Japanese horticulturalist who doesn't know much English, while Ajit wears a fake beard and “interprets” in gibberish. In a caricature of a typical Japanese tourist, Byomkesh snaps a photo of every person he meets and bows constantly. But he is almost outed by an ex-pat businessman who speaks to him in Japanese!



First visit to Golap colony The horse-drawn carriage driver who has come to fetch them from the station tells them that Golap Colony is locally called *chiryakhana* or “menagerie”, playing on the literal meaning of “bird” (*chiriya*) and “house” (*khana*), that is, “jailbird”. The farm is in financial crisis and profits are being embezzled. Nishanath greets them and says that they will like the beautiful rose gardens. He introduces his wife and his nephew, then shows them around the compound, including “holy cows” in a shed. They also meet some of the inmates and Nishanath describes their histories.



A possible identification After the tour, Nishanath tells Byomkesh and Ajit more about the women in the colony, adding that one of them sings the song that he was seeking, but that none of them look like the actress Sunayana. He also mentions that someone has been throwing car parts into the colony at night, but laughs at the idea of blackmail.

Nishanath is murdered We see what the inmates of the colony do at night, overtly and covertly, focusing on the movements of the women. While making a phone call to Byomkesh, Nishanath is bludgeoned with a club, dragged to his bed and has his dead eyes closed by an unknown assailant. The call was still connected; Byomkesh and Ajit hear the sounds of a sitar over the phone.



An investigation- second visit to Golap colony The next day, Inspector Barat calls Byomkesh about Nishanath's murder, without knowing Byomkesh's prior connection to him. They see his body on the bed, the nearby room where the murder occurred with the phone still hanging off the hook and footprints. Inspector Barat is sure that it is a "simple case of burglary", but Byomkesh disagrees.



Inspector Barat

Byomkesh interviews the inmates Walking through the farm with Ajit and Bijoy, Nishanath's nephew, Byomkesh gathers clues, such as the butt-end of a local cigarette, and speaks to some of the inmates. He learns many things:

- Bijoy is set to inherit half of his uncle's property but was sleeping the previous night.
- Braja, Nishanath's personal manservant, was also asleep at the time.
- Paanu, the deaf and mute gardener, seems to know something but is too afraid and unable to communicate what he saw while smoking the cigarette.
- Mushkil Mian, the driver of the horse-drawn carriage, lied that he slept deeply.
- Another employee, Rasiklal, has gone missing; Bijoy suspects him of embezzlement.
- Nepal Gupta, an ex-Professor of chemistry who lost his job after making bombs and burning half his face in an explosion, says that the colony is a hotbed of controversy.
- Dr. Bhujangadhar Das, who lost his medical license due to an illegal abortion, is the colony's doctor and resident sitar player. He is startled when Byomkesh mentions the raga that he was playing on the night of the murder. He says that it's unfortunate that a man's measure is not his intellect, but how well he conforms with society's rules, and he finds nothing wrong with saving a girl from the shame of bearing an illegitimate child. Humans can't always repress their desires.
- Banalakshmi, one of the women, says she was sewing on her machine late into the night but declines to answer any questions about Dr. Das. Bijoy guesses that the doctor may have behaved inappropriately with her.
- Damayanti, Nishanath's widow, is grief-stricken and too overwhelmed to answer questions beyond minor details.

Inspector Barat says he'll have the culprit in handcuffs in the next two days.



Bijoy



Mushkil Mian



Paanu



Nepal Ghosh



Banalakshmi



Damayanti

The Poison Tree- "What do you know of love" Romen Mallik takes Byomkesh and Ajit to the director of *The Poison Tree* for a private showing of the film at a cinema hall. They see the actress Sunayana who sings the song. "What do you know of love" onscreen, but the damaged reel cuts out mid-song. Byomkesh uses a voice recorder to record the song. He has a sharp memory for voices.



Brain-storming Byomkesh pins up the photos he took at Golap Colony, along with a map of the compound. He asks Ajit which of the four ladies he found most enchanting. Ajit chooses Damayanti, a widow, as she was appropriately heartbroken. Byomkesh suspects that the stated relationships of other three women are likely fabricated. He takes one of Sunayana's film stills and tries to match it with the women's pictures, but there is no match. They also discuss the blackmail angle related to the car parts, but can't find a clear connection to the murder.



Braja's confession Braja, Nishanath's personal manservant, suddenly turns up. He had taken an oath to never lie while he was in jail and became a devoted Krishna worshiper. So suppressing the truth would be unjust and a crime. Braja drops the bombshell that Damayanti was not married to Nishanath. Her husband, Laal Singh, was sentenced to be hung by Nishanath, but his sentence was reduced to a prison sentence. In a flashback, he recounts how at the sentencing, Laal Singh threw a shoe at the judge.



Damayanti



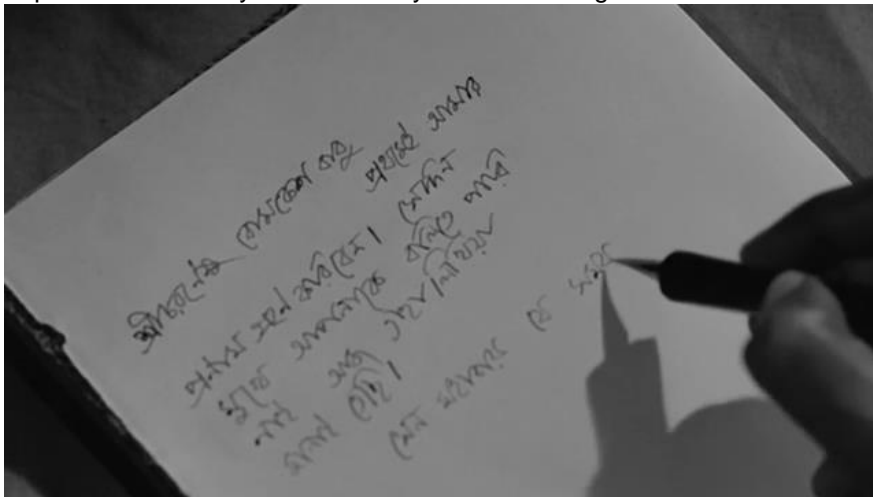
Nishanath as a judge



Braja

A judge takes a live-in partner Some days later, Laal Singh's wife, Dayamanti, approaches Nishanath. She says (in Hindi) that she married her husband out of love, but he has been adequately judged by Nishanath. She, however, is innocent and how will he judge *her*? To Braja's discomfiture and disapproval, Nishanath takes her as a live-in partner. If such a respected judge could steal another man's wife, then stealing was all right for a common man like Braja too. So he stole, was sentenced to jail and then rehabilitated by Nishanath after release, as the relationship between the two men was unchanged. He wasn't in a position to judge Nishanath's moral character and he is saddened and repentant. Laal Singh should have been released from jail by then and he used to own a car repair shop.

Paanu is murdered Paanu, while writing a letter to Byomkesh with the intention of revealing what he had seen on the night of the murder, is bludgeoned to death. Laal Singh climbs into the compound but is apprehended by a policeman. Byomkesh regrets that he wasn't able to anticipate the second murder. Inspector Barat reports that Laal Singh confessed to the blackmail— every month he would throw a car part into the compound and Damayanti left money for him in the greenhouse.



Byomkesh interrogates the inmates Byomkesh interrogates the inmates in a closed room and records the conversations with his voice recorder: Byomkesh tells Damayanti about Laal Singh's arrest and sympathizes that she had to give him the money. She breaks down and he lets her leave. Nepal Gupta is angry with Bijoy because he proposed marriage to his daughter Mukul, but turned her down for the "whore" Banalakshmi. Mukul was awake that night, but did not hear the sounds of the sewing machine. She declines to answer any questions about Bijoy. Banalakshmi says she was brought to the city (implying sex trafficking) and wanted to learn the sitar as she likes music. Nazar bibi keeps looking at Bijoy and giggling. She habitually eavesdrops but does not provide any information. Mushkil Mian says that he was intoxicated, instead of being asleep as he previously claimed. Bhujangadhar Das says his ex-wife was a white British woman who "suddenly became aware of the color of my skin" and left him. Bijoy knew his uncle's history with Damayanti but greatly respected them. He also brought Banalakshmi to the colony as he was moved by her story and fell in love with her. Byomkesh sternly accuses him of having a motive for murder as Nishanath wouldn't have approved of his marriage to Banalakshmi. He admits that he was with Banalakshmi in her cottage at the time of the murder and the Mukul was aware of that. Byomkesh instructs Inspector Barat to inform him if anyone attempts to leave the colony.



Byomkesh and Ajit ruminates on motives They discuss possibilities, removing suspects from the board while reviewing the recordings. They dismiss Nepal, Mukul, Mushkil Mian and his wife Nazari bibi. He is stuck by an inconsistency in the use of the proper local word for “home” in Banalakshmi’s recorded interview. They deduce that she wanted to hide from society by using a fictitious tale of woe to evoke sympathy. Ajit gives Byomkesh another idea of who the murderer can be when he says that the recorded voices of the people are present but not the people themselves. But Byomkesh cannot find a motive. He receives a phone call with information that pleases him and he thanks the caller.



Disguise and discovery Byomkesh, disguised with beard and turban, follows Bhujangadhar Das as he disembarks from a train. The doctor is carrying a suitcase and wears formal western attire. He has the key to a room in a brothel, which he unlocks and enters. Ajit, alone in Byomkesh’s house, is startled by the skeleton and the snake. As Bhujangadhar is leaving, Byomkesh purposely bumps into him and steals the key. Then he removes his disguise, goes to the brothel and ties up one of the girls there when she discovers him entering Bhujangadhar’s room. He shows her his firearm to keep her silent. The girl willingly tells Byomkesh that it’s the doctor’s establishment and she pays rent. Just as Byomkesh is leaving, Bhujangadhar returns, anxious about the lost key, but Byomkesh slips by unnoticed. Byomkesh tells Inspector Barat to raid Bhujangadhar’s room at the brothel. He then instructs Bijoy to pay Banalakshmi as usual and correct the injustice he has done to Mukul.



Exposé Ajit, film connoisseur Romen and all the inmates are gathered together. Byomkesh begins with discussing the actress Sunayana and her affair with the murdered man, who gave her a lot of jewelry. Eight years later, when Nishanath came to him with the suspicion that one of the women in the colony was Sunayana in disguise, he was bludgeoned to death. Byomkesh directly asks Bhujangadhar why he was lying about his alibi and shows them the tape recorder that the police recovered from the brothel room. The tape plays the tune that Byomkesh heard while Nishanath was murdered. Bhujangadhar confidently says that it's usual among musicians to record their own work. But he gets flustered when Byomkesh tells him the motive— keeping Sunayna's identity a secret—and shows the evidence: gloves, jewelry and a contract for her film. Bhujangadhar says that she was his first abortion patient and he “took responsibility” for her by marrying her. Banalakshmi asks Byomkesh to play the film song again and cries. Finally, she confesses that Bhujangadhar had taken advantage of her and also committed the three murders. He tries to run, but Inspector Barat stops him.



Closing scene Byomkesh tells Ajit and Romen about the plastic surgery that changed Sunayna's appearance to Banalakshmi. He got the clue from some plastic flowers. Then he frightens them with his pet snake, which was in an inconspicuous bag all along.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Byomkesh Bakshi (*Open, Intelligent, Adventurous, Humorous*)

Byomkesh Bakshi is a renowned detective who calls himself a “seeker of truth”. He works with his friend and sidekick Ajay to solve two murders at a colony inhabited by reformed criminals. He has some strange tastes, such as keeping a snake for a pet and collecting demon masks, but overall, he is the very picture of a successful and highly respected private detective. So much so, that Police Inspector Barat leaves the investigation in his hands and follows his directions to the letter. Byomkesh is intelligent, adventurous and has a knack for humor in unlikely situations.

Intelligent In a majority of literary detectives beginning with Sherlock Holmes (Ray was a fan) and Hercule Poirot, the most prominent characteristic is their intellect. Byomkesh is no exception. He shows his deductive prowess early on, when he proposes that the blackmail subplot and the murders are not connected. He also analyzes the motives each of the characters may have, particularly Bijoy, who is set to inherit half his uncle's property. He is also quick to realise that most of the suspects were lying to him and then interrogates them again to find how their alibis weren't watertight. Particularly, his sudden realization that the sitar music was recorded, not live, helps crack the case. In addition to possessing an extraordinary intellect, Byomkesh also possesses an exceptional memory and the ability to recognize anyone's voice if he ever heard it earlier. He recognizes Inspector Barat's voice over the phone after speaking to him just once months ago.

Adventurous The detective, who calls himself a “seeker of truth”, has a more prominent adventurous streak in the film than in the literary series. This is seen from the opening scene with the décor of his living room including a demon mask and a full-sized skeleton. Then he plays with his pet snake, to Ajit's great discomfort, and brings it snake along (for some undisclosed reason) for the exposé, just to frighten Ajit and Romen. The snake, in fact, is novel to the film and immediately provides a clue to the identity of the murderer, doctor Bhujangadhar. *Bhujanga* means “snake” and *dhar* means “he who holds”. Byomkesh literally grasps a snake and plays with it, symbolically portraying his dominance over the criminal.

We see another adventurous streak when he disguises himself and follows Bhujangadhar to the brothel. There, at the risk of having his identity exposed, he steals the room key from the doctor, then manhandles and ties up one of the Anglo-Indian prostitutes, then shows her his revolver so that she does not scream for help. Byomkesh's actions here reveal the Bengali middle-class's reprehensible attitude towards sex workers. The girl in question however doesn't seem to mind at all, likely mistaking him for a handsome client.

Humorous Apart from enjoying some dark humor at his friends' expense with the pet snake, Byomkesh also has a humorous/satirical streak. While his demeanor is appropriately serious while interacting with the suspects,

he dons the funny hat (literally) when he impersonates a Japanese horticulturist at the beginning of the film. When he unexpectedly meets a co-passenger businessmen who spent years in Japan and who speaks to him in (correct) Japanese, he has to pretend to be hard-of-hearing. He keeps fixing his fake mustache and both he and Ajay speak incomprehensible gibberish, passing it off as Japanese, on their first visit to the colony, to the great admiration of the inmates.

Nishanath Sen (*Unconscientious, Sensitive, Careless*)

Nishanath Sen is a client who initially asks Byomkesh to track down a film song and the actress who sang it. He is fashionable (and a little weird) in how he wears sunglasses indoors. He is a retired judge who has established a flower and diary farm, Golap Colony, to rehabilitate a few “social outcasts”— some with physical defects and some ex-convicts. However, he is murdered and is present only in the first part of the film, with one extended flashback.

Sensitive Nishanath is thoughtful and sensitive, going beyond his duty as a judge to truly care for those who receive punishment at the hands of the law. After suffering a stroke, he realized that he had no right to be the one deciding another person’s life and death and resigned from his position. He is thoroughly repentant and establishes Golap Colony to provide a safe space for those who find it difficult to exist in the society at large. He also shows a sensitive side when he takes in Damayanti, a non-Bengali wife of a convict he sentenced, as his own live-in partner. Of course, he was sexually interested in her, but giving her the position of his own wife and willing her half his property after death shows that he truly cared about her and wanted her to have a respectable position in society.

Careless His career as a judge was short-lived and there is no indication that he did not perform his professional duties as he should have. But after retirement and setting up Golap Colony, he grew lax in money matters, perhaps by choice. We see this first when he gives Byomkesh an odd number of extra bills as an advance payment. A second example is when Byomkesh learns that one of his employees was embezzling from him; apparently, according to Nepal Gupta, Nishanath was aware but chose to ignore it. And a third example is his carelessness in giving Damayanti access to his cash reserves on top a regular allowance, which she draws on to fulfill Laal Singh’s blackmail demands.

Dr. Bhujangadhar Das (*Emotional, Uncontrolled, Unstable*)

Dr. Bhujangadhar Das is the “villain” of this murder mystery. He is a much more interesting character in the novel, as he puts his medical knowledge to good use in committing the murders; in the film, he merely bludgeons the victims to death. He is an accomplished medical doctor who received his degree in surgery from London and once had a British wife. His medical license was, however, revoked after he performed illegal abortions on girls who he claimed needed them, including on Banalakshmi, whom he married.

Uncontrolled Bhujangadhar is shown only in a few scenes, but enough to make him stand apart from the rest of the inmates. For one thing, he is unusually talkative, confident and even opinionated with Byomkesh while knowing that the detective was there to apprehend him (the murderer). He keeps asking Byomkesh how the latter knew which raga he was playing on the sitar, providing a clue to the audience (though not directly to Byomkesh) that the music might be key to unraveling the murder. His overconfidence, while not providing any direct clues, makes him a person of interest early on. Another example is his illegal business. He rents out a building to prostitutes in a red light district and also uses the room as a safe house to hide the evidence of his crimes: the recorder with his sitar music, a box full of jewelry that he stole from Banalakshmi’s lover whom he murdered years ago, the gloves he wore to murder Nishanath and Paanu, and, of course, the most damning evidence of them all, the film contract proving Banalakshmi’s real identity.

Unstable e are not told why his British wife left him. While he presents his “brown skin” as the reason, it is more likely that he was portraying himself as the victim, as sociopathic narcissists often do. The color of his skin didn’t change overnight and she probably grew wary of his unstable nature. Similarly, his second wife, Banalakshmi, faced a difficult life at Golap colony. She is evidently having an affair with Bijoy and her husband is absolutely fine with being cuckolded; in fact, it is suggested that he forced her into having an affair for a share of Bijoy’s inheritance. He also forced her into seclusion at the cost of a promising career as a singer and actress. Since there is no statute of limitations on a murder investigation, Bhujangadhar had to keep her quiet and commit two more murders, just so his first murder wouldn’t be revealed.

THEMES

JUSTICE (Punishment)

Punishment *Menagerie* presents some unconventional views on justice and punishment, even going so far as to cast doubt on the system of the law. Byomkesh stays on the side of the truth, which in this case coincides with the side of the law and its enforcers represented by Inspector Barat. But he cannot ignore other perspectives on the topic, seeing how all the major players in this murder mystery have been punished by the law in some way or another.

Judge Nishanath, for instance, realized the hubris in wielding the power to sentence another human being to death. No matter what the crime, that punishment does not seem justified to him when doled out by another equally flawed human. This is brought to him when he suffered a minor stroke and realized that life and death should be in the hands of the Almighty.

Bhujangadhar presents a radically opposed perspective, but one not entirely without merit. In a society where premarital sex is taboo and unmarried women bearing illegitimate children are a scandal at best, abortions continue to be a prevalent practice despite legal prohibitions. In order to save a girl from being outcast by society, Bhujangadhar considers abortion a “social service”. He also appeals to the supremacy of intellect over morality and is dissatisfied that a man’s measure in society’s eyes is in the latter, not the former. To him, the punishment of losing his medical license is another affront to his own warped sense of justice.

Notably, but not surprisingly, all four women characters are punished by fate and society, though not so much by law. Nazar bibi, girlish and uncomplicated, is Mushkil Mian’s second wife and much younger than him. At night, while her intoxicated husband lies asleep, she habitually leaves the cottage and eavesdrops to find some excitement. Mukul, who is in love with Bijoy, watches and suffers in silence as he withdraws the marriage proposal and grows enamored with Banalakshmi, spending time in the latter’s cottage. Damayanti, too, loved her husband, but suffers twice: once when he was sentenced to death and again when he returns to blackmail her—all the while unable to share her pain with Nishanath. And of course, Banalakshmi suffers a great deal, first being brought to the city, then becoming pregnant and having an abortion, then being forced to marry Bhujangadhar and conceal her identity, sacrificing her career in the film industry in the process, not to mention being forced into an affair with the sympathetic Bijoy. While not always guiltless, the punishment they face just for being women is completely out of proportion with their crimes.

FLAW (Fear, greed)

Fear As to be expected in a murder mystery, fear motivates many characters into behaving uncharacteristically. For instance, Damayanti is afraid that her ex-convict husband, Laal Singh, will spread false and scandalous rumors about her and her relationship with a respected ex-judge. She therefore lets him blackmail her for money over an extended period of time, even stealing money from Nishanath occasionally. Paanu, the deaf and mute gardener, was also afraid of revealing something that he saw. But we never find out what that was, as he was bludgeoned to death while writing a letter to Byomkesh. And of course, the murderer and his accessory in crime, Bhujangadhar and Banalakshmi, are also afraid that her identity will be revealed. That would simultaneously reopen the case against her and reveal that the doctor murdered her lover from her actress days. This fear feeds into Bhujangadhar’s psychopathic tendencies and motivates him to commit two more murders before Byomkesh finally puts an end to it.

Greed Two characters in the film are noticeably motivated by greed: one repents and changes his ways, while the other does not.

Bhaja, Nishanath’s personal manservant, who had been with him since the latter’s days as a judge, tells Byomkesh his story. When he saw his master stealing someone else’s wife, he was influenced to steal, too. He embezzled some money, was caught by the police and served a jail sentence. However, in jail, he repented his actions, became religious, took an oath to never lie again and mended his relationship with Nishanath, who eventually rehabilitated him in Golap Colony. Laal Singh, on the other hand, does not mend his ways. Released early from jail for good behavior, he searches for and finds his wife, Damayanti. But instead of attempting to mend their relationship, he prefers to blackmail her, showing that he cared more for money than his wife. And his greed is punished appropriately in the end, when he goes right back to jail.

QUEST (Search)

Search Byomkesh always self-identifies as a “seeker of truth”, not a “detective” or what in local parlance translates to “lizard”, as Romen Mallik jokes on their first meeting. Byomkesh’s quest begins with something as innocuous as a song from an almost-forgotten film and a search for the actress who sang the song. Matters are complicated by the two murders and the seeming lack of motive for most of the inmates in Golap Colony. The investigation gets more complex by the fact that all of the persons of interest lie to him or outright refuse to answer his questions. Minor characters (like Mushkil Mian, Nazar bibi (Mushkil’s wife), Nepal Ghosh and his daughter Mukul) provide contradictory statements, muddling the investigation. Add to that the blackmail subplot stemming from Laal Singh and Damayanti’s previous marriage. The muddle is so great that Byomkesh has to meet/interview the inmates not once but thrice (once in disguise), with a camera and a recording device no less— quite the technological novelty for the time.

Finally, his search for the truth hinges not on finding any concrete evidence— the evidence is obtained *after* he has determined the identity of the murderer— but on Banalakshmi’s usage of the word “home”. If she actually hailed from the village she claimed was home, she would have used a different word. This helps unravel that her sob story was concocted to evoke sympathy and hide her true origins. Another important realization stems from Ajit’s observation about voices on the gramophone, which clues him in to the possibility that the sitar music he heard during the murder may have been recorded, thus falsifying Bhujangadhar’s alibi. Another innocuous coincidence, seeing some plastic flowers, lets Byomkesh make the connection to plastic surgery which Banalakshmi underwent to change her facial features. It is only by pulling these disparate threads apart that Byomkesh is able to solve the mystery and bring the criminal to justice.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1) Do you think Byomkesh is an interesting detective? Why or why not?
- 2) Analyze the two scenes in which Byomkesh dons a disguise. How do they affect the development of the plot?
- 3) Do you think Nishanath and Bhujangadhar’s opinions on law and order are justified? Why or why not?
- 4) Analyze one of the female characters in the film, focusing on two illustrative moments. Do you think they deserved their fate?
- 5) What do you think about the role of the police in the film?
- 6) Was any major element in the film culturally alien to you? Discuss.
- 7) Who, to you, is the most interesting minor character in the film and why?