

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## PRATIDWANDI (THE ADVERSARY) 1970

Satyajit Ray

(Bengali language)

### OVERVIEW

This film (based on a Bengali short story by Sunil Gangopadhyay) is set in the historical context a violent, Marxist insurgency that raged across Bengal in the 1970s (and continues, to a lesser extent, there and elsewhere in north India). The revolutionaries, mostly middle and upper-class, educated young men were called Naxalites after the region of Naxalbari where the insurgency first surfaced. The story focuses on a young man, Siddhartha, who is forced by the early death of his father to abandon his medical studies and find a job in Calcutta. While his job search is unsuccessful, he meets various figures, some of whom, like his young brother, are revolutionaries. He also interacts with his sister, who he suspects got her job by sleeping with her boss. He remains distant from everyone, except a young woman, named Keya. Alienated, broke and drifting, Siddhartha finally leaves Calcutta to take up a job as a salesman in a rural town far from the city. There, lost and cut off, the story ends as he watches a cremation take place, a scene which recalls his father's death at the beginning of the film. Much of the film reveals Siddhartha's thoughts and fears, sometimes in the form of dreams.

### CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

*The Adversary* is one of several Ray films (including *Mahanagar*, *Apur Sansar* and *The Middleman*) that throw light on urban India, specifically Calcutta. From one angle, it is Ray's aesthetic response to the violent and well-organised Marxist revolutionary movement that swept over Bengal and much of north and central India in the 1970s. Rather than focus on the revolutionary (represented by Siddhartha's younger brother, Tonu), the film examines the life of the brother who has no cause, political or otherwise. And for this reason, the film presents a life that many in the cinema-going audience would understand. Young, educated and thoughtful, but not politically aligned to a revolutionary movement, Siddhartha is a sort of Calcutta every-young-man. Many would have undergone what he endures in his job interviews, the frustration of the long wait, the bureaucratic process and the large number of candidates, some of whom faint before they are interviewed. Once again, what elevates Ray's film from sociological document to artistic achievement is the emphasis on the protagonist's inner life, his dreams, nightmares and fears. In the 1960s and 1970s, university education in India was churning out a large cadre of men who had no chance of finding employment in a still-modernising economy. This is the source of their alienation and the reason that many of them turned to extreme politics.

### STORY

*Father's death* The film opens with the cremation of Siddhartha's father, which leaves his mother without support and forces Siddhartha to quit medical school and earn money. The sequence is shot with black-and-white negative images, which lends it a spectral, haunting air. This sets the tone for the movie as a whole in its close examination of the protagonist's mental state.

*The interview* Now, the action moves to Calcutta, the big, bustling city, where we watch Siddhartha, well-dressed and hair combed, go through the ordeal of a job interview at the city's Botanical Garden Survey. There are many, many candidates for a single position. When Siddhartha's turn comes, he answers the questions of a three-man panel candidly. When asked if he likes flowers, he says, 'Not unconditionally.' When asked what was the outstanding event of the past decade (1960s), he pauses and says, 'The war in Vietnam.' 'Not the moon landing?' he is asked. 'No, the courage of the people in Vietnam was outstanding.' 'Are you a communist?' he is asked. 'I don't think one has to be one to admire their courage, sir.' His answers are sincere, articulate and intelligent, but, needless to say, he doesn't get the job.

*Experiences in the city* Siddhartha is watching a movie when a terrorist bomb goes off in the cinema. He meets an old family friend, who may or may not be a revolutionary, but he is not keen to receive 'fatherly advice' from him. Then he sees an attractive woman, whom he recognises from medical school, and fantasises about her breasts until he remembers the anatomical lectures about the female anatomy. He watches the river flow by and overhears foreign hippies waxing lyrical about 'oriental mysticism.' He visits a former classmate in medical school, who is shown to be completely selfish, even taking money out of a Red Cross collection box.

*Inner world* We are also privy to Siddhartha's sometimes confused and agonised thoughts. 'I haven't done the proper calculations about how to get a job.' 'The weaker sex is now the stronger sex.' At home, he has frustrating conversations with both his younger brother (Tonu) and older sister (Topu). Tonu, still a college student, is committed to the revolutionary cause and criticises his brother 'for doing nothing.' Siddhartha tries to caution his brother, saying he may be killed. This is followed by a flashback in which his brother is frightened when he sees a man kill a chicken for a meal.

*The sister* Then Siddhartha learns that a rumour has spread that his sister got her job by sleeping with her boss. She denies it but is nonchalant, which Siddhartha cannot understand. He wants to 'thrash' the boss or make the rumours stop, but Topu accepts the boss's advances as part of 'the job.' She is a modern, working woman (the only one in the family with a job), and it's obvious that Siddhartha feels powerless with her. After a long conversation—he making moral arguments and she dismissing them—she lays down and picks up a movie-star magazine. 'Do what you like, but leave me alone,' she says.

*Flashback* This scene of alienation is followed by a flashback to their childhood when she calls his attention to a bird call and they both listen to the haunting sound in childhood rapture. In other words, brother and sister were once very close.

*Visit to the boss* Next, Siddhartha visits his sister's boss and tries to convince him that his sister should leave her job ('for everyone's sake'). However, it's clear that his attempt is half-hearted. He has no purpose, no direction and no job.

*New opportunities* These bleak moments are followed by hope. One of Siddhartha's old friends arranges a job for him with a pharmaceutical company. The only problem is that the position is located in a town a long way from Calcutta. While deciding whether or not to take the job, Siddhartha goes to a bird market in an effort to find the bird whose call he and his sister loved as children. That search is in vain, and a friend, trying to cheer him up, takes him to a woman's flat and says 'she's all yours. I've already paid.' Disgusted, Siddhartha leaves.

On his way home, he meets Keya, a young woman he knew from his medical studies. He helps her repair a blown fuse in her flat, they share a cup of tea and chat. Back home, he has more unsettling interactions with his brother and sister, which lead to a nightmare that reveals his fears: his sister in a sexy bathing suit; his brother executed by a firing squad; and Keya dead.

*Keya* Siddhartha begins to court Keya, taking her out to see sights in the city, to which she is a newcomer. As their love develops, she tells him more and more about the troubles in her own family. During one conversation, Siddhartha says, with a little exaggeration, that he is a doctor and knows a lot about bones and bodies. 'We're all basically the same,' he proclaims. 'Yes, but how very different we really are,' she replies. Again, Siddhartha, relying on objective science, struggles to understand complex human nature.

*Finale* Siddhartha has not yet decided about the pharmaceutical job and goes for one more interview for another position in Calcutta, which turns into an hallucinatory hell for Siddhartha. There are 75 candidates for the position, who have to wait for hour and hours in the heat. A candidate faints, but the organisers refuse to provide extra chairs. In his disturbed mind, Siddhartha sees the candidates sitting in the hallway as skeletons. Finally, Siddhartha explodes and charges into the interview room, overturning tables and screaming abuse.

In the closing sequence, Siddhartha is on a train, travelling to take up the job in the countryside. In his head, he writes a loving letter to Keya, saying that she is only person he will really miss in his exile. He settles into an uncomfortable room and hears the bird song from his childhood. He goes

out on a terrace to find the bird but ends up watching a cremation and hearing the priest repeatedly chant, 'The name of Lord Rama is the eternal truth.'

## THEMES

*Alienation* This is a film about the lack of connection and understanding between people, families and friends. How, the film-maker seems to ask, do we connect with others and how do we find our purpose in life? One answer is the political message of the Naxalite revolutionary movement, which is personified in the character of Siddhartha's brother. He has a purpose, 'a path' as he calls it, which appears to value communalism over capitalism. Siddhartha has been trained in another purportedly objective ideology, that of medical science. As he explains to Keya in a key scene, 'You can learn a lot from dead bodies. Nerves, arteries, bones. Everyone's basically the same.' Keya can't accept this and says that you need to understand people by looking at their eyes. A third theory of human behaviour is expressed by one of Siddhartha's friends. 'Why do I drink alcohol? Because my father did. It's fate.'

Other sections of the film document the alienation felt by Siddhartha. He does not understand either his brother or his sister, even though they were close as children. He is out of place in the job market, too, where his honest answers in interviews only result in failure. There is also the physical vastness of the city, shown in a series of panoramic shots, in which Siddhartha appears as a dot. His alienation deepens as the story progresses, causing hallucinations and nightmares. Only with Keya can he find some solace, but even that lifeline might snap as the film ends with him in a far-off place, all alone and looking at a cremation. But, perhaps like the Siddhartha of ancient times (the historical Buddha), Ray's cinematic character must go through the full spectrum of life's experiences before he reaches enlightenment.

*Death* The film is bookended by deaths. In the opening sequence, Siddhartha's father is being cremated. His mother is torn apart with grief, screaming about being left alone and destitute. The priests intone the prayer, 'Chant the name of Hari [Rama].' Friends console the widow, saying, 'Be calm, sister. We are here to help you.' The last shot of this scene is the young Siddhartha watching the flames rise up and consume his father. In the final sequence, Siddhartha watches another cremation, this time of an unknown person in a faraway town. But again, he hears the same chant about Lord Rama [Hari]. Death appears in the middle of the film, too. Siddhartha becomes a medical student who studies dead bodies and later tells his girlfriend (Keya) that you can learn a lot by dissecting corpses. In the interview scene toward the end, the candidates waiting in a corridor turn into skeletons. In a dream, Siddhartha's brother is executed, and in a flashback, a chicken is beheaded. If, as some critics have suggested, this is a film about searching for the meaning of life, it appears that the answer is found in death. Certainly, although Ray was not a religious person, there some comfort in hearing the rhythmic chant of the priests at both cremation scenes.

## MAIN CHARACTERS

Siddhartha	Siddhartha is the protagonist of the film.
Topu	Topu is his unmarried older sister, who is employed.
Tonu	Tonu is his younger brother, a student committed to a revolutionary movement.
Keya	Keya is a young woman with whom Siddhartha falls in love.
Adi	Adi is one of Siddhartha's old classmates.
Sanyal	Sanyal is Topu's boss.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

### *Siddhartha*

Character Siddhartha, the protagonist who dominates the film, is a searcher and a thinker, who is out of step with everything and everyone around him. He is too honest for the interview, too intellectual (or too passive?) for the revolutionary cause (for which he has sympathy), too chivalrous to have sex with a prostitute, too prudish to accept his sister's 'modern' ways and too blinded by his love of science to understand others. He is plagued with doubts about most things, and drifts around a huge city without a plan. As Ray himself explained in an interview, he was interested in Siddhartha 'because he is the vacillating character. As a psychological entity, as a human being with doubts, he is a more interesting character to me. The younger brother has already identified himself with a

cause. That makes him part of a total attitude and makes him unimportant.’ Although critics still debate the identity of the ‘adversary’ in the title, we can safely say that Siddhartha has an adversarial relationship with life.

### Illustrative moments

*Principled* For all his inaction, Siddhartha never appears as anything less than a young man of principles. He refuses sex with a prostitute, he tries to counsel his brother to avoid danger and he seeks to protect his sister from a man whom he considers to be predatory. But the best illustration of his honesty and intelligence is the famous ‘interview’ scene. Siddhartha sits before three older men, representing the Botanical Garden in Calcutta, and attempts to answer their questions. Asked about his aim in life, he says, ‘Right now it’s to find a job, sir.’ The panel are expecting some deeper purpose, but they pass on to a second question about whether he likes flowers. His answer (‘not unconditionally’) might be seen as pretentious cleverness in another person, but Siddhartha is simply trying to be honest. Next, he is asked a technical botanical question, which he answers with considerable accuracy and detail. Then comes the question that sinks him. Asked about the most important event of the past decade (1960s), he does not, as they expect, say the moon landing. Instead, he chooses the war in Vietnam. He goes on to explain that whereas the moon landing was predictable (given the advances in technology), the reaction of the peasants in southeast Asia defied prediction. ‘It wasn’t about technology. It was just plain human courage,’ he declares in a rare example of firmness. Could it be that Siddhartha is conscious of his own lack of courage in facing life’s challenges?

*Lost* Throughout the story, Siddhartha is lost, without apparent aim or direction. With his medical studies cut off by his father’s death, his search for a job has thrown him into a wider search for himself. He has no real friend, or family member, to guide him. The advice he does get from his father’s old colleagues is too insincere to be taken seriously. He is also sometimes shown to be physically lost in the vast metropolis of Calcutta. One aerial shot of thousands of tiny figures moving through the streets shows us just how insignificant he is. However, the best illustration of his confusion is toward the end. He is travelling on a train to a job in a town he has never visited, a place hours from Calcutta. It is a journey to nowhere. And as he sits in the train, he begins to compose a letter to Keya, his girlfriend, who is also on the move, to New Delhi. In the letter, he explains how he has no one he cares about (except her, of course). And when he arrives at the unknown town, he is shown into a rented room. He is a stranger in a strange place.

### *Topu*

*Character* Topu, Siddhartha’s older sister, is a study in contrast with her brother. She is the breadwinner in the family, a burden that Siddhartha should shoulder. She is also a practical person, at ease with the world and her job, which might involve accepting some unwanted attention from her boss. She is a modern woman, who wears the latest fashions, reads fan magazines and spends a lot of time in front of the mirror. She is confident and wilful, but not unpleasant or rude. In a flashback, we see her as a young girl responding to the sound of a bird. That childhood wonder is now safely tucked away in the past, wisely, she would say.

### Illustrative moments

*Practical* Topu is a practical woman, who has to teach her idealistic younger brother about the realities of the world. We first hear about her when she is not on screen. Her boss’s wife has come to the family house and complained that she is having an affair with her husband. When Topu does arrive late at night, she does not offer any explanation. Instead, she turns on the fan and tries to cool herself. She is dressed in a sari and short-sleeved blouse, which show off her figure. When the outraged Siddhartha tells her about the rumours, she merely laughs and says ‘that his neurotic wife’ will say anything. When her brother says that he will ‘give him a good thrashing’, she scoffs at him as if he is a little boy. When he asks her why she has come home so late, she tells him that her boss took her to see his new house. ‘There were other people with us,’ she adds. ‘But can’t you refuse to go?’ he asks. ‘No, because next month I’m going to get a raise of 200 rupees,’ she says. That silences her brother. She has a job, and he is unemployed. She provides the family income.

*Nonchalant* Topu’s easy-going acceptance of the world is illustrated in a scene in the middle of the story. After his first long conversation with her (about the rumour of her affair with her boss), Siddhartha has gone to her boss’s house to convince him to let her quit her job. When he comes back home, she is lying on a bed reading a magazine, her preferred position, showing supreme lack

of interest in anything else. Siddhartha announces rather self-importantly that he went to the boss's house, but she doesn't move a muscle. He repeats his statement; still she doesn't take her eyes from her magazine. He tells her that the boss has agreed that she should quit, and she starts to laugh. 'I don't believe you,' she says firmly. 'And even if it were true, I'll tell him myself tomorrow that I'm not quitting.' She rises and begins to admire herself in the mirror, as he continues his moral campaign. 'What about mother? Doesn't it concern you that she is upset about these rumours?' 'Tell me, brother,' she replies, turning herself around, eyes still on the mirror. 'Should I go into modelling?' The scene ends with her showing him the new dance steps she has learned.

### *Keya*

Character Keya is set up as a female counterpoint to Topu. She is a young student, who is socially and sexually immature. She even giggles from time to time. She lives with her parents, who have recently moved to Calcutta from New Delhi. Like Siddhartha, she is without a clear path in life. And also like him, she is thoughtful but relies more on intuition than objective science to forge her way in the world. She is introduced to the story as a 'helpless female,' who needs someone to fix her burnt out fuse. That person turns out to be Siddhartha, and from that accidental encounter they grow to love each other.

### Illustrative moments

*Innocent* Unlike the other women in the film—Siddhartha's sister, his friend's girlfriends, a prostitute—Keya is innocent. Her innocence is illustrated by a clever bit of photography when she first appears in the film. Siddhartha has just left the prostitute in disgust and is walking alone at night on a dark street. From the shadows of a doorway, he hears a woman call, 'Hey, mister.' He hesitates. It must be a street-walker soliciting business. But it is only Keya, an innocent young woman who needs help.

*Intuitive* Keya is young but also wise and observant for her years. She trusts her intuition, a characteristic that she both demonstrates and explains in a long conversation that takes place in a café toward the end of the film. Siddhartha tells her that we can learn a lot about a dead body by dissection because everyone is anatomically the same. At the end of his mini-lecture, she considers for a moment and says, 'Yes, but nevertheless there are differences. We're not all the same.' He defends the assumptions of medical science, but again she disagrees, saying, 'You can see it in the eyes, and feel if someone is good or bad.' Siddhartha counsels against such intuition because it can lead to mistakes, dangerous mistakes. She accepts this qualification but maintains the value of instinct and impression. At the end of this scene, when she turns her own bright eyes on him, when are left in no doubt that she has judged him to be a good person.

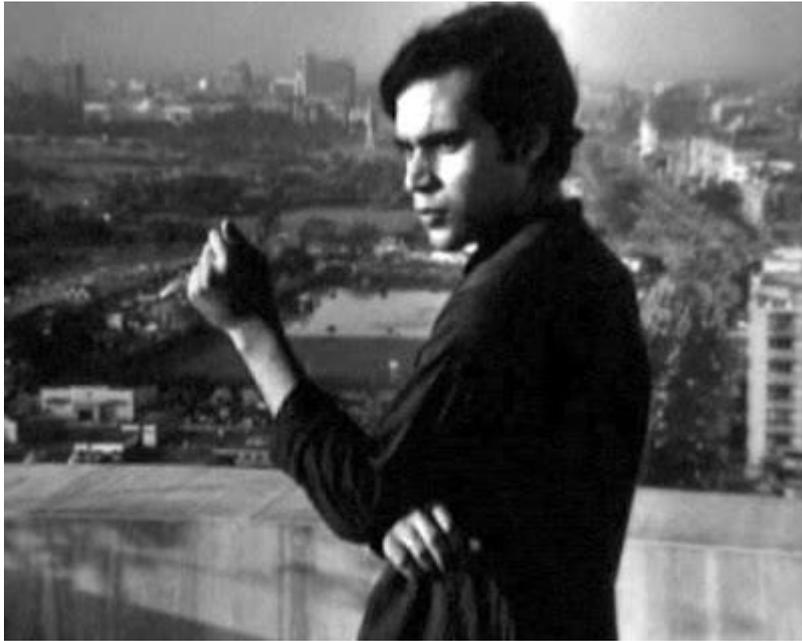
*Loyal* A third defining quality of her character is loyalty. By the end of the film, it is clear that she has fallen in love with this somewhat unpromising hero. He is thoughtful and kind and listens to her. Her loyalty to him is displayed when they stroll out on a terrace and she scans the vastness of the city. It is the monsoon season, when lovers unite. Walking slowly back and forth on the terrace, she is deep in thought. Siddhartha says that if he does not get a better offer, he will accept the position in the faraway town. She says, 'If you leave, then I, too, will leave.' He doesn't say she loves him—that would not be proper at this stage of their relationship—but her meaning is clear.



(Siddhartha's friend introduces him to a prostitute)



(Siddhartha's sister, Topu, turns a deaf ear to his concerns)



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(Siddhartha contemplates his future, with the vast city below him)



(Siddhartha at his interview)



(Keya shines her eyes on Siddhartha)



(Siddhartha's hallucination, when the candidates turn into skeletons)



(In the final scene, when Siddhartha hears the bird call)