

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

Stuart Blackburn, Ph.D.

ARANYER DIN RATRI (DAYS AND NIGHTS IN THE FOREST) 1970

Satyajit Ray

(Bengali language)

OVERVIEW

This deceptively simple story (based on a novel of the same name by Sunil Gangopadhyay) describes a three-day visit to a forest by four young bachelors. Coming from upper-class Calcutta families, they travel for a weekend to a tribal area hoping to find something that's missing in their lives. Having left behind the restrictive society of modern India, they hope to share in the free and easy customs that they think these 'primitive people' follow. Once inside the forest, they do meet some tribal people but most of the time they interact with another urban family, especially two young women. The film has been seen variously as a 'buddy-movie', a 'road trip movie' and a political comment on India's relationship with its tribal populations. In fact, it is all three, but at the same time also something more subtle. While there is no key event or crisis, Ray subtly reveals the quieter dramas inside each man.

CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

This film works on two main levels: the psychological and the political. While not as popular as some of Ray's other films, *Days and Nights in the Forest* remains a favourite among those who see themselves in the characters of Aparna and Ashim. These characters may be somewhat stereotypical—successful superficial man, mysterious beautiful woman—but Ray manages to make them believable and sympathetic. On the political level, while the film-maker did not set out to make a statement about the neo-colonial attitude of most Indians toward their forest-dwelling countrymen and women, that issue has become ever more pressing in the years since the film was made. The forests themselves are disappearing beneath the developer's digging equipment, and the animals are dying from poaching or from straying into villages. These changes are all the more distressing because India has had a deep historical and cultural relationship with its forests, which even in ancient times represent a primordial space of purity. Kings do not rule the forests in India, sages do.

STORY

Arrival Four young men travel by car from Calcutta to a forested area in the state of Bihar. Through their dialogue we have a glimpse of their individual personalities and their relations with each other. As a group, they have read a little about the Santhal tribe in the area and believe them to be 'free' and 'unfettered' by traditional Hindu social customs. They think the women are beautiful and open. These bachelors plan to 'break' some rules—they have decided not to shave—and have some fun. When they reach the forest, they arrogantly assume that they can simply rent the government-owned bungalow without having made a reservation or secured a permit. Told that that is not possible, they bribe the caretaker, walk to the nearby Santhal village and start drinking at a local bar. Inside, they have their first interaction with local society when Duli, an attractive tribal girl, asks them for money for another drink. Hari tries to get close to her and they all drink a lot.

Familiar sights Although the quartet came to the forest to escape the city and 'interact' with tribal girls, the story takes a turn when they meet two young women who are clearly not local. Aparna and Jaya, who are staying in the forest with Aparna's father, are as urban and sophisticated as the men. They are not only beautiful but also educated and independent-minded, with the father chaperone figure nowhere to be seen.

The next day, the straggly beards are carefully shaved off and the men spend time with the two women. Sanjoy is attracted to Jaya, while Ashim, the leader of the pack, seeks out Aparna, who is the more attractive. The other two men, Hari and Shekhar, are left to seek out Duli, the tribal girl. These two sets of pairs among the men seem natural as Sanjoy and Ashim are the sophisticated ones, while Hari and Shekhar are less so.

Encounters With the stage now set, the characters enact a series of encounters. The most revealing occurs when the four men are bathing outside—revelling in the open air of the

countryside—when the two women drive by to drop off Hari's wallet, which he had mislaid in their bungalow. Although the women are unfazed by seeing their male friends half naked, the men are deeply embarrassed. They have been unmasked as fleshy animals, and their attempt to present an image of sophisticated urbanites appears humorous. There is special chagrin for Hari since he had abused the women's maid for stealing his wallet.

More humiliation follows when Aparna, who is driving her car, sees them staggering along on the road, completely drunk. Things get worse when a government forest official orders them to vacate the bungalow, for which they have no proper permit or reservation. Even when Ashim tries his most intimidating 'we-are-important-people' approach, the officer refuses to budge. Until, that is, Aparna glides up in her car, takes off her sunglasses and turns her winning smile upon the officer. She has saved them.

The Picnic Next comes a picnic arranged by the two women and the four men. The six of them sit around in a circle and play a game of memory, in which each person must recite a list of famous people who have been named by the others and then add a new one. Again, this is a simple scene, yet the names each character chooses and the way each responds to the others reveal a great deal about their backgrounds and ambitions. For example, Sanjoy, who has leftist politics, names Karl Marx, while Aparna comes up with Cleopatra and Bobby Kennedy. Ray's technique of shooting the scene, cutting between faces, is also effective. One by one, the characters fail to remember the list correctly and drop out. In the end, the natural couple of Aparna and Ashim are left to compete against each other. Sensing Ashim's weak ego, Aparna deliberately makes an error that hands him the victory.

The fair The final section of the film throws the four men back into contact with the 'forest' when they visit a tribal fair. During this long (26-minute) segment, with tribal drums pounding in the background, each of the bachelors has a vignette that cleverly defines him. Shekar borrows money in order to gamble. Hari takes Duli into the trees and makes love to her, but is then beaten and robbed by a tribal man. Jaya daringly invites Sanjoy to the bungalow, where they would be alone. Once there, she changes her bland widow clothing for a more glamorous sari. Sanjoy, the cautious one, is about to make love but stops. Finally, Ashim and Aparna engage in a deep conversation, in which she reveals secrets about her past. She also takes him to the caretaker's house, where his wife is dangerously ill. Ashim asks if she is in love with anyone and she answers, 'Not until now.' Aparna gives Ashim her address and invites him to visit her in Calcutta. The film ends, as it began, with the four companions climbing into a car for a road journey.

THEMES

Image and reality Although Ray himself said that there is no dominant theme in this film ('It's about so many things...people want just one theme, but there isn't just one.'), a good candidate would be the contrast between appearances and realities. The story begins with the four men chatting about their images of the tribal forest they are about to visit, images that reflect themselves rather than any cultural reality of the Santhal people. They think the tribal women will be freer with sex, but it is the four men (or at least one of them) who are obsessed with sex. It turns out that money is more important to the Santhals, the same money that most of the men are deeply concerned with. The men decided not to shave and to project a new image of themselves, but immediately after meeting the attractive women from the city, they switch back to another image of the clean-shaven, rule-bound men. Who are they in reality? Another layer of appearance is stripped away when the men take off their clothes to bathe and are seen by the women. These physical unmaskings are only the prelude to the revelation of deeper, psychological realities in each of the characters, the women as well as the men. By the time the film ends, we have seen the inner turmoil of each of the six characters. Even the Hindu ideal of the 'spiritual forest' (home of the holy men and to which every man is supposed to retire) turns out to be a sham. The tribal society, while different, is no more pure or virtuous than the grubby city life they had hoped to leave behind.

Ego and empathy A second theme that runs beneath most of the separate strands of the story is the contrast between ego (mostly male) and empathy (mostly female). This dynamic is dramatised most vividly in the central relationship between Ashim and Aparna, who are the leading male and female characters, played by famous stars of Indian cinema. Ashim has a very robust ego, believing that his suave manners and elevated position in business can overcome any petty barriers to social

success. He bribes officials and expects to win at games but has little understanding of himself. Aparna, who appears to be clever but withdrawn, eventually shows deep empathy not only for Ashim, whom she has fallen in love with, but also for the tribal caretaker and his wife. In their final, dramatic scene Aparna gently leads Ashim to an understanding of his excessive pride and, at the same time, draws him in by revealing tragedies in her life. This combination of the distant but morally superior woman and the affable but flawed man is commonplace in Ray's films, but nowhere does it occupy such a prominent place as in this story, which is essentially a love story with deceptive self-images.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Ashim	Ashim is the most successful and confident of the four friends.
Sanjoy	Sanjoy is as privileged as Ashim but is more cautious and thoughtful.
Hari	Hari is an athlete, a cricketer, and (stereotypically) more physical and less cerebral than the others.
Shekhar	Shekhar is the odd man out, a short person who plays the clown to be accepted.
Aparna	Aparna is a young woman staying with her father in a rented bungalow in the forest.
Jaya	Jaya is Aparna's widowed sister-in-law.
Duli	Duli is a Santhal tribal girl who befriends the group

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Ashim

Character Ashim is the male lead, appropriately played by a screen star. He is smooth-faced and smooth talking, accomplished, successful and confident. It is significant that he drives the others in his car. He is also handsome. He knows the rules of the social and business game and he is a successful player. With such a powerful exterior, it is the revelation of his interior that is the focus of the film. He is the one who suffers most from the string of humiliations that occur for the men.

Illustrative moments

Arrogant Ashim's sense of entitlement sometimes spills over into overt arrogance. The best illustration of this trait occurs when the group of men arrive at the government bungalow in the forest and ask for the caretaker. This bony, poor man appears before them and explains that he cannot open the bungalow unless they have a permit. Ashim then tells him that they are all VIPs. 'Do you know what that means?' he demands. The poor caretaker does not, so Ashim opens his wallet and hands him a wad of cash. Even then the subordinate does not want to accept the bribe and stands motionless. Ashim reassures him, saying that he will personally speak to his superior officer. When the man finally takes the money, Ashim murmurs, 'Thank god for corruption.'

Rule-bound A central element of Ashim's personality is his idea of rules—social rules, economic rules and personal rules. And it is precisely those restrictions that he seeks to transcend when he drives the group into the forest. We understand this from the beginning of the film, but it is most clearly illustrated in the final section when he has a long conversation with Aparna. They are walking together along a sandy path, away from the tribal fair, and begin to confide in each other. Ashim tries to make Aparna understand him, and she says that she finds him 'childish.' When he asks why, she replies, 'You like breaking rules, don't you?' 'Yes,' he says, 'but you don't have a job. How can you understand the pressure of rules?' 'You'll have to follow the same rules when you go back,' she points out. 'Of course, how else will I get any money?' This is the central trap of Ashim's success. He is successful, but he is not free.

Aparna

Character Aparna is an enigma. Young, beautiful, educated, modern, she is also withdrawn. She is poised and sophisticated and able to socialise with young men, but she does not appear to enjoy their company. Her banter and laughter seem to protect her rather than draw others in. We also see that she has great empathy and understanding. She sees right through Ashim's mask, and she is concerned about the ailing wife of the poor caretaker. In the end, after painful revelations of her past, she becomes the moral centre of the story.

Illustrative moments

Private Throughout the film, until the very last scene with Ashim, Aparna remains secretive. She is socially at ease with the men, but chooses to linger in the background. A good illustration of this protectiveness is shown when the four men visit her father's bungalow in the forest. She sits in a corner reading a book, while her father, her sister-in-law and little nephew entertain the guests. Although she is not rude, she holds herself back. Only when her father suggests that she show Ashim the building in the back, which she uses for meditation and reading, do we glimpse something of her true nature. The little room is crammed full of books, from popular novels to serious science. That room is a perfect spatial representation of her private self, confined but curious. She smiles but gives away nothing of her inner feelings.

Scarred A second illustrative moment provides an explanation for her protectiveness: she has been scarred. It occurs at the very end when she and Ashim are walking away from the tribal fair. They are clearly attracted to each other, and Ashim admits that he 'likes' her very much but is unable to 'understand' her. With this opening, she begins to tell him the story of her life. Only three years earlier, her brother committed suicide. Before that, when she was 12 years old, her mother was burned to death in their house, right in front of her eyes. 'You've never had such a big shock in your life, I suppose,' she says. These two family tragedies have closed her down emotionally. In speaking about them to Ashim, however, she seems to have formed a special bond with him.



(The four bachelors meet Aparna)



(Duli and Hari)



(Caught bathing, one of the men ducks for cover)



(Playing the memory game at the picnic)

e



(Jaya tries to seduce Sanjoy)