



Jana Aranya (The Middle Man) is the concluding part of Satyajit Ray's Calcutta Trilogy. Below is Kino Ken's review of that Saitronics SHP DHA dvd film.

19 of a possible 20 points = a major film classic

India 1975 black-and-white 132 minutes subtitled live action feature drama
 Producer: Subir Guha Indus Films a Saitronics 2006 dvd-r release

Key: *indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance

Points:

- 2 Direction: Satyajit Ray*
- 2 Editing: Dulal Dutta
- 2 Cinematography: Soumendu Roy
- Still Photography: Nemaï Ghosh and Sandip Ray (Satyajit's son)
- 2 Lighting
- 2 Screenplay: Satyajit Ray* based on the novel of the same title by
 Mani Shankar Mukherjee
- Musical Direction: Satyajit Ray
- 1 Music: Satyajit Ray
- Playback Singer: Sharmila Roy
- 2 Art Direction: Ashoke Bose

Makeup: Ananta Das

2 Sound

Sound Recording: J. D. Irani, Sujit Ghosh, and Anil Talukdar

2 Acting

2 Creativity

19 total points

Cast: Pradip Mukherjee* (Somnath), Satya Banerjee* (Somnath's father), Arati Bhattacharya (Mrs. Ganguli), Gautam Chakravarty (Sukumar, Somnath's college friend and fellow job-seeker), Lily Chakravarty* (Kamala, Bhombol's wife), Bimal Chatterjee (Harish Adok, crooked accountant), Kalyan Chatterjee (a friend of Somnath's), Bimal Deb* (Jagabandhu, a Member of Parliament), Alokendu Dey (Fakirchand, an office bearer), Dipankar Dey* (Bhombol, Somnath's elder brother), Utpal Dutta* (Bishuda, "self-made" businessman), Santosh Dutta (Hiralal), Rabi Ghosh* (Natabar Mittir, a Public Relations Officer), Soven Lahiri* (Goenka, textile factory purchasing officer), Padmadevi (Mrs. Biswas), Aparna Sen* (Somnath's ex-girlfriend), Kalyan Sen (Mr. Bakshi), Sudesna Das (Kauna / Juthika, Sukumar's sister), Ajeya Mukherjee (a pimp), others

Satyajit Ray's black-and-white drama begins in an examination room where dozens of young sweating college seniors are gathered to write their final graduation essay in history. They are being monitored, in form only, by two proctors, both helpless to stop rampant cheating and conversation occurring under their negligent eyes and ears. One of these students is a youth named Somnath, younger son of a middle class Calcutta family. His best academic subject is history. He expects test results will win him not only a pass grade but honors as well.

That doesn't happen. Because an overworked evaluator with fatigued eyes, confronted by Somnath's squeezed handwriting, takes a shortcut and peremptorily issues a low point total for his paper after a summary scan of it.

Somnath is disappointed at public announcement of his exam result. His arduous study has merely obtained him a pass with no honors.

Adding to the young man's frustration, he's informed by older brother Bhombol appeal for rescoring is pointless. Angry undergraduates have locked the vice-chancellor reviewer in his office.

To add insult to injury, Somnath's girlfriend chooses that evening to communicate an intent to drop him and marry a wealthier rival approved by her parents.

Crushed by circumstances completely beyond his control, the aspiring youth finds himself one of a hundred thousand applicants contending to land a professional job in Calcutta. Vacancies are few. A simple pass certificate doesn't carry any weight with prospective employers.

Months pass, leaving the increasingly discouraged college graduate unemployed, irked, and with no attractive prospect of breaking free from home support. Though his sister-in-law offers cash against future salary, he rejects that exchange, unwilling to become indefinitely indebted to her.

One day he encounters a former fellow student and equally unemployed friend named Sukumar. The luckless pair entertain themselves by commenting on passers-by and a football game in progress nearby. They are obviously resigned to wasting time, having obtained no success in employment interviews where hiring officials bombard them with trivia questions unrelated to job aptitude.

Eventually, after eight or so months of such total failure, Somnath slips on a discarded banana peel and falls more or less at the feet of Bisuda, an acquaintance who's prospered in contract sales. This older, more successful individual counsels setting up as an independent subcontractor, buying cheap and selling dear. Office space is no problem: there's a free empty desk available in the cramped set of rooms Bisuda rents on the fourth floor of a tenement building. He urges Somnath to establish himself as three competing companies, each with its own name, pricing figures, and separate set of account books.

For underbidding yourself is quite painless, costs nothing, and fools outsiders lacking time and resources to investigate startups. At least, that is Bisuda's belief. Anyone who willingly pounds pavements daily, wheedles connections into making referrals, and fills out complete paperwork for three dummy firms should be able to make more than adequate profits.

Of course, Somnath must rent office space from him after six months. Any outgoing phone calls from the shared instrument in Bisuda's semi-partitioned

cluster of rooms must be paid for on a timely regular basis. Taxing authorities insist on collecting their share of earned income, too.

Though the novice's engagement in commerce seems shameful to his father, neither Somnath nor Bhombol find anything vile or perturbing in it. They insist Calcutta has changed since their parent's salad days. Its gainfully employed population operates by means of laxer principles than those of a preceding generation. Besides, deceit and treachery have always been approved by Indian cultural norms. Bhombol recalls to his dad unethical heroes and villains alike in traditional tales such as the *Ramayana*.

For a while, morally dubious transactions seem to pay off for Somnath. No client questions his ability to provide sought material. Wholesalers accept his relatively small orders. Soon bus transportation replaces foot travel for the affable, hard-working entrepreneur.

Buoyed by success, he's now able to bring Sukomar a proper hosting gift when he finds time to visit his home. At this point, the latter is practicing driving skills in order to qualify for a cabbie position local politician Jagabandhu's keeping open for him.

However, both trainee and younger brother are ill with fever. They cannot afford a doctor's visit.

Sukomar shares news his sister Kauna is comfortably established in acting assignments and able to pay her own way. Unfortunately, their father's an accident-prone laborer whose income rises and falls according to whether or not he's fully mobile. On top of that, the patriarch is still paying off debts stemming from a daughter's wedding.

Embarrassed by the older man's sudden appearance and unfriendly attitude towards Somnath, Sukomar hastily exits with the visitor. Only to find neighborhood adolescents grouped a short distance away, apparently in order to observe Kauna's somewhat exhibitionistic primping.

After verbally shaming oglers, her brother berates the object of their attention for shamelessness, prefiguring neatly the film's climax.

Later on Somnath learns about a potentially lucrative optical whitener order. His attempts to snag it result in a lengthy amiable chat with the procurement official for a textile factory. Yet nothing happens for days afterward. Worry sets in. Lab tests get run on his samples and still no confirmation of a sale is forthcoming. What if Goenka refuses to sign for the proposed purchase?

Attempting to seal the deal, or at least put greater pressure on his client, Somnath makes an appointment with Mr. Mitter for a consultation. That dapper gentleman had previously been recommended to him by office mates as a formidable blockade-buster. But he charges a fee for service and time rendered. Moreover, his business tactics are utterly amoral. He bombards the amateur deal maker with questions.

Is Somnath willing to adopt his openly disgraceful proposal? Indeed, is what Mitter suggests worth the diminished self-respect which will accompany its pursuit?

Where Syamalendu decided in Ray's preceding drama *Seemabaddha* (*Company Limited*) to manipulate people as tools or pawns, Somnath is tempted to treat clientele as commodities for buying or selling.

Will such marketing of human beings prove an acceptable tradeoff for his success?

You must watch the final scenes to find out.

Frequently described as the most downbeat and despairing of Ray's thirty-two feature films, *The Middleman* uses its narrow focus to portray larger national decadence in an India struggling to maintain itself under Indira Ghandi's "national emergency" edict. Ray bitinglly communicates the fact education had become as much a cul-de-sac as elevator to prosperity. Marketplaces were economic war zones where failure could result in permanent absence from workplace and even life itself. Families were being faced with either breaking the law or watching themselves dissolve under external monetary pressures. Caste insulations and strait-jackets of tradition didn't help matters. Marriages, still being arranged much of the time as mutually acceptable transfers of wealth, resulted in disproportionately greater outlays from the bridal family regardless of its actual net worth.

All these factors combined to send morality plummeting ever lower. That decline Ray found reprehensible. With British overseers no longer in power, blame for spreading squalor and decay had to be placed on the native population itself. Too much empty talk. Too little action. Soul-shattering compromises were made all too often in lieu of honest, mutually beneficial agreements. They steadily corroded whatever temporary improvements in living conditions followed the bloodbath of the 1947 partition into Hindu and

Moslem majority regions. What Ray witnessed in 1970s Calcutta was regression, not progress.

The future appeared anything but rosy, with emigration of professionals, artists, and technicians leaving behind an expanded middle class dwarfed numerically by a terminally rooted proletariat hamstrung by poverty, scarcity of jobs, and disease.

Ray was unable to formulate any solution. Nor have India's successive governments been any more successful.

It's nearly impossible to pick out a handful of superior performances in this film. Every role is played with utmost sincerity and conviction, each actor and actress presenting a unique aspect of personal corruption. Even Somnath's generously supportive sister-in-law, Kamala, prefers to enforce (ineffectually) a code of silence about cheating and bribery raging throughout household and city rather than take active steps to counter them. Somnath's dad resigns himself to futile researches into dilemmas faced by a younger generation. Sukumar retreats into impotent sarcasm and scolding, neither being an effective substitute for constructive cooperation.

The director crafted telling dialogue so superbly in his screenplay that no villain is allowed to surface. Rather, each character slides slowly into a despicable morass from which rescue appears beyond reach. Black-and-white filming admirably reinforces this despondency, creating a gloomy environment where assistance only enables floundering swimmers to be pulled deeper underwater.

No character appears strong enough to refuse that negative sort of help.

Given the plenitude of unsavory characters peopling this drama, encomiums must be extended to cast members for making them nonetheless engagingly human. They are certainly more than hollow representations of society's predestined misfits, dupes, tricksters, and losers.

Santosh Dutta's real estate contractor, Hiralal, is funny and affable. Even when preoccupied tracking down dilapidated residences overdue demolition.

Bimal Chatterjee as figure-juggling bookkeeper Harish Adok appears genuinely committed to giving Somnath advice which, if not legal, is at least prudent.

Playing Somnath's bemused and misled dad, Satya Bannerjee wins audience affection through patience, tolerance, calmness, and total unwillingness to use coercion despite being buffeted by a host of indignities completely undeserved.

Though onscreen for only a short while, Aparna Sen as Somnath's sympathetic bespoken girlfriend supplies conflicting emotions in attempting to console and distance simultaneously. Combining those tasks took true craftsmanship on a lofty level indeed.

Utpal Dutta's smugly manipulative Bishuda is irresistible, steering Somnath into a drainhole while peppering him with pragmatic suggestions about how to create material somethings from actual nonentities. Watching him work is like attending a master class in fabricating deceptions instructed by an eager mentor proudly tossing out yummy tidbits to a voraciously credulous student.

Possibly most fascinating of all is Rabi Ghosh's Natabar Mittir, always willing to insert himself into precarious ratholes so long as that results in some personal cash infusion by the time he scurries out. A kind of White Rabbit dragging half-informed followers into shady environs where things are as apt to go wrong as otherwise, he emerges a figure not totally repulsive. After all, Mittir has a wife and children who are kept apart and unenlightened about his revoltingly sneaky operations.

Lily Chakravarty's Kamala, determined peacekeeper in Somnath's family, also has substantial appeal. Though unable to suppress each outburst of negativity and cynicism there, her loving heart and tongue are quick to salve resultant wounds.

Cinematography by Soumendu Roy shows in grubby detail the filth and disrepair of Calcutta's crowded, pothole-pitted streets, and the jostling throngs that populate them. Rooms are narrow and all too confining, privacy nearly unknown. Outer walls serve mainly as advertisement networks bearing overlapping political graffiti and garishly prominent proprietary names.

Indoor lighting is quite adequate. Outdoor shots are necessarily somewhat grainier, which dovetails splendidly with the prevailing ambience Ray desired.

Editing by Dulal Dutta keeps viewer interest constantly intact. It includes prominent instances of key foreshadowing, reinforcing suggestions posed by the screenplay about inescapable outcomes of activities pursued by Somnath and the double-faced character known variously as Kauna at home and Juthika on the street.

Ashoke Bose's art direction emphasizes the almost claustrophobic clutter marking Calcutta's disorderly riot of competing styles, services, and shops.

As is sadly often the case, Ray's music score begins with considerable vitality and tension only to narrow into a nearly monochromatic trickle towards end scenes.

Sound capture is of a very high order throughout. Noises of a car repeatedly bumping over highway holes are perhaps the finest achievement in that category.

Just as fulfilling and thoughtful as any other Ray masterpiece, *Jana Aranya* is an essential part of the director's oeuvre. Unrelentingly dark and pessimistic, its rewards will evade teen viewers generally favoring more optimistic fare.

Adult viewing at its uncompromising best, *The Middleman* dvd will be a future LVCA dvd donation to the Ligonier Valley Library. Don't miss a chance to see it and decide if you agree with honors listed below.

Jana Aranya won numerous awards, including Best Direction at the New Delhi Film Festival in 1975, the Jury Prize for Best Feature Film at the 1976 Karlovy Vary Film Festival in Czechoslovakia, and Best Film, Best Direction, and Best Screenplay awards from the West Bengal Government in 1975. The following year Pradip Mukherjee received a richly merited Filmfare Award as Best Actor in a Leading Role for his achievement in bringing the character of Somnath to life.

Soul-stabbing dialogue, poignant acting, and omnisciently comprehensive camerawork combine to make *The Middleman* a landmark of social protest cinema.