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FILM INDIA: Part I

Satyajit Ray

June 25 - July 24, 1981

Monday, July 6 at 6:00

Thursday, July 9 at 8:30

THE EXPEDITION (ABHIJAN). India. 1962. Script, music and direction: Satyajit Ray. Production company: Abhijatrik (Calcutta). Production Manager: Anil Choudhury. Based on the novel by: Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay. Photography: Soumendu Roy. Editor: Dulal Dutta. Art Director: Bansi Chandragupta. Make-up: Ananta Das. In Bengali; English subtitles. 150 mins.

With: Soumitra Chatterjee (Narsingh), Waheeda Rehman (Gulabi), Ruma Guha Thakurta (Neeli), Gyanesh Mukherjee (Josef), Charu Ghosh (Sukhan), Robi Ghosh (Rama), Arun Roy (Naskar), Shekhar Chatterjee (Rameshwar), Ajit Banerjee (Bannerji), Reba Devi (Josef's mother), Abani Mukerjee (Lawyer).

"When I called on Satyajit Ray in Calcutta, his piano was littered all over with jottings, in meticulous staff notation, of incidental music for his newest film, ABHIJAN. This is the second film (KANCHENJUNGA being the first) for which Ray has composed his own music. The story is by the Bengali novelist Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay, as was that of JALSAGHAR, but Ray's direction of the film came about through sheer accident.

"As with most things Indian, the launching of a film is a very solemn business, with elaborate religious ritual and at an auspicious hour carefully chosen by the pundits. Ray was asked to crank the camera for the first shot, known as the 'Mahurat' or opening ceremony, of ABHIJAN. He was so struck by the story and script, and also by the locale of the village of Dubrajpur very near Tagore's university Santiniketan, a starkly dramatic stretch of land strewn with enormous boulders--that he spontaneously offered to direct the film, to the delight of producers. To quote Ray: 'It has a strong plot--at the other extreme to KANCHENJUNGA--it has toughs and taxi drivers. It is also perhaps my longest film, and it is fifty per cent action.' Ray has chosen some professional actors from the theater, instead of his usual amateur newcomers, and a young Bombay actress of wistful, haunting beauty, Waheeda Rehman. He feels that ABHIJAN can pass in the rest of India without dubbing, as it speaks visually, although foreigners might find subtitles helpful."

--Amita Malik writing on the making of
ABHIJAN (Sight and Sound, Autumn, 1962)

"ABHIJAN represents a departure in Ray's career which can only be explained in terms of his periodic urge to break out of the confines of what he is best reputed to do, and to try his hand at something unfamiliar. The world of taxi drivers and smugglers and kept women is as far removed from Ray's middle-class experience as anything could be.

"In Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay's novel, this story is garnished with drunken brawls and much racing and rivalry amongst the drivers--all of which Ray translates faithfully to the screen. Charu Prakash Ghosh as the smuggler and Bombay's front-rank star Waheeda Rehman as Gulabi turn in excellent performances. Gulabi's seduction scene in which she sings, dances, cries and tells her life story--all within a few minutes of long takes--is memorable. Robi Ghosh, whom we later see in a number of Ray films, is engagingly real. So are the Christian family and the group of drivers. But Ray's apprehension of the milieu and the motivations is at best incomplete, at worst extremely awkward. For the maker of the trilogy, DEVI and JALSAGHAR, the unsureness of motivation proves to be a great handicap. To avoid the problem, Ray goes for the externals of the action rather than the mental events, and spells out rather than suggests. The result is predictably banal; he is obviously in territory to which his talent is not suited. To compound the problem of his choice, Soumitra Chatterjee's affinity to the urban literati is so marked that to make him put on a long beard, a permanently afflicted expression and a false accent is one of the most uncharacteristic casting decisions Ray ever made. It simply does not ring true, ever. Seen again today, it sticks out like a sore thumb in a row of master-works. The fact that it was followed by MAHANAGAR (1963) and CHARULATA (1964), probably indicates a conscious return to the natural character of Ray's creativity, and an acceptance of its limitations."

—Chidananda Das Gupta in "The Cinema of Satyajit Ray" (Vikas Publishing, 1980)

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