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AJANTRIK (Pathetic Fallacy)

1958/Bengali/B&W/35mm/English translation/117 Mins.

Shorter Version: 90 Mins.

Script and Direction: RITWIK GHATAK/ Producer: Pramod Lahiri/Story: Subodh Ghosh/ Cameraman: Dinen Gupta/ Music: Ustad Ali Akbar Khan/ Sound: Mrinal Ghathakurta. Editor: Ramesh Joshi/Art Director: Robi Chatterjee.

Cast:- KALI BANNERJI, KALAL CHATTERJEE, SITA MUKHARJI, ANIL CHATTERJI, SATINDRA BHATTACHARYA, JINABE MUKHERJEE, KESTO MUKHERJEE.

AJANTRIK is the story of a taxi driver playing his ramshackle taxi around the town of Ranchi on the Bengal-Bihar border. It is based on a 12-page short story by Subodh Ghosh. Bimal's vintage taxi is mocked at by his friends and customers. But to Bimal it is "JAGADDAL" - the "LOVED ONE" - his constant companion, friend and bread-winner for the past fifteen years. He knows too, the secret, that Jagaddal has a soul, a jealous, loving, eating soul. That is why it breaks down when Bimal is attracted to a stranded girl. It feels jealous and slighted. Bimal spends all his savings and works night and day to get his old friend mended again and on the road, taking no notice of people who say that it is finished. At last he gets Jagaddal to go and it seems to him as if he has won a victory over death. But there are signs of inner weakness and he takes the cab to a secluded place to test its engine. At last Jagaddal gives up the ghost. Is it the engine that has burst? Or the old taxi's heart? Bimal is not sure. The remains are taken off for scrap and a big void engulfs Bimal's whole existence. He has lost his friend. But he has learned a lesson too - the lesson of life.

Bimal and his taxi provide the director with a convenient mechanism to hold the various episodes of the film together. We start with a very queer pair of passengers: an uncle and his idiotic, marriageable nephew, who want to reach the venue of the arranged marriage and hire Bimal's taxi for that purpose. We are immediately introduced to certain minor characters, who give the film some of its psychological texture. The little boy who shares Bimal's pride in the taxi, and wants to have a ride in it. The madman of the town, whose image is used to symbolise an excess of obsession - in this case, an obsession with the part of a motorcar itself.

The second episode concerns a young man and his beautiful bride, who want to reach a hill-side dak bungalow in Bimal's taxi. This is a moving sequence. This time the little boy gets aboard. On the way, the lady remarks blithely on the patch of sky she sees through a hole in the roof of the taxi. Bimal is touched to the quick. The lady makes Bimal stop his taxi as she sees a comb-seller by the roadside. The young man gets down, buys a comb for her and says as he gives it to her, "just four annas!" When the couple reach the dak bungalow, while Bimal is away receiving his fare, the little boy gets on to the driver's wheel and drives it round the garden path. This amuses the innocent, love-happy lady so much that she bursts into gay, childlike laughter. Bimal rushes out and stops the taxi - a few inches from the lady who was squatting on the gravel in her fit of laughter. The camera shows us the ever so slightly bewildered expression on her face.

The story of the lady is taken up at a decisive stage. She is spurned by the young man, who runs out on her. Bimal discovers her sitting forlorn on a big, black rock. He reaches her to the station, he runs frantically to give her the ticket he has brought for her. The train steams out, taking her out of his life, a mysterious but deep experience, crystallised by the unconscious souvenir/form of the comb, which is (in the unwittingly left by the lady in Bimal's taxi, along with her other nondescript belongings, in a moment of distraction.

AJANTRIK (Contd...

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Apart from a view of these diverse types of passengers which in its turn brings out characteristic reactions on Bimal's part, there are minor incidents whose strands are gathered up in the story. There is, for instance, Bimal's visit to a temple, which he does not dare enter, due to an inferiority complex which is touchingly suggested. To crown this, there is the humiliation he suffers quietly at the hands of urchins who pelt his dear old taxi with mud-balls. There are the continuous tiffs he has with the sikh driver, who has a more up-to-date taxi. There is a very substantial and typical cameo in which Bimal tries to have himself and his taxi immortalised by the street photographer. Some more minor characters are intermittently etched in; the fat woman who fries rotis on the roadside - a callous old bird, scornful of Bimal's taxi; the sympathetic motor mechanic, father of the boy. Through this frame emerges every idiosyncrasy of Bimal's obsession with the taxi which has replaced, incidentally, his dead mother in his heart.