

Document Citation

Title	Jana-aranya
Author(s)	Geoff Brown
Source	<i>Publisher name not available</i>
Date	
Type	program note
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Jana-Aranya (The middleman), Ray, Satyajit, 1975

Jana-Aranya (The Middleman)

India, 1975

Director: Satyajit Ray

Cert—AA. dist—Connoisseur. p.c—Indus Films. p—Subir Guha. p manager—Anil Chowdhury, Bhanu Ghosh. sc—Satyajit Ray. Based on the novel by Shankar. ph—Soumendu Roy. ed—Dulal Dutt. a.d—Ashoke Bose. m—Satyajit Ray. sd. rec—J. D. Irani, Anil Talakdar. sd. re-rec—Mangesh Desai. assistants—Ramesh Sen, Santi K. Chatterji, Sahasini Mulay, Purnendu Bose, Anil Ghosh, Kanai Das, Siddhinath Nag, Nitai Jana, Kashinath Bose, Samir Ganguly, Surath Das, Bolai Addy, Troilokya Das. l.p—Pradip Mukherji (Somnath Bannerji), Satya Bannerji (Somnath's Father), Dipankar Dey (Bhombol), Lily Chakravarti (Kamala), Aparna Sen (Somnath's Girlfriend), Goutam Chakravarti (Sukumar, Somnath's Friend), Sudeshna Das (Kauna, "Juthika"), Utpal Dutt (Bishuda, a Broker), Bimal Chatterji (Adok, a Book-Keeper), Soven Lahiri (Goenka, Chief Officer, Kejriwall Mills), Robi Ghosh (Mitter), Arati Bhattacharja (Mrs. Ganguly, a Call-girl), Padma Devi, Santosh Dutt, Kalyan Sen, Ajeya

Mukerji, Umanath Bhattacharji, Bimal Deb, Alokendu Dey. 11,790 ft. 131 mins. *Subtitles.*

The news that Somnath Bannerji has only been awarded a pass in the university examinations causes consternation in his impoverished Brahmin family, and he is forced to begin the dreary business of applying for jobs, though every post advertised in Calcutta has thousands of applicants. Neither his high-minded father nor his cynical brother Bhombol offer any encouragement, though Bhombol's wife Kamala treats his plight with sympathy. An old friend, Bishuda, suggests that Somnath might set up in business as a middleman like himself, supplying buyers with goods for a profitable commission. His father is dismayed at the prospect, but Somnath accepts and is quickly educated in the many tricks and frauds necessary to succeed. One lesson is learned the hard way: Somnath mentions to a client the name of the paper manufacturer from whom he was buying material, thus enabling the client to arrange for deliveries himself. Soon Somnath has prepared an important transaction—supplying chemicals to a textile mill. Concerned when the mill's chief officer, Goenka, delays in confirming the deal, Somnath asks Mitter, a public relations expert, for advice. Mitter learns that Goenka is already being supplied with chemicals; however, Somnath's deal could still be clinched if he could supply Goenka (married to a polio cripple) with female entertainment for an evening. Dismayed by the proposal, Somnath nevertheless goes ahead, accompanied by Mitter. The meeting proves difficult to set up, for the call-girls Mitter suggests are either unacceptable or unavailable. The caretaker of a commercial school (which also serves as headquarters for a prostitution racket) suggests a new and very attractive girl, "Juthika". To his horror, Somnath discovers that she is Kauna, sister of his best friend Sukumar; against his wishes, she insists on going through with the arrangement. Somnath returns home dazed, telling his anxious father that his important business deal has been successfully completed.

This is Ray in *Company Limited* territory. Once again the setting is a Calcutta visibly breaking up under stress: instead of terrorist bomb attacks, the main menace is a general decline in public services ("We have three kinds of roads", the hero is informed, "bad, very bad, very very bad"). Once again the main character is involved in business and falls into dishonest practices: whereas earlier the dishonesty arose through wriggling out of a business deal, here Somnath loses his self-respect endeavouring to pull one through—finding to his intense displeasure that the job of supplying "anything from pins to elephants" (Bishuda's description) encompasses supplying prostitutes. Yet *The Middleman* is no exact sequel, for Ray's portrait of the sad inter-relationship between amorality and success is painted in far greater detail and in darker colours. There is more explicit emphasis on the break-up of India's past traditions, represented by Somnath's father, who becomes so alienated by the progress of his son's career that he retreats into silence. Bhombol, his other son, ingenuously explains that bribery and corruption must have a hallowed part in Indian history, for a word meaning bribery exists in Sanskrit. Religion is specifically degraded: Mitter tells how he went bathing in the Ganges to butter up a client—an event only newsworthy because it proved that his expensive waterproof watch wasn't waterproof. Pradip Mukherji's face acutely reflects the stages in Somnath's dubious progress, moving through wild bafflement during his initial disappointments to puppy-dog eagerness as he enters the business life, grasping the ways of fiddling income-tax or tempting clients with a phoney set of uncompetitive estimates from phoney firms. When this life sours, his face freezes into distasteful acquiescence, caught in eloquent close-up (the black-and-white photography makes such moments doubly powerful, providing stark contrasts of light and shadow). Unlike many other directors (Altman, for instance), Ray can depict sour and cynical characters or events without being sour himself: from the opening scenes the film bristles with the warm, involving comedy of everyday oddities and indignities, conveying Ray's moral and message with far more effectiveness than any strident tub-thumping. The examination marker who causes Somnath's troubles suffers from dangerously bad eyesight and pestering mosquitoes; at job interviews, Somnath is asked weird and wonderful questions like "What is the weight of the moon?" (pronounced 'moan', to make matters funnier). And his colleagues in 'order supply' form a cherishable gallery of seedy charlatans, impudently oozing respectability. Ray's camera observes the comic disasters and follies with his customary dry detachment: during a drive back to town in Goenka's car, a dashboard compartment repeatedly flaps open every time the vehicle hits a pot-hole—an event deliciously signalled by shots of one of the car's wheels hurtling fatefully along the road. The film runs for a little over two hours, and the narrative drifts and drags its feet slightly; a couple of flashback scenes seem curious intrusions. But nothing can detract from the film's overall success and its penetrating charm.

GEOFF BROWN