

Article

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The Pain-Scarred Journey of *Aranyer Din Ratri*



Aranyer Din Ratri restored by The Film Foundation's World Cinema Project in collaboration with Film Heritage Foundation, The Criterion Collection and Janus Films premiered at Cannes Classics 2025*

Fifty-five years after its first release, Satyajit Ray's *Aranyer Din Ratri* (1970) returned to the screen—this time at the Cannes Film Festival, in the prestigious Classics section. Yet the feeling was not only excitement, but a kind of wonder: how could a film still carry such power after so many years?

On the evening of May 19, 2025 the Cannes red carpet shimmered with elegance as Sharmila Tagore, draped in a green sari, and Simi Garewal, glowing in a white gown,

captivated the audience with their presence. Together, they became the evening's most memorable vision. Among those present was American filmmaker Wes Anderson, a lifelong admirer of Ray. In a gesture of respect, Anderson himself opened the car doors for Sharmila and Simi, inviting them onto the red carpet.

The restoration of *Aranyer Din Ratri* was made possible by the Film Heritage Foundation, Janus Films, the Criterion

Collection, and L'Imagine Ritrovata. Thanks to their work, a new generation of viewers at Cannes could witness the film. And when the screening began, the audience was quietly transported—to the streets of Kolkata of another time, to the silent forests of Palamau, to the inner journeys of four young men and the women they meet.

As the final scene faded, the theatre filled with applause—loud, unbroken, and deeply felt. Standing ovations may be common at Cannes, but here the clapping carried something more: pure emotion and heartfelt respect.



Aranyer Din Ratri is not merely the story of city youths on a holiday. It is a search for identity, for meaning, for a sense of existence itself. Through his sharp, compassionate eye, Ray revealed the cracks beneath human comfort—the doubts, the conflicts, and the fragile truths that lie outside the shell of security.

One of Ray's greatest strengths as a filmmaker was his refusal to follow the ordinary path. He never copied others. His films stood apart, carrying their own distinct voice. That is why, in almost every major international festival across the world, Satyajit Ray's place is secure. And yet, back

in 1970, it was not at all easy for *Aranyer Din Ratri* to make its way into an international festival. The reason was unexpected—bureaucratic obstacles.

The Berlin Film Festival had directly invited the film, but because of these hurdles, Ray's masterpiece could not compete there. Even earlier, as soon as shooting began, debates raged over the choice of subject. In March–April of 1969, under the burning summer sun, Ray worked tirelessly with his team. But at that very moment, many Bengali intellectuals declared that this story was not even worthy of being made into a Ray film. That was the very beginning of the storm surrounding *Aranyer Din Ratri*.

For fifty-five long years, the film has faced an “international struggle.” This year at Cannes, a small victory finally came its way. Among Bengalis, there had always been fierce disagreement: Was the film great or meaningless? Important or utterly without value? No other Ray film has ever caused such extreme and dramatic arguments.

Satyajit Ray's curiosity about *Aranyer Din Ratri* began not from reading the novel itself, but from a short piece of text printed as part of its advertisement. Even before turning a single page, Ray sensed that the story's theme could be reshaped into a completely new kind of film—one with a unique structure.

The novel had no single central character. That gave Ray an exciting opportunity: to give equal importance to eight or ten different people, each tied to the flow of the story. It reminded him of his earlier film *Kanchenjunga*, made almost a decade before, where several characters were balanced with equal weight. Since then, he had never

thought of making another film in that form. Reading the advertisement for *Aranyer Din Ratri*, he immediately realized—the time had come to attempt such a structure again.

But the moment news spread that Ray had decided to adapt *Aranyer Din Ratri*, a storm broke out among Bengali and Indian leftist intellectuals. They complained bitterly: the man who once gave the world timeless films like *Pather Panchali*, *Aparajito*, and *Devi* was now neglecting the serious “content” of his films. Instead, they said, he was more fascinated by structure. To them, this meant he was following a shallow philosophy—*Art for Art’s Sake*—and heading toward what they mocked as “hollow formalism.” Their voices grew louder with sarcasm, analysis, and lament.

This criticism found its sharpest reflection in the *Presidency College Magazine*. At that time, in 1969, this magazine was one of the most trusted platforms for leftist thought. There they wrote: “*Satyajit is now busy making a shameless and obscene film in the forests of Palamau!*”

It is true that the original novel contained descriptions of nudity. But whether or not Ray would actually place such nudity in the film—this the leftist students neither paused to consider nor cared to imagine. Their impatience was understandable: the Naxalite movement was at its height, and every issue was burning with passion and protest.

Another reason for the confusion around *Aranyer Din Ratri* was this: just a few months earlier, Satyajit Ray had made *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne*, a film celebrated worldwide for its anti-war message and deep humanity. And now, so soon after, he was

making a film about four young men running away from their lives, escaping into the forest. To many Bengalis, this felt like betrayal. They believed Ray was revealing his own escapist nature through the story. This thought not only disappointed them but also made them angry.



When the film was finally released, even more dramatic events followed. *Aranyer Din Ratri* remains the only Ray film that had to be released “twice.”

The first release was scheduled for December 12, 1969. But on that very day, in North Kolkata, just before the evening show, protests erupted outside the cinema hall. The demonstration was led by the Bangla Film Preservation Committee, under the banner of the “Shilpi Sansad” (Artists’ Association), whose president was none other than Uttam Kumar, Bengal’s matinee idol. Their complaint was simple: once a film has received a censor certificate, that film should be released in the proper order. According to them, *Aranyer Din Ratri* was being allowed to “jump the line” ahead of many other films waiting for release. This, they said, was unacceptable.

On the surface, this demand sounded logical. But a deeper look showed how unrealistic it really was. Just because a film has a censor certificate does not guarantee it

will be released. That has never been the rule in India—or anywhere in the world.

If Bengali films were forced to release strictly in the order they received censor certificates, then the entire system would collapse. Every year, at least ten Bengali films that receive censor approval are later considered unfit for release by distributors or theatre owners. If those unreleased films blocked the queue, then no other films would ever reach the audience.



This was the hidden flaw in the Artists' Association's proposal. But at that heated moment, no one noticed it—or perhaps no one cared to notice it. Excitement and outrage had clouded all reason.

In North Kolkata, the protests against *Aranyer Din Ratri* grew so fierce that not a single person could enter the evening show. The situation escalated when a few reels of the film were dragged out of the projection room and set on fire right in the middle of the street. To energize the picketers further, Ajit Pandey climbed onto a table placed on the open road and sang protest songs. This extraordinary and almost unbelievable event had the direct backing of the Artists' Association (*Shilpi Sansad*). In fact, the movement was planned by its members. Among the leaders were actors Anil

Chatterjee, Jahor Roy, and cinematographer Ramananda Sengupta. Every important decision of the Association was taken under the leadership of none other than Uttam Kumar himself.

If we look carefully, one thing becomes clear: after this incident, none of those three artists—Anil Chatterjee, Jahor Roy, or Ramananda Sengupta—ever worked in a Ray film again. Before the protests, however, all three had played significant roles in his cinema. In this way, the movement not only harmed their chances of reaching an international audience but also narrowed Ray's own field of choice when it came to casting actors.

But how did Satyajit Ray himself feel, seeing educated and left-leaning people of his own city rise up against him? He did not collapse under the weight of it. One reason was that, at the very same time, his reputation as a writer was soaring. Just a few days earlier, his detective story *Badshahi Angti*—featuring the beloved sleuth Feluda—had been published as a book. It became an instant success, with new editions coming out almost every week. The advertisements in the literary sections of weekly magazines from that period still show how popular Ray had suddenly become as a writer for young readers.

This success had taken even Ray by surprise. When he received the first royalty check from his publisher for *Badshahi Angti*, he was so astonished that he exclaimed, “Do you mean one can actually earn money by writing?” That remark has now entered Bengal's cultural history as a kind of legend.

And while *Aranyer Din Ratri* was being blocked by picketers, Ray was calmly

busy writing another timeless story—a science fiction adventure called *Professor Shonku and the Box from Baghdad*. Within just two months, the story began appearing serially in *Sandesh*, the children’s magazine he edited. The tale was later translated into several languages and won international acclaim. For a mind that could dream up such imaginative worlds, the turmoil over a film’s release could only ever feel temporary.

At last, *Aranyer Din Ratri* was properly released on January 17, 1970. This time, there were no protests or picketing, even though the Artists’ Association’s amendment was still officially in place.

But now it was the turn of Bengal’s film critics to unleash their harsh words. In a rare moment of unity, both the far-left *Presidency College Magazine* and the right-leaning popular daily newspapers joined voices against Ray’s film. An experienced critic like Jyotirmoy Basu Ray even wrote: “After the hard work of making *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne*, this film is simply Satyajit Ray taking rest. And he, too, has the right to rest!”

Despite all this, *Aranyer Din Ratri* did manage to celebrate a Silver Jubilee Week in Kolkata. Yet, under the long shadow of *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne*, it never got the importance it deserved. This became painfully clear in the awards given by the Bengal Film Journalists’ Association (BFJA). Among the notable films released in 1970, *Aranyer Din Ratri* was ranked only in tenth place. For a Satyajit Ray film, such strange neglect—before or after—was never seen again.

As expected, India’s Ministry of Culture once again blocked the film from entering the main competition of the Berlin

Film Festival. Even though the festival organizers repeatedly invited it, *Aranyer Din Ratri* was denied permission to participate. At that time, Teji Bachchan, wife of poet Harivansh Rai Bachchan and mother of actor Amitabh Bachchan, held great influence in the Prime Minister’s Office. Using her influence, she ensured that the film *Reshma Aur Shera*, starring her son Amitabh, was officially sent to Berlin instead. Needless to say, the outcome was far from glorious for India.



At the Berlin Film Festival, *Aranyer Din Ratri* was finally screened—not in competition, but as a special presentation from one of the world’s greatest filmmakers. And yet, most international critics agreed: had the film been allowed into the competition, it would almost certainly have won the Golden Bear, the festival’s highest prize. It could have been another “World Cup” for India. But because of the shortsightedness of India’s central government and the usual politics of favouritism, this honour slipped away.

One might think that such rejection at home would drive Ray toward Hollywood. Indeed, he had several tempting invitations. The best came from David Selznick, Alfred Hitchcock’s producer. Columbia Pictures and the Ford Foundation also invited him. Even Toho Film Productions in Japan, through Madam Kawakita—producer of Akira

Kurosawa—urged him to take up the filming of the *Mahabharata*. Ray had even begun sketching the early plans for such a project in his red notebook. But neither the West nor the Far East could pull him away. With his natural detachment, Ray brushed aside these opportunities and remained in Kolkata.

Despite sharp attacks from the far-left *Presidency College Magazine*, Ray never turned hostile toward leftist politics. Proof of this came in his very next film, *Pratidwandi*. In it, he portrayed the young Naxalite character Tunu with deep compassion and understanding. In fact, in an important interview with *Sight and Sound*, one of the world's leading film journals, Ray admitted that he understood and valued Mao Zedong's ideas on social reform. Such generosity of mind was his true nature.

Meanwhile, in 1973, *Aranyer Din Ratri* was released in the United States. There, some of the most influential Western critics—including Pauline Kael, Tom Milne, and David Robinson—praised it as India's greatest film since the *Apu Trilogy*.

When *Aranyer Din Ratri* reached the wider world, it was welcomed like a long-lost friend. Critics everywhere spoke of it with awe, as if they had discovered something both familiar and brand new.

Pauline Kael, the legendary voice of *The New Yorker*, confessed that Satyajit Ray's films stirred in her a kind of joy she never found elsewhere. "No artist," she said, "has ever made us rethink the familiar world the way Ray does." In her book *Reeling*, she described *Aranyer Din Ratri* as "a remarkable film by a great filmmaker," praising Soumitra Chatterjee's presence and calling Sharmila Tagore "incomparable in her grace."

David Robinson, the respected critic of the *Financial Times*, wrote as if every detail of the film had touched him. "Every word, every gesture," he said, "feels true, feels real." And then he added something unforgettable: when Ray was at his best, as in this film, "his timing, his direction of acting, his editing, his music—everything reached such perfection that it became undeniable."

The world had seen many films before, but here was one that seemed to whisper truths both simple and eternal.

Professor Suranjan Gangopadhyay, in his long and detailed study of *Aranyer Din Ratri*, offered a striking insight. He argued that in the consciousness of India's post-independence generation, a different kind of "nation" had emerged—one built more on illusions than on truth. The educated, upper-middle-class youth of that time had never really learned to recognize the real India. One of them even humiliates and falsely accuses an Adivasi man named Lakha. None among them had the courage to ask how gravely ill the watchman's wife really was.

So, the very film that the radical *Presidency College* magazine in the 1970s dismissed as "escapist" has, through Gangopadhyay's lens, turned into a raw exposure of bitter reality. Half a century later, this change of perspective amazes us. In fact, such a dramatic shift in opinion about a single film has rarely happened anywhere in world cinema.

Unlike most of Ray's films—which usually revolve around one or two central figures—*Aranyer Din Ratri* (like *Kanchenjunga*) has no single hero. Here the story revolves around ten characters. Even the faint shadow of the watchman's ailing wife

affects the bonds between men and women, and the structure of society itself. Perhaps it is the absence of one central character that makes many viewers feel unsettled. But Ray arranged his characters like electrons spinning within an atom: each one different, yet equally important.

It is this vision that makes the film timeless and modern all at once. At Cannes, this quality lifted audiences to a new awareness. In the end, Aparna and Duli remain etched in memory—but so does the shadow-like, frail presence of the watchman's ailing wife. That is where the film's immortality lies.

**Lead Photo Courtesy: Film Heritage Foundation*

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