Movie - **Namak Haram** (Traitor; 1973) – This is one of the masterpieces in Indian cinema. The movie revolves around the class divide within the purview of the troubled relationship between a capitalist-industrialist and his proletariat friend. The plot is somewhat inspired by the English film, Peter Glenville’s “Becket”.

Somnath, the protagonist belongs to a middle class family who lives with his mother and sister Sarala. He has a friend named Vikram Maharaj, who belongs to a wealthy family. The whole movie revolves around these two characters (Somnath and Vikram) and their relationship as friends and as employer and union leader. Vikram’s father, Damodar is the villain in this movie. He is portrayed as a selfish character in this movie. He owns a factory and is a very wealthy person in Delhi. His aim in life is to make as much money as possible even if it is by exploiting the poor and the weak. Over the years he learns the business tricks of keeping the employees divided on many trivial issues so that they don’t focus on essential issues like wages, employee rights and work safety.

In this movie the business world is shown in a very negative light. The story is about how the poor laborers are being exploited by the rich with lower wages, unsafe environment and no worker benefits. This movie deals with ethical issues such as power, exploitation and favoritism. The backdrop of the story is set in a factory mill during 1973 in the north part of India. Though over the years things have changed quite a bit, the fact remains that there are still such human rights violations in different parts of India.

The movie starts with the portrayal of a strong bonding between two close friends. The bond between the two friends is very vividly depicted in the movie and this lays a strong foundation for the rest of the movie. The story takes a fast ride when Damodar (Vikram’s father) gets a mild
heart attack and is advised by the doctor to take a rest from his factory business. He requests his only son to temporarily replace him. Vikram does so and settles into his new role as a boss with ease. Along with this ease comes a certain degree of arrogance.

The twist in the story starts as soon as Vikram takes his father’s place. The head of a worker’s union, Mr. Bipinlal asks Vikram for financial compensation for a worker who accidentally injured his hand in a machine. His plea is met with a fuming response from Vikram who does not understand how the factory is responsible for the carelessness of a worker. There is a strike being called off because of Vikram’s rude response to Bipinlal. **At this point Vikram faces the ethical issue of apologizing to the union leader and conceding to the plea of the union leader or sticking to his own point that employers are not responsible for worker safety.** At the advice of his father, Vikram later issues an apology to the union leader. Vikram is deeply humiliated for apologizing to the union leader. He goes back to Somanth and emotionally regales the whole story. Somnath devises a plan where they both can hope to take a revenge on their new enemy. Somnath decides to work as a laborer in the factory. Initially, his plan is to make the workers believe that he is better than the existing union leader. Soon after that, the union leader will be forced to step out of his position. Which according to the two (Somnath and Vikram) is a great insult to the union leader.

The ethical issue faced by Vikram was dealt in a rather ignorant and arrogant manner, ignorant because Vikram hardly understands the suffering of a poor laborer and what these laborers mean to the factory and arrogant because he doesn’t even want to understand the union leaders plea and feels that the workers are dependent on the factory not the other way round. The issue should rather have been resolved by being receptive to the feelings of the workers. On first place when the union leader had come with the plea for financial compensation he should have
tried to understand the situation. Secondly if he had used some harsh words in a fit of rage he should have apologized with whole heartedness and used this incidence as a learning experience for himself rather than using this incidence for taking revenge.

The second phase of the movie is about Somanth and change in his views. Somanth is very successful in his plan and in a very short span of time he wins the heart of the laborers. In just a matter of months Somanth is elected as the new leader of the union. Vikram is now so elated that he has succeeded in his mission not knowing what awaits him. As a union leader Somnath unknowingly becomes so involved with the worker community. He gets a personal peak into the lives of his co-workers and is emotionally touched by what he sees. He witnesses their poverty, their pain and their struggles. He understands that these workers are being exploited by the factory owner. The wage at which the people work is not even sufficient for the workers to feed their own family. He realizes that the factory owner is making huge profits at the expense of exploiting these poor laborers. He thinks it is his responsibility to speak about this to Vikram. At the same time he is also afraid of jeopardizing the relationship he shares with his friend. **Somnath finds it really difficult to deal with this ethical dilemma on one side he has a loyal friend and on the other side he is witnessing the suffering of his co-workers who have full trust in him.** He finally breaks out of the friendship cage and somehow convinces his friend to raise the wages of the employees. Vikram reluctantly agrees only to find out that his father is totally outraged with this decision.

The way Somnath deals with this ethical dilemma is the perfect way to deal with this kind of issue. The transition phase through which he goes through is just so realistic and any good person will do what Somnath does. In fact, as a leader one should be very receptive to the
feelings of his co-workers. Though he owes so much to his friend he still forces himself out of
the shackles of favoritism. He makes a decision on what is morally right rather than based on
what his friend would think of him.

The third phase of the movie deals with clash between capitalism and socialism. Somnath
becomes more and more involved with the worker community. Vikram cannot see why Somnath
is fighting for the cause of the poor. He is not able to see through the eyes of his friend. Vikram
now feels his friend has betrayed him. But there is no stopping for Somnath, he is all set to
change the conditions of the poor laborers. At this point of the movie Vikram’s father steps in.
He figures out that Somnath is now the new hero among the laborers and he is all set to change
the attitude of the poor laborers. He realizes that if Somnath is not stopped then he will not be
able to make as much profits as before. Vikram’s father is now in an ethical dilemma of
either just leaving things on its own and working for the greater good or using his power to
stop this. He thinks the only way to stop this is by getting rid of Somnath. He decides to kill
Somnath so he hatches a plan and ends up killing Somnath. Vikram enraged with what his father
has done surrenders to the police saying that it was him who was responsible for Somnath’s
death. Vikram feels that this is the best way to punish his father. Ultimately Damoder dies of
heart attack when he hears that his son is being sentenced to 14 years of imprisonment

The way Vikram’s father deals with this ethical issue is so selfish. He is so concerned
about profits that he doesn’t care about killing a person. Instead to resolve this issue he should
have had a face to face discussion with Somnath and created a plan to both help the laborers and
at the same time increase the profits of the company. But Damoder is so blinded with his own
ideals that he thinks the only way of making profit is through exploiting the poor and the weak.
I believe what I learned from this movie is far more valuable to me than what I had learned from so many different lectures or class exercises. I have watched this movie many times. But this time I had to see the movie with a different lens and it was so different. I was able to keenly note every aspect of the movie. Each and every aspect has a social message embedded in it. For a keen observer this movie speaks volumes about the divide between the rich and the poor. The most important thing I learned from the movie is how the rich often fail to see the other side of the world, not knowing that the other side of the world is the vast majority. Though I was not among the rich class but I was among the upper middle class and I have witnessed many aspects of the movie in my own life. In some scenes the movie takes a very close peek at the life of the poor. I have seen this through my own eyes in my day to day life and have been unaffected by it but when I saw the same thing in the movie I was moved. I realized how I have blinded myself from looking deep into the hearts of the poor. This movie opened my eyes. The best part of the movie is the dialogue between Vikram’s Father and the lead actress who is a socialist. Vikram’s Father says that it is God who has given more power and more brains to a select few so that they can use it for their own benefit. The lead actress gives a befitting reply to this she says that God has given the power and brains to a select few only to protect others not to exploit them PERIOD. If each one of us in this world especially the rich think on the same lines then poverty would be history. I could see myself becoming rich very soon but I hope I am different from all those greedy rich people. One thing which keeps motivating me always is the saying of Mahatma Gandhi “Be the change you wish to see in this world”. I hope I am that change.