

# Memories and Vagaries – Ritwik Ghatak

An artiste, even in this age of mindless greed and hurry, captures the public imagination, if only for a moment or two, should he or she answer to type, that is, of being a romantic idealist. Ritwik Ghatak, the Bengali filmmaker and short story writer, was such an individual and an alcoholic to boot like the Urdu poet of romance and revolution, Majaz Lucknawi and Sailoz Mookerjea, the painter whose soul made a daily creative journey across continents—from the French countryside of the Impressionists to the verdant green Bengal of his childhood and youth, and austere, dusty Delhi where he had settled down. Like them Ghatak died young – in his fifty-first year, on 6th February 1976. His send-off was perfunctory, like the ones accorded to Majaz and Sailoz, and it took a long time for a larger public to gauge the worth of the three of them. The reason for this neglect was probably lack of access to their work.

In retrospect Ghatak stands a better chance of being in the public gaze because of the nature of his medium—cinema, which has a far greater reach than either poetry or painting. He had problems finding finance for his films because of his inability to suffer fools, especially in the film world, and this compounded with a talent for insulting hypocrites, including would-be producers when drunk made his own life and that of his family completely miserable.

He forgot that he lived in a country that was simultaneously half-feudal and half-capitalist and was still emerging from the shadow of colonialism. Directness and honesty in private and professional life were qualities lauded in the abstract but viewed with suspicion, even fear, in the real world. In his case it was inevitable that alienation and unemployment would lead to alcoholism, bankruptcy and an early death. His worldly failure was somehow seen as the touchstone of

‘artistic worth’ by a certain section of the Indian elite and they claimed him as their own ten years ago. This is indeed ironic, for they have neither knowledge nor intuition of the Bengali language or the culture that made a genius like him possible.

Like many communists of his time, Ghatak came from the feudal class but from its educated minority that had access to Sanskrit, Bengali, Persian, English, the literature and philosophy of Europe, including the writings of Sigmund Freud and Karl Marx, and the heritage of Hindustani and western classical music. To this formidable intellectual baggage he added in later years of artistic maturity the ideas of C.G. Jung, the explorations in cultural anthropology, including the Great Mother image in Joseph Campbell’s prose derived from Eric Neumann’s *The Great Mother* and the vast repertoire of folklore and folk music of India, and the two Bengals—East and West.

Like many young people of his generation Ghatak joined the Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA) the cultural wing of the Communist Party of India (CPI). This organisation had rendered yeomen service during the Bengal famine of 1943 that had a death toll of five million. IPTA had brought succor to the starving and destitute in the state by bringing them food supplies and, in Bijon Bhattacharya, found a dedicated actor and playwright who wrote the path-breaking Bengali play *Nabanna* or *New Harvest* on the event. Bhattacharya, was to soon marry Ghatak’s niece Mahashweta Devi who is the celebrated writer and activist of today.

IPTA travelled from village to village and to the small towns in Bengal apart from playing in Calcutta and its suburbs and soon had roots all over India. It did contemporary Indian plays and significant Western ones as well. In addition the ‘song squad’ was famous for its musical acumen and rousing repertoire. The organisation’s role in the evolving of positive cultural values in independent India was seminal. To say that modern ideas in India theatre and cinema grew out of the activities of IPTA would not be an exaggeration.

His own growth as an artiste and a socially conscious man can be linked to his apprenticeship in the IPTA as a fledgling playwright, actor and director. He took his first tentative steps in the cinema in Nemaï Ghosh's left-wing neo-realist *Chinna Mool*, in which he played a young comb seller. It was about East Bengali refugees who come to Calcutta after the partition. He could never give up acting and cast himself in Cameo roles in some of the films he was to direct later.

Three events marked him for life: World War-II, the feminine Bengal and the partition of India in 1947. He became a confirmed pessimist during this period when he was man's bestiality towards man as Hindus and Muslims slaughtered each other to supposedly uphold and protect their own religion. He tried bravely to end even his most tragic films on a note of hope; psychologically it did not work. Sorrow was always reinforced.

When he made his first film *Nagarik* in 1952 Calcutta, he was nearing 27. It was produced on half-a-shoe-string budget with actors mostly from IPTA and had for its story the travails of a middle-class refugee family from East Bengal the had banked unwisely on the job prospects of the older son to keep it afloat. Rather a grim beginning for a budding artiste. It was never released in his lifetime and only a dupe negative struck from a damaged print discovered at Bengal Lab, in Tollygunge, Calcutta, a year after his death made a token two-week commercial release possible.

*Nagrik's* lack of outward polish could not suppress its innate qualities, which included a fine sense of camera placement, an ear for music and incidental sound, a passionate involvement with social issues. As a communist film-maker he was committed to speak up for the deprived. Prova Debi, an Exceptional Bengali stage actress was moving as the nurturing mother. Kali Prasanna Das's music, including the song *Priya Praan Kathin Kathore* set to Maithili mystic poet Vidyapati's lyrics was another high point. There was enough in this first work to suggest a major director awaiting the right opportunity. But that was five years away.

His second feature film, *Ajantrik*, came after much struggle. Following the non-release of *Nagrik*, three-and-a-half years were spent in Bombay writing scripts, first for Filmistan Studio whose boss, S. Mukherjee, he tried to wean away from the hackneyed charm of commercial Hindi cinema. He then worked for Bimal Roy Productions and wrote the story and screen play for the memorable ghost-romance, *Madhumati*. His other worthy script was for Hrishikesh Mukerjee's debut film, *Musafir*, that included in its three tales, a version of O. Henry's *The Last Leaf*.

*Ajantrik* too was based on a literary work like his very first venture, *Bedini* (1951), abandoned after a 20-day outdoor schedule when the shot footage got spoilt by a camera defect. Tarashankar Bandopadhyay's tale about gypsies never got to the screen but Subodh Ghosh's memorable short story did. It was about a cranky, poetic cab-driver's attachment to his 1926 model Chevrolet named *Jaggadal* that he drives in the Chota Nagpur tribal belt in Bihar. It was Ghatak's first major artistic success. He had prepared for it by directing a two-reel documentary simply entitled *The Oraons of Chotanagpur* on the tribe of that name for the Aurora Film Corporation, Calcutta, and another short, *Bihar Ke Kuch Darshaniye Sthaan*, for the state government. These exercises helped him develop a grasp of the landscape that became an organic part of *Ajantrik*'s narrative. Perhaps it was for the first time that nature was used with such poetic authority in an Indian film to bring into focus both its concrete and abstract elements. When the jalopy is sold as scrap after its final breakdown following an expensive restoration job to a dealer wearing diamond earrings, the most stone-hearted viewer's heart is wrenched despite the premonition of the inevitable that hovers over the film almost from the beginning. The final moments; have indeed the clarity of a parable as Bimal (Kali Banerjee), the taxi driver, hears and sees a little boy playing with the discarded horn of his beloved car on which he had lavished the attention he would on a dearly loved wife. *Ajantrik*'s charm is elusive, almost metaphysical, although it deals with a very

real situation in human terms. The Communist Party of India welcomed the film with open arms after driving away its director on grounds of being a Trotskyite. The Left felt it depicted the dialectics between man and machine to great effect. Still others saw it as a satire on random imposition of modernity on the countryside in newly independent India. But there were too many disparate elements within the story to ensure a clear-cut, all-embracing interpretation.

What, however, could not be accounted for was the prominence given to the local lunatic, Bula (played unforgettably by Keshto Mukherjee), who is attached to his aluminium plate and is the butt of cruel jokes of the children who hover around him. The only concession to rationality in the conception of his role is when towards the end of the film he is seen jubilantly hugging his new plate and dancing around, saying, "Oh my new thali, my new thali"! This bit prepares us for the idea that will assert itself in the end that the old makes way for the new and, therefore, of the continuity of life. It is, however, difficult to interpret in strictly intellectual terms the backward descent of Jagad Dal down a steep slope, with fields of ripening paddy on either side, during its test run after Bimal has spent all his savings towards repairs. Then, of course, there is that deceptive shot that follows soon after.

It looks pat but is not. Bimal pushes his broken-down car over a high bridge with the help of Adivasi men and women, some of whom are seated in the vehicle. Just as they reach the middle, a steam locomotive comes roaring in on the tracks below. There is also the charming little scene of Bimal all dressed up with his boy assistant to get himself and his car photographed by the local view-camera master who asks him not to smile foolishly lest the picture be spoiled! Bimal attends a night of revelry with Oroan tribals in a nearby forest. It is a fleeting, poetic moment, mysterious and clear at the same time like shots of Jagad Dal sputtering, chugging, fighting its way through rain-lashed landscapes. Ustad Ali Akbar Khan's haunting rendering of raga Bilas Khani Todi on the sarod to

helps create a film that makes the viewer feel he has been on to important things, indeed privy to secrets related to man and nature.

A fairly low negative cost of one lakh thirty five thousand rupees was difficult to recover during its release. Even the money spend on prints and publicity expenses was not recouped. Bengali audiences in 1957 were bewildered by a film in which a recalcitrant old Car was the lead character and its eccentric driver only of foil, although a most effective one. But the viewers in Calcutta, despite *Pather Panchali* and *Aparajito* by Satyajit Ray, were completely unprepared for Ghatak's cinematic poem. More than a quarter of a century went by before recognition came for its path-breaking qualities. *Cahiers du Cinema* compared its director's unique juxtaposition of sound and image, after its Paris screening in 1983, to the explorations of great European experimentalists like Jean Marie Straub, Jacques Tati and Robert Bresson. Sadly, recognition first came abroad. Small sections of so-called discerning viewers in India gradually woke up to its merits. Incidental sound in *Ajantrik* was used in a most interesting manner, adding another 'voice' to that of the old automobile. Pramod Lahiri, its producer, had already made *Paras Pathar*, a touching serio-comedy, with Satyajit Ray and was about to embark on a new film with him when, at Ray's insistence, he decided to do *Bari Theke Paliye*, based on a story by humorist Shibram Chakravarti, in 1959 with Ghatak in the hope of making up his losses on *Ajantrik*. The story of a stern village schoolmaster's pre-teenage son who runs away to the metropolis of Calcutta in search of the EI Dorado that he has read about did not gel. What could have been a sparkling children's film became a dull tract on the heartlessness of city life where only the poor have humanity and the rich are indifferent. The director fell prey to the necessity of having a sabak or moral lesson for the prospective young viewer. What remains after all these years is young Param Bhattarak Lahiri's charming performance and Salil Chaudhury's lilting musical score. Predictably the film failed at the box office. Even Khaled

Choudhary's lovingly designed humorous poster could not attract children in sufficient numbers to see it.

A married man with responsibilities, Ghatak turned desperately to 'saleable material'. For his new venture he chose a well-written popular novel, Koto Ajaana Rey by Shankar. Mihir Law, a successful paint manufacturer, agreed to finance an expensive production-by Bengali standards. Ghatak bought additional insurance by engaging a big star like Chabi Biswas to play Barwell, the English barrister, a crucial figure in the novel. He also had Anil Chatterjee, a fine actor whose star was rising at the box-office, and a supporting cast that included Karuna Banerjee of Pathar Panchali and Aparajito fame and a powerful young left-wing theatre actor named Utpal Dutt. The shooting progressed well and both director and producer were happy with the results. Then, as in many other times, in the artiste's later life, shooting came to a halt over an absurd incident. He had instructed the literal minded Gorkha watchman (durwan) of the studio not to let anyone in as he was shooting a crucial scene in the script. The producer, Mihir Law too was denied admission by the zealous sentry. Startled and insulted, Law returned home and decided to withdraw all financial support after having already sunk a considerable sum of money.

Ghatak kept the home fires burning by scripting Swaralipi for Asit Sen, a successful commercial director and a highly skilled craftsman. Mahendra Kumar Gupt, the producer of this film, teamed up with the scriptwriter with a certain talent for attracting trouble to produce in 1959-60 Meghe Dhaka Tara, a film that turned the tide in the director's life and art. When he made it, he felt he had been forced into a 'commercial transaction'. But it proved a big hit and, to everybody's surprise, a genuine critical success as well. It is the one film on which his reputation rests; the one work that everyone hails as an unqualified masterpiece; the one seminal depiction of the existential dilemma of the Indian lower middle class, where the sacrifice of the one good, meek, dutiful daughter – she dies tragically of TB in the end – ensures the survival of

the rest of the family. Shaktipada Raj Guru's ordinary melodrama, Chena Mukh, became the source of one of the most emotionally rich films ever made anywhere in the world.

Always a bad, nay, non-businessman, he promptly invested the two-and-a-half lakh rupees he had earned from this film in a new one, Komal Gandhar, a marvelous picaresque comedy with serious undertones that obliquely examined the causes behind the failure of the IPTA and, by extension, the CPI. It was a glorious artistic achievement and, ironically, a hopeless tactical error that was to ruin his life. An original screenplay full of pathos, humour and music and daring technique – it was twenty years ahead of its time – there was enough in it to drive an aware filmmaker wild with jealousy and to despair party bosses who thought they had seen the last of him.

To digress to the background of the film and its subject matter: the communist movement in India reached its height in 1948-49 when, in the Telangana district of Andhra Pradesh, an armed struggle by the peasantry led by the CPI against the Indian State took place. The ill-fed, barely-armed revolutionaries were soon overwhelmed and the CPI was banned by the ruling Party, the Indian National Congress. The Left, so to say, was wiped out in a trice, and, after a humiliating compromise in the early 1950s came back to participate in parliamentary politics. There was an elected communist government in Kerala in 1957 and then the breakaway Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) led by Jyoti Basu formed the ministry in West Bengal in 1977. Having eschewed revolutionary politics, the Communists in 1960-61, at the time of Komal Gandhar's making and release, had become, particularly their middle and upper class leadership, adept Coffee House debaters. Their hold on the poor rural peasantry and the exploited urban working class was eroding rapidly. Moreover, their finest cultural workers already been driven away by a myopic party ideologue by the name of Sudhi Pradhan. Most of them, like Ghatak, Balraj Sahni, Salil Chowdhury, Majrooh Sultanpuri, Kaifi Azmi, Shailendra, Vishmitra Adil and K.A.



Abbas, left to earn a living in the cinema while Shambhu Mitra, Bijon Bhattacharya and Utpal Dutt prospered in theatre. Ghatak criticism of the party's cultural policy in his new film was seen as gross misdemeanor by the bosses and worthy of severe punishment. Of that later.

Komal Gandhar was about a committed theatre group that reached out to the people in the countryside, bringing to them genuine works of art. There is the staging of Shakuntala, the Sanskrit classic by Kalidas, in the film which perhaps was included as an extension of Ghatak's own memories of having directed onstage Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream and Rabindranath Tagore's Visarjan for IPTA in the early 1950s. There are resonances and nuances within the story that would have got to the sensibilities of even the most obtuse of Party men. Inclusion of a particular scene from Shakuntala redolent of romance seems a deliberate act of guerilla warfare. Shakuntala helped by her female companions is dressing up in her Guru's jungle ashram to look beautiful for her lover Dushyanta, a king travelling incognito with his entourage. He, getting her with child shall forget her on reaching his kingdom. Nothing of the latter part of his life is shown but the story is too well-known in India and Shakuntala at her toilette on camera, would subliminally help the audience to imagine her fate. Shakuntala is of course India, Dushyanta the CPI and their prospective child the ordinary people of India.

Laughter and tears are good companions in this moving film that makes nonsense of artificial geographic borders and manufactured history. A common heritage of language, music and customs brings people together and the machinations of demented politicians forcibly divide them along with the land where they have their roots. All the wars fought in the last hundred years have been over purely commercial considerations; racism has always been used alongside as an excuse to consolidate business gains. A snatch of an old folksong is heard in the film – Aey Paar Paddaa 0 Paar Paddaa/ Moddi Khaaney Chaur/Tahaar Moddeye Bosheye/Aachen Shibo Saudagor (On

this bank is the river Padma / On the other bank is the Padma too / And an island lies between them / Where lives Lord Shiva / The trader-great).

Another example of the syncretic culture that existed in undivided Bengal is the chorus literally crying out “Dohai Ali!” (Mercy Ali!) in gradually accelerating tempo as the camera simulates the movement of a train hurtling forward towards the end of the railway tracks that are closed to acknowledge the presence of the new country – Pakistan. There is also repeated use of the wedding song from East Bengal – Aam Tolaaye Zhumur Zhaamur / Kaula Tawlaaye Biyaa / Aayee lo Shundorir Zhaamaayee / Mukut Maathaye Diyaa (A stirring of breezes cool in the mango grove / A wedding blessed by the auspicious green plantains all around / Comes now the groom for the beauteous bride / Wearing chivalry’s glorious crown).

This song comes on at key moments in the narrative, most expressively in outdoor shots of Santiniketan’s undulating khoai when Bhrigu (Abaneesh Bandopadhyay) and Ansuiyya (Supriya Choudhury), unknown to themselves, fall in love with each other. The rich soundtrack also has an old bhawaiyya, sung a Capella by Debabrata Biswas towards the films climax as he comes to participate in a morning concert. Two Rabindra Sangeets are also used effectively: Aakash Bhauraa/Shurjo Taara (This endless Expanse of Sky/With Suns and Stars Arrayed) rendered by Debabrtata Biswas and picturised on Anil Chatterjee in broad day light in Kurseong, and Aaj Jyotsna Raatey Shobaaee Gaecheye Boneye (Lovers Roam the Woods/On a Full Moon Night Like This) by Sumitra Sen over images that simulate moonlight convincingly. In addition, old IPTA songs serve an obligato-like function in a film structured as precisely as a musical score.

Komal Gandhar, for all its adolescent preoccupation with the idea of Mother and Motherland and at the same time the authentic poetic connection between the two, is also a loving tribute to the nation-building energies that went into the activities of the IPTA which was, before it was sabotaged from within by the CPI, an organisation of idealists who had a

purity of purpose and dreamt of building a contended egalitarian India.

The release was stymied reportedly by certain CPI bigwigs working in collusion with Congress backed goons. According to Ghatak, it played to a responsive packed house in the first week; then, at the beginning of the second, he began to notice strange happenings in the dark of the theatre. Loud sobbing would be heard from different parts of the hall during funny or romantic scenes and raucous laughter at moments of sorrow, sending conflicting messages to the genuine filmgoer. Attendance rapidly dwindled by mid-week and fell away altogether at the end of it. The film had to be withdrawn, causing an enormous financial loss to the two producers, Mahendra Gupt and Ghatak himself. It was later discovered that a fairly large number of tickets were bought by shady characters, who had been instructed to disturb and misguide the legitimate audience.

This failure engineered by forces inimical to his integrity as an artiste and person, completely shattered him. He could not believe that the very people who not long ago had been his comrades could get together to sink him. His descent into alcoholism had begun. Beer suddenly gave way to hard liquor and relentless drinking occupied him more than cinema, literature, the plastic arts or music. "He was signing in three bars for his drinks, and, not being able to drink alone, was also being the generous host," remembered Barin Saha, iconoclast, filmmaker and social activist in 1977, a year after Ghatak's death. Quite naturally, funds were going to run out sooner than later. People had barely understood Komal Gandhar during its subverted release and that fact too undermined his self-confidence. Then, Abhi Bhattacharya, an old actor friend, appeared out of nowhere to bail him out.

He took Ghatak back with him to Bombay, where he lived and worked, to help him recuperate from the excesses of his emotional life. One evening he came back with a proposal. A friend of his, one Radheyshyam Jhunjhunwala, was willing to finance a feature film in Bengali with Abhi Bhattacharya in

the lead and to be directed by his beleaguered friend. There was, however, one condition – that the volatile director behave himself during the entire period of its making. The story, or its bare skeleton, was provided by the producer himself. It was about a brother and sister who are separated in childhood and meet as adults quite by accident, she as a prostitute making her debut and he as her first customer. When they suddenly recognise each other, she kills herself. A desperate Ghatak agreed and took enough of an advance to complete the shooting.

Subarnarekha (1962) was an act of magic in which the artiste transformed the producer's puerile story into a multi-dimensional meditation on life with the Partition serving as a backdrop. When he saw the rough cut, Jhunjhunwala panicked and ran away. Ghatak did the only advertising short of his life for Imperial Tobacco Company, publicizing the popular brand of Scissors cigarettes, courtesy his old friend, Chidananda Dasgupta, who was chief of public relations there. With the proceeds he got the first print out of the laboratory. It was only after Subarnarekha was sold to Rajshree Pictures, owned by Tarachand Barjatia, to 'balance' their books in a particularly profitable year, that Jhunjhunwala reappeared on the scene.

In the three years between the completion of the film and its release in 1965, Ghatak's life went up and down like a see-saw. He tried unsuccessfully to get backing for a film based on Bibhuti Bhushan Bandopadhyay's novel, Aaranyak. Set in the wilderness, it ran as a moral, possibly ethical counterpoint to the urban world and was worthy of anything written by W.H. Hudson, the greatest interpreter of nature in English Literature. If there was anyone who could grasped Bibhuti Bhushan's novels intensity and transfer it on screen it was Ghatak. Scarcely any other director had responded to nature with such lyrical understanding since Robert Flaherty, the American documentary poet of Irish origin. But the film was not to be. Jagannath Koley, heir to a well known Calcutta biscuit company and Minister for Information and Broadcasting

in the state government, failed to convince the bureaucracy under him to waive the mandatory bank guarantee Ghatak was required to provide.

Then, of course, there was the adaptation from Italian Alexander Blasetti's hit serio-comedy, *Two Steps into the Clouds*, filmed in 1941. *Bagalar Bangadarshan*, in its 1964 Bengali reincarnation is completely transformed to suit the local milieu. It flows elegantly in print and captures with wit and charm abiding values of rural Bengal without appearing to be remotely reactionary. The four reels that were actually shot were lovely to look at but his refusal to oblige an unusually decent producer Raman Lal Maheshwari by not drinking on the sets – as his quick mood changes unsettled the actors, led to its closure. Had it been made, it would have posed real problems for all those people who pigeon-hole him as the tragedian of the partition of India. The story of an absconding village tomboy brought home by a young, married Calcutta medical representative she meets on the way was both touching and hilarious. On their return to her village he is mistaken for her husband. Her fiancé lurks about nearby without being able to do anything. It is discovered in the course of events that he ran away after impregnating her in Calcutta because she was in the habit of beating him up! of course, all ends well in the script of this comedy of Shakespearean resonance.

The release of *Subarnarekha* was a success and it played to packed houses before Rajshree Pictures realised it had bought it as a 'tax shelter', having made huge amounts of money earlier with a Hindi melodrama, *Dosti*. To Ghatak's shock and surprise, his film was promptly withdrawn from Calcutta theatres without any explanation. It was the most demanding film he had ever made, and, in scope and breadth surpassed everything he had done before. The filming, it is reported, was improvised on a day-to-day basis. No, not even a master improviser like the Swiss-French director Jean-Luc Goddard, had ever been through such an ordeal.

It is about rational elements like history, war and its

aftermath, mass displacement and loss of an old habitat and hence roots on the one hand, and irrational entities like destiny and fate that are not supposed to but do affect human beings and their conduct to alter their lives irreversibly on the other. Ishwar Chakravarti, a man of God as his first name seems to suggest, comes after the partition as a refugee from East Bengal to live with his fellow sufferers in Navjeevan Colony, a settlement for the displaced, at the outskirts of Calcutta. With him is his little sister, Sita, and an orphan, Abhiram, whom he has accepted as his little foster brother.

Ishwar meets Rambilas, an old friend and now a prosperous industrialist, accidentally in the street. Hearing of his plight, he offers Ishwar a job managing his factory by the river Subarnarekha in Bihar. Harprasad, the schoolmaster who has nurtured the new home of his fellow unfortunates, accuses Ishwar of being a coward and for thinking only of his own welfare and not that of the others around him. We are plunged into the heart of a morality tale that can only end in tragedy. And a tragedy it is, borrowing its narrative method from the ancient Indian epics and folk tales where there are digressions in the storyline with moral and metaphysical ideas thrown up for the audience's knowledge, but the end effect is overwhelming, cleansing and uplifting. It illustrates the idea, long before the Russian master, Andrei Tarkovsky, thought of it and, used it as the title of his autobiography, that cinema is indeed sculpting in time.

The most illuminating moments occur in Ghatak's cinema like in Luis Bunuel's, a director he particularly admired, not in great bursts of dramatic action but in the gaps between them. Bravura scenes are there only to confirm what we have intuitively gathered to be the essential ingredients of the unfolding story. These are the real moments of revelation. This is true particularly of Subarnarekha, where plainness and exaggeration coexist in a technique born out of necessity; the producer had to be lulled into believing that a lurid melodrama was in the making, which would on its release make a killing at the box-office.

The most talked about revelatory moment in the film is of course when the child, Sita, accidentally runs into the bohurupee (quick change artiste) dressed as Mahakaal, the scourge of time, and is shocked at the sight of him. When he is scolded by the broken- down old accountant of the factory where Ishwar is manager, for scaring a little girl, he says, "I did not try to scare her, sir, she sort of ran into me." The little scene takes on a new dimension when it is learnt that the old man consoling her has been in a precarious emotional state himself ever since his own daughter eloped with her lover. The scene is further enriched when he and Sita walk away from the camera and we hear him ask her name and on hearing it tell her the story of Janak, the king of Mithila, who one day found his daughter, Sita, in the very soil he was tilling. When seen in the context of the whole film, the scene's function seems to be oracular, a prediction, as it were, of Sita and Abhiram's tragic future together as adults. There is a sudden flash of prophetic intuition in a scene from Sita and Abhiram's childhood when they pretend to be aircraft taking off from a long-forgotten, dilapidated Second World War British airstrip near Panagarh in the Bengal countryside. At the climax of their game, through the use of a subjective camera, they appear to personify an aircraft taking flight. Truth in the arts, particularly the cinema, is achieved through such enunciatory acts. There are other instances of poetic insight in a film where the paradox and irony of life become apparent all of a sudden.

On the same desolate airstrip Sita sings a bandish in raga Kalavati, Aaj Ki Anando (Oh, How Joyful is the Day). The raga is also used to create a somber mood, when she sings a different composition at the same sight at dusk, after her elder brother, who is like a father to her, rejects the fact that she and Abhiram are in love and would like to marry. The abandoned airstrip is used for the last time in the final quarter of the film when Ishwar and the ghost from his past, Harprasad, the idealist school teacher and founder of Navjeevan Colony, arrive there after a night of despair, when

he is prevented by his friend's sudden appearance from hanging himself out of grief following Sita's elopement with Abhiram. The final scene, heart-breaking and of surpassing beauty with Ishwar and Binu, the orphaned little son of Sita and Abhiram, walking away towards a craggy landscape with the horizon far in the background, accompanied by choral chanting of the Charai Beiti mantra on the sound track, in search of a new life, sums up the forced political and hence historical displacement of millions, in our own times and earlier, whose only crime was that they had sought a little peace, dignity and happiness in their lives.

While Ishwar and his nephew were able to go out to find a new life at the end of Subarnarekha, Ghatak's own was fast reaching a point of no return. A cherished documentary on Ustad Allauddin Khan of Maihar, the father figure of Hindustani instrumental music in the post-1940 era, had to be abandoned after the shooting because Ghatak had the first of his alcohol-related breakdowns. After waiting for a recovery that did not come quick enough, producer Harisadhan Dasgupta, reluctantly patched together a version for the Films Division of India. It was predictably, not the film Ghatak had conceived.

Sheer economic necessity had forced him to join the Film and Television institute of India, Pune, in 1965 as Vice Principal. His controversial 18 months there proved him to be an outstanding teacher. He did ghost-direct the haunting short, Rendezvous, a diploma film credited to Rajendranath Shukla, photographed ingeniously by Amarjeet Singh at the Karla Caves in Lonavala near Pune. Always a teacher who taught by example, Ghatak once filmed a tree in early morning light in black & white to help his students connect with nature. Needless to say, the result was exquisite. This single shot of three hundred feet or three minutes and twenty seconds in 35mm was preserved in the institute vaults for many years and may still be there to inspire new generations of filmmakers.

He came back to Calcutta, having resigned his job at Pune, to resume a career that was already in the doldrums. He wrote a



short story, Pandit Mashai (now lost), in a non-stop seventeen-hour session, and collapsed immediately afterwards. A screenplay entitled Janmabhoomi was gleaned from it and has survived. It was about a Sanskrit scholar and teacher who seeks refuge after the partition in a traditional crematorium or burning ghat along with his young daughter. Their lives are destroyed in the course of events like that of the millions in Ghatak's generation who could not adapt to the cruelty and indifference of changing times in order to live. They were people who believed in the regenerative powers of love for themselves and for others and were betrayed for their beliefs. He wrote a film script from Manik Bandopadhyay's classic novel, Padda Nadir Majhi and carried a bound copy with him till the end. And even tried to get his old friend, producer Hiten Choudhury, sculptor Sankho Choudhury's elder brother, to produce it in colour. He also wrote the script for the Ashtamsarga of Kalidas's Kumara Sambhava. These were two projects that he wanted to do very badly. But failing health and hospitalisation for psychiatric disorders, including a diagnosis of dual personality by doctors at the Gobra mental asylum, Calcutta, and chronic lack of even basic expense money prevented him from filming them. His wife Surama in the meanwhile, had gone out to teach and keep the wolf away from the door.

In 1968, he began Ranger Golam, an adaptation of a novel by Narayan Sanyal, "with amazing confidence", in the words of Anil Chatterjee, who was playing the lead. He had earlier played a cameo as an irresponsible, thieving young husband in Ajantrik and then stellar roles in Meghe Dhaka Tara as Shankar the classical singer to whom fame and money come in time to pull his family out of the financial mire but too late to save the life of the beloved tubercular elder sister, Nita, and of course, as the rebellious, thinking theatre actor in Komal Gandhar. He recalled years later, "Seeing him work, you wouldn't believe he had been so ill just before he began Ranger Golam." A melancholic story and his refusal to stop drinking at work led to the closure of this production too. He

was unable to understand that people investing money in a production directed by him also had the right to feel emotionally secure in his presence.

He wrote the screen play for Premendra Mitra's heart-wrenching short story Sansar Seemante. He wanted Madhavi Mukherjee and Soumitra Chatterjee in the lead for the new film. Madhavi was moved to tears by the script and declared it was the best thing she had ever come across. But, she said she would only do the film if he did not drink on the sets. He flew into a rage and stormed out of her house, kicking her pet Pomeranian standing in his way! Shakti Samanta, a successful producer-director in the Hindi cinema of Bombay, and an admirer of his work, offered to produce two films of his choice, giving him complete artistic freedom. Again, Ghatak's by now notorious bad temper became a stumbling block. He sent Shakti packing. Another fine opportunity was needlessly lost.

Between 1968 and '70, he made four documentaries on commission. Scientists of Tomorrow and Yeh Kyon were for the Films Division of India, and Amar Lenin and Chau Dance of Purulia for the Government of West Bengal. Of them, only Chau Dance of Purulia had any artistic merit with certain moments of genuine poetry in it. The rest were bread and butter jobs or, better still, 'drink-providing' jobs. The war of liberation in Bangladesh in 1971 made him direct Durbaar Gati Padma, a twenty minute piece of fiction with the improbable pairing of Biswajeet, a chocolate-box hero of Hindi films, and a resurrected retired female film icon, Nargis. To put it mildly, it was a strange film but had some impressive black-and-white shots of his beloved river, Padma.

He had known Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in the distant past and liked to call her his Santiniketan connection. She had as a girl been all too briefly a student there during Rabindranath Tagore's lifetime. He happened to know people close to her, namely P.N. Haksar, an ex-communist and her main advisor. It was through her good offices that he got the National Film Development Corporation of India to finance Jukti Takko Aar Gappo in 1971. The selection committee felt

that he was too much of an alcoholic to actually complete and deliver a film within a given time-frame. Indira Gandhi herself overruled their objections.

Jukti Takko Aar Gappo had enormous promise as a script. It was the story of one Neelkantha Bagchi—the name is deliberately chosen to draw parallels between Lord Shiva's blue throat after having swallowed all the poisons-of-the-world during the churning of the ocean and the character, in the film a played-out alcoholic who was once a respected teacher and intellectual. It is a not-so-veiled self-portrait of the director. His wife and son leave him for being a failed breadwinner and family man. He is about to leave his rented house before the landlord evicts him when he runs into Banga Bala, literally meaning Lass Of Bengal, who is a refugee from Bangladesh and, like him, is in futile search of a shelter. His protégé Nachiketa returns with money after selling a ceiling fan that recently belonged to Neelkantha. Without further ado he takes to the streets with Bangabala and Nachiketa. After many digressions and misadventures the film ends with Neelkantha dying in an exchange of fire between Maoist Naxalites and police forces. It was a lack lustre production which added nothing to his reputation.

While he was making Jukti, Bangladesh was liberated in 1971, and Pran Katha Chitro, a production company, invited him to direct a film for them the following year. He chose Adwaitya Malia Burman's literary saga of an East Bengali fishing community in the early decades of the 20th Century, Titash Ekti Nadir Naam. He shot it in a record 17 days and nearly died in the process. He had to be evacuated from location by helicopter and spent the next 18 months in hospital. The producers released the film, much to his chagrin, without showing him the final cut. Having recovered somewhat, he went over to Dacca to re-edit the film. "I am 75 per cent happy with the film. Work needs to be done on the sound," he declared in March 1975 to this writer after a screening at Sapru House, New Delhi, during the first ever retrospective of his work in his lifetime, organised by Sanjib Chatterjee of

the Bengalee Club, Kali Bari, New Delhi.

Titash Ekti Nadir Naam is a relentless tragedy. There is no let-up through its two-and-a-quarter hour run. It is dynamically photographed and the ensemble acting is throughout spirited. The cinematic rendering of the novel is a curious case of Thomas Hardy meeting with Hegel and Karl Marx in the riverine culture of Bengal just as industrialisation is beginning to make a dent. It succeeds perhaps because of its authentic local flavour and jades in far-off Manhattan, New York, were moved to tears seeing it in a retrospective of his films in 1996.

Ghatak's cinematic rendering gave prominence to the characters who lived on the banks of Titash. So authentic was his detailing that viewers could easily be fooled into believing that they were watching a documentary by a superior sensibility. Then, suddenly, inexplicably ambiguous poetic elements begin to make their presence felt, infusing tragic grandeur into a story of a river drying up and leaving the fishing community on its banks without a source of livelihood or purpose and making them prey to attacks of goondas in the pay of city businessmen who wish to take over the land.

Titash is by no means flawless. But its charge of emotion is genuine and sustained from beginning to end and there is a sense of loss in its depiction seldom approached in post- War cinema. Had it been his last film, it would have been a worthy farewell but that was not to be.

Jukti Takko Aar Gappo was not worthy of his genius although it had four excellent sequences. His own performance as a drunken gadfly was memorable. While picturising Kaeno Cheye Aacho Go Maa (Oh! Why Do You Gaze Expectantly at your Ungrateful Children Mother) with kingly austerity on himself, he vomited blood between shots. The end was near.

When death came, he had for some years borne a resemblance to King Lear. His hair had turned white, his body had shrunk and he looked thirty years older than his actual age. Yet there was something majestic about him. Broken in health but optimistic, he was full of plans. He had always wanted to make

a real children's film and actively engaged in negotiations with the Children's Film Society of India to produce Princess Kalavati, based on a famous Bengali folktale, Buddhu Bhutum. He devised ways of achieving Special effects elegantly and effectively for the film within a modest budget.

He was extremely to make Sheye O Bishnupriya, a contemporary tale of rape and murder juxtaposed with the fate of the real Bishnupriya, the unfortunate third wife of the medieval Vaishnav saint Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu of Nabadwip, West Bengal, was an important project. At another level, the script dealt with man's gradual loss of paurush or manliness and sensitivity and his fear of woman's innate goodness and creativity and his attempts to first reject and then destroy it in the course of history.

A project close to his heart was an untitled comedy about a fishmonger, who is believed to have won a huge lottery. His rise in the esteem of certain greedy business folk who want to grab his prize money is only to be expected. But luck decrees otherwise. It is revealed that he has actually lost by the margin of a single crucial digit blurred by the constant handling of his lottery ticket with grubby hands. He wrote it in tribute to his real hero – Charlie Chaplin.

The best of Ritwik Ghatak continues to be invigorating cinema twenty-seven years after his death: prescient, plastic and rich with possibility. He always claimed that he did not care for storytelling in his films and that for him the story was only a starting point. But in his own way he was a terrific storyteller, who could, like the Indian literary masters before the industrial age and much earlier, digress from the main story in a seemingly arbitrary fashion and always return to enrich it. In this respect he resembled his friend, Ustad Ali Akbar Khan, the supreme improviser in Hindustani music, who at his best can take the listener by complete surprise with his digressions from the main composition in a given raga; by his sly asides, and his startling return to the dominant theme to create new, unforeseen avenues of thought and feeling.

There are long stretches in Ajantrik, Meghe Dhaka Tara, Komal Gandhar, Subarnarekha and Titash Ekti Nadir Naam that create a bond with the viewer, thus making him/her an integral part of the film's creative process. Only the finest of artistes in the performing arts have this quality. Ghatak at his best certainly did.

It is a pity he did not work more and was constantly strapped for cash and that he let the demons in his professional life take over his personal life to the ultimate destruction of both. It is all the more sad that he did not have a strong survival instinct like Bertolt Brecht, although he knew what it entailed. He allowed mean and vicious people to hurt him repeatedly and drive him to irreversible alcoholism; he then hurt those who loved him the most and tried to help him. The Left that had made him an artiste in the first place, had by the end of his life – much earlier, actually – abdicated its responsibility towards the exploited and the spurned and begun to nurse bourgeois aspirations for itself. Only he continued to dream of being a people's artiste, of working towards an Indian film language, though not consciously. He was forced to accept, in penury, a documentary on Indira Gandhi, deluding himself that he would get the better of her by portraying her as Lady Macbeth. He was released from his agony when he turned up late and drunk at Dum Dum airport in Calcutta during a leg of shooting and she took him off the project, inadvertently saving his dignity for posterity.

For a further understanding of the artiste, one must go back to Paras Pathar, a story he wrote as a young man of twenty-three. Chandrakant Sarkar, a humble colliery clerk and connoisseur of Hindustani music is given by a traveling Shaman, a secret formula for bringing the recently dead back to life. He attacks and robs a company official carrying the weekly payroll to fund his own research that entails several trips to the Himalayas to get rare herbs. Chandrakant loses the piece of paper that has the miraculous formula on it by a waterfall and goes mad. Ritwik Ghatak's greatness and his vulnerability are symbolically predicted in this story.