ASHA BHOSLE AT NINETY

Evergreen Asha Bhosle when she was younger

First Published in THE AIDEM (theaidem.com)

Asha Bhosle, the most charismatic female exponent of the Hindi film song (from the late 1940s to the early 1980s) when it became an independent art form, turned Ninety on 8th September, 2023. She has sung thousands of songs in good, bad an indifferent films, principally in Hindi, where her singing has been the leading attraction. This is indeed high compliment as she has always been compared to her elder sister Lata Mangeshkar, who, in her prime years between the late 1940s to, the early 1980s, was the most tuneful or 'Sureela' of all woman singers in Hindi films, or films from any other part of India. Asha, however won out because of her versatility and the ability to conjure up a wide range of feelings and experiences that belonged to this flesh and blood world.

Her singing at first was not so different from that of her elder sister, a style she adopted or was made to adopt by certain music directors in order to sound like her thin-voiced but extremely mellifluous elder sister Lata. Not until O.P. Nayyar (1926–2007) came along, was she able to find her musical self. He reportedly told Asha, "Tum apni awaaz main gao (sing in your own voice)". Nayyar saw to it that she did her riyaz (practise) every morning in her natural voice which was distinctly darker than her sister Lata's and intrinsically sensual. But before O.P. Nayyar came along she had sung two non-film songs that still linger in the memory: "Geet kitni gaa chuki hun is sukhi jag ke liye" and "Ambua ki dari bole….", both composed by the brilliant, mercurial table maestro Nikhil Ghosh.

Strangely enough in 1953, when Lata her elder sister was already famous, Asha was offered three solo songs by a gifted, young composer, Mohammad Zahoor Khan 'Khayyam' for Footpath, a film directed by Zia Sarhadi and Starring two powerful young performers, Dilip Kumar and Meena Kumari. It was said that Lata wanted to sing those three solos but young Khayyam stood

firm backed by his director. ‘Piya aaja re’, ‘Kaise jadoo dala re’ and ‘So jaa mere pyare’ sung by Asha Bhosle are still remembered along with Talat Mahmood’s immortal “Sham-e-gham ki qasam”.

Soon after the brilliant composer Madan Mohan, a Great Lata fan, got Asha to sing a ghazal written by Jalal Malihabadi, “Saba se ye keh do” for the film, Bank Manager. Asha’s rendering had both empathy and romance. As a singer she had arrived. But the contracts for solo songs were not that many. Earlier in Sangdil, 1952, a Dilip Kumar–Madhubala starrer, a composer of genuine originality, Sajjad Hussain, had got Asha to sing a duet with Geeta Dutt, an unusual talent. “Dharti se dur gore badalon ke paar aaja”. It was a haunting duet with Asha showing both vocal range and a timbre that could be called tactile. It was a voice destined to stay in the memory of the listener.

It took Asha a fairly long time to establish her identity as a truly fine soloist, despite earning respectable sums of money. Lata held sway over the film music world as a soloist, with her obviously formidable musicality and by sounding like a ‘virgin’. A musical approach that seemed to fit the image of all the leading ladies who were there to shore up the moral quotient of Hindi films and were thus curtailed emotionally, leaving the male leads to indulge in their peccadillos!

It was Nayyar, whose career was in the ascendant who worked hard to project Asha as a solid, reliable soloist. In Shakti Samanta’s Howrah Bridge (1957) he promoted her as the voice of Madhubala, the reigning Queen of Hindi films and its only comedian. in “Aaye meherban”, Asha’s sensual singing picturised on Madhubala in a Cabaret sequence, made her sparkle. Then was the snappy, melodious solo, “Ye kya ker dala tuney” that made the most recalcitrant of cynics respond to the romance in the words and the music. In the same year Nayyar repeated his success with Asha in Nazir Hussain’s Tumsa Nahi Dekha. Her two duets with Mohammad Rafi were instant

hits, namely, “Aye hain dur se….”, “Dekho kasam se kasam se”. Around that time, Sachin Dev Burman, created a moving solo for Asha in Bimal Roy’s Sujata, “Kali ghata chaye mora jiya ghabrae” mirroring the longings of an Untouchable orphan girl played by Nutan.

S.D. Burman had a falling out with Lata Mangeshkar, but ego forbade him to give in. Kala Bazar produced by Navketan and directed by Vijay Anand, had Asha singing “Sach hue sapne mere”. No female singer had sung with such abandon in Hindi films before, perhaps because the Heroines, with the notable exception of Madhubala, and Geeta Bali, who died well before their time, the only two who got roles to also express the sunny side of their personalities.

S.D. Burman got Asha to sing four solos in Narendra Suri’s, Lajwanti “Kuchh Din pehle…”, “Chanda re chup rehna”, “Gaa mere mun tu gaa” and “Koi aaya dhadkan kehti hai”, are all sung with depth and feeling and picturised on Nargis, an exceptional actress. They continue to be played on the Radio and on YouTube, surprising those young listeners are who responsive to the beauty of Indian melodies that enunciate and augment the lyrics that are set to them.

Two other solos recorded almost a decade apart come to mind : ‘’Main jab bhi akeli hoti hun’’ from Dharamputra (1962) composed with elegance and poise by N Dutta, and, ‘’Mein shayad tumhare liye ajnabi hun’’, a haunting melody composed by O P Nayyar for Ye Raat Phir Na Ayegi.

Contemporary composers, to be sure, had been aware of Asha’s potential and the expressive quality of her voice. However, they were not going to challenge the preference of film producers and financiers who were completely taken in by the virginal sweetness of Lata Mangeshkar’s voice and her unassailable technique. Asha would have to prove herself in duets (and did she!) She sang with Kishore Kumar in the Dev Anand–Nutan starrer, Paying Guest. “O deewana Mastana” and

“Chod do aanchal zamana kya kahega” spring to mind after all these years with all their freshness and zing.

O.P. Nayyar had an unusual sense of melody, part Punjabi folk and part raga-based in its inspiration: this coupled with his pulsating rhythm section of tabla, dholak and occasionally, western drums, gave to many of his compositions a distinctive personality. Even when he cogged melodies from the West, eg., “Hun abhi mein jawan” sung by Geeta Dutt from Aar Paar that got its mukhda or introduction from “Put the blame on me” from Gilda, a Rita Hayworth hit from Hollywood directed by Charles Vidor. The Antara clearly had Nayyar’s distinctive touch.

Asha Bhosle, and before her Geeta Dutt, had voices most suitable to his work. Much as he had admired Lata Mangeshkar’s artistry, he found her voice to be too thin for his kind of music. Asha’s voice was very flexible, had a dark, sensual colour and was responsive to lyrics to express many moods and experiences. Nayyar understood perceptively both Asha Bhosle the woman, as well as the singer who brought his compositions to life. Until they parted in amidst much acrimony, they had literally been a perfect pair of lovers for twelve years.

Asha Bhosle, a mother of three, had been unhappily married to a man of uncertain profession, Ganpatrao Bhosle, from 1949 to ’60. He died in 1966, supposedly in a taxi. O.P. Nayyar, had married Saroj Mohini when he was seventeen and she, fifteen. They had four children together. He shot to fame with “Preetam aan milo” that he composed as a teenager and was first recorded by C.H. Atma as a non-film song. On discovering Asha Bhosle, he found his muse, and the perfect female voice for his songs. Their problematic marital status as separate individuals did not prevent them from living together in a beautifully furnished flat on Worli sea-face in Bombay.

When they parted in 1972, they had recorded for the film Pran Jaye Per Vachan Na Jaye, “Chaen se humko kabhi aap ne jeene na diya”. It was a masterly composition rendered by Asha with

unfettered emotion, which, in effect, also summed up the cause of their parting. O.P. Nayyar could not find another female voice to replace her and his career faded away rapidly. He observed ruefully later, “I put all my eggs in one basket.” He regretted having side-lined a singular talent like Geeta Dutt. Asha went from success to success over the next three decades and married Rahul Dev Burman, the gifted composer son of S.D. Burman.

This digression was necessary while discussing the life of Asha Bhosle, an unusually gifted singer and a feisty woman who has navigated with unusual grit and skill through all the ups and downs in her turbulent life. For the record her depressive daughter Varsha committed suicide in 2012 and son Hemant, a composer, died of Cancer in 2015 in Scotland. Asha continues to fight on with every fibre of her being.

As late as 2001, when she sang, “Radha kaise na jaley” for A.R. Rehman in Amir Khan’s, Lagaan, Asha had retained the spring, and melody in her voice, which by then had become ever so slightly girlish. She could render fast taans (there are a couple of instances in this song) with ease and accuracy. No mean achievement for a singer in her late sixties.

She is believed to have sung Ten thousand songs in eight hundred films. One can only talk of one’s favourites and there are very many. There are the three from the Ashok Kumar starrer, Kalpana, (composer O.P. Nayyar), namely, “Phir bhi dil heye beqaraar”, “O ji sawan mein bhi… ”, “Beqasi hudh se jab guzar jaye”. Completely different from each other, revealing the amazing malleability of her voice, its unique melody and the sure grasp of evanescent emotion. There is the other haunting song, from Raagini, also composed by O.P. Nayyar, “Chota saa baalma” in Raga Tilang. There are a host of other Nayyar compositions as well.

“Jaaiye aap kahan jaayengi” (Film: Mera Sanam), “Meri nazrein

haseen" (Ek Musafir Ek Haseena); ''Aaj meiney jana mera dil heye diwani'' (Farishta), "Aaj koi pyaar se" (Sawan ki Ghata); "Yehi wo jaga heye" (Ye Raat Phir Na Ayegi); "Puchho na hamein hum unke liye", (Mitti Main Sona), ''Aao huzoor tumko sitaron mein le chalun'' (Kismat), and a song picturised on the 'bad girl' in a given film, "Ye heye reshmi zulfon ka andhera na ghabraeye …." (Mere Sanam).

The duets that she sang for S.D. Burman with Kishore Kumar in Nau Do Gyaara, "Aankhon mein kya jee", her own solo, "Dhalki jae chunariya…" and the two duets with Mohammad Rafi, "aaja panchi akela heye" and "Kali ke roop mein chali ho dhoop main…" certainly are memorable as are the three from Ek Musafir Ek Haseena: "Main pyaar ka rahi hoon"; "aap yun hi agar humse milte rahe"; "Jawani yaar man turki", and two others from Kashmir ki Kali—"Isharon isharon mein" and "Deewana hua badal", both composed by O.P. Nayyar and yet another duet with the marvellous Mohhamad Rafi ,''Phir milogi kabhi…'' from Ye Raat Phir Na Ayegi,and, much earlier a mesmerising duet from Phagun, ''Main soya akhiya meechey''.

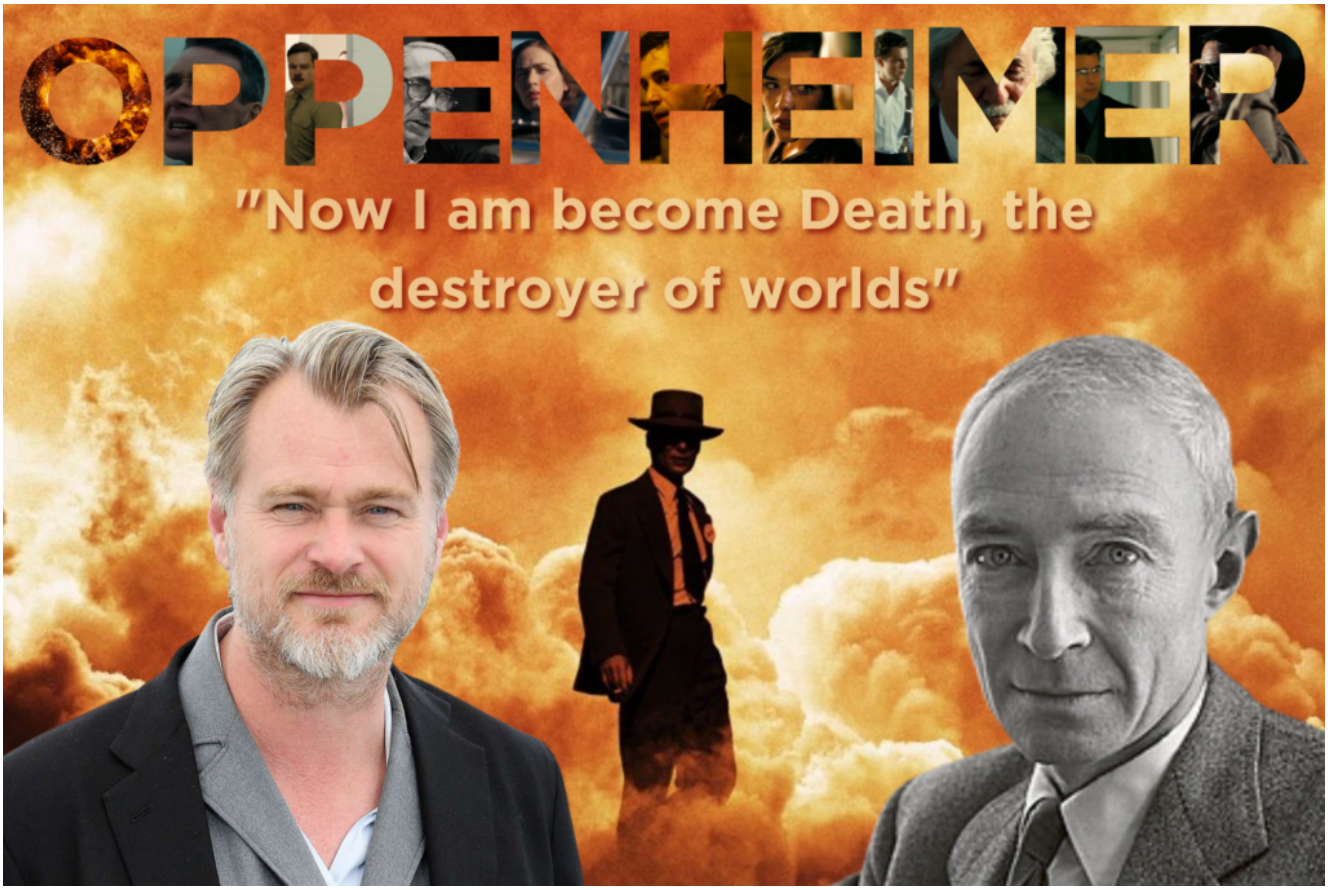
Khayyam is the other composer who brought the best in Asha's multifarious musical personality. Two duets from Ramesh Sehgal's Phir Subah Hogi: "Who subah kabhi to aayegi", and "Yun na keeje meri gustakh nighahi ka gila", both with Mukesh, have attained immortality. Her solos in Muzzafar Ali's Umrao Jaan bring out her astonishing vocal range, the flexibility and soz (poignance) in her voice. Her songs for the tawaif (singing courtesan) Umrao in this period piece set in mid-19th century Lucknow, stay in the memory. "Dil cheez kya heye aap meri jaan lijiye"; "justu jiski thi", "Ye kya jagah heye doston" are amongst the finest songs composed in the annals of the Golden Age of Hindi film music. Asha's singing fitted Rekha's vulnerable screen-personality perfectly, just as her elder sister Lata's did on Meena Kumari playing Sahib Jaan in Kamal Amrohi's, Pakeeza.

If this article is a shade too subjective, well… it is. While

having enormous respect for Lata Mangeshkar’s peerless tonal quality at her peak that lasted for thirty or so years, one could never understand her well-nigh ‘abstract’ handling of emotion in her songs, as if any hint of sensuality in them would disqualify her from being a great artiste. Asha Bhosle’s singing was uninhibited, earthy, intrinsically musical and very much to be felt with one’s entire being. That is why one remains enamoured of Asha Bhosle’s singing.

Somehow, she continues to be in the limelight not just for her delectable music. At the recently concluded World Cup Final played at the Narendra Modi Stadium in Ahmedabad, India was pitted against Australia in the 50-over Cricket tournament. India lost, after giving great hope to an enormous, completely partisan home crowd. Asha Bhosle, a die-hard cricket fan, like her late sister, Lata, was seated between BCCI President Jay Shah and Sharukh Khan, the superstar of Hindi cinema. An ND TV video, shows Sharukh take Ashaji’s empty coffee cup, despite her reluctance, and hand it over to one of the cleaning staff. A viewer remarked,’’It was the only heart-warming gesture in the whole match.’’ Asha Bhosle’s charisma cuts through generations and inspires them to acts of gallantry.

Openheimer – Said and Unsaid



First Published in THE AIDEM (theaidem.com)

Oppenheimer is a biographical film on the most controversial physicist of the 20th century by the celebrated Hollywood director Christopher Nolan, maker of *Dunkirk* (2017), *Interstellar* (2014), *Batman Vs Superman* Ultimate Edition (2016), *Inception* (2016) and a host of other films on eclectic subjects. He is a megastar amongst Hollywood's film directors.

Robert Oppenheimer, was an American Jew, whose intellect, perhaps matched that of Albert Einstein, the German-Jew who, fleeing Hitler's anti-sematic Nazi Germany in 1932, found a home in the United States of America and was celebrated there. Einstein's genius for physics was matched by his ethical conscience. The same cannot be said of J. Robert Oppenheimer, who came to be known as the 'Father of the Atom' bomb and the man who headed the Manhattan Project, comprising a team of scientists working on the Atom Bomb in utmost secrecy and with great speed to have it ready before Hitler's Germany did during World War II (1939-1945).

The ultimate tragedy was that Oppenheimer (the subject of the film) was unable to fully comprehend the destructive potential of the bomb until it was too late.Promotional poster for Oppenheimer (2023)

Nolan’s film goes easy on these ethical considerations though there is a sentimental approach adopted by the director in the last shot of the film, when, in response to Einstein’s fear that the Atom Bomb may destroy the world, Oppenheimer, in gigantic close up (the film is shot in IMAX, a huge screen format designed expressly to overwhelm the viewer), he says “we already have,” meaning have destroyed the world. This lone statement does not compensate for the rest of the film which evades the ethical implications of creating a monster that can destroy the world in a trice.

The film’s structure is staccato. It begins with Oppenheimer’s trial instigated by the notorious anti-Communist Senator Joseph McCarthy, who was convinced that Oppenheimer was a traitor, because of his communist sympathies, at a time when very many intellectuals, became either members of the Communist Party of America or fellow travelers, having witnessed the failure of American capitalism when the share market collapsing in 1929 and leaving the economy of the nation tottering for a decade and millions struggling for their daily bread. The principal villain in the trial in the film, is Lewis Strauss, a mediocre scientist who thinks he has been wronged by Oppenheimer. Strauss (played powerfully by Robert Downey Jr.) is the driving force of the story and scenes from Oppenheimer’s life are intercut with Strauss’s ‘testament’ at the trial.

Cillian Murphy’s portrayal of Oppenheimer is involved, in an old fashioned style of Method acting. He lives the part, in accordance with his conception of what the man he is playing may have been like. It is through his portrayal that Nolan’s film acquires both its thrust, and aesthetic ambivalence.

It is important to place the real Oppenheimer alongside his onscreen version. The film's Oppenheimer, for all his brilliance, comes across as a vulnerable, and, on occasion, an indecisive man. In other words the victim of his circumstances. It is an interpretation that suits the American audience, still floundering between Christ and Freud, and also, unable to give up its appetite for the overweening comforts of the material world and its attendant perversions.

Nolan, who is also the scriptwriter of the film, sees Oppenheimer as a man obsessed with his work and yet politically aware, who is grateful in an understated way to the American State for providing him the opportunity as it turns out, in retrospect, of playing both Faust and Mephistopheles at the same time. The script is based on J. Robert Oppenheimer's biography, *American Prometheus* by Kai Bird and Martin Sherwin, a book that won a Pulitzer Prize.American Prometheus by Kai Bird and Martin Sherwin

It is difficult, even today, for the U.S. and its citizens (a vast majority of them) to accept the fact that the Atom Bomb created by Oppenheimer and his team in the Manhattan project had paved the way for the destruction of the world; an observation proven by the proliferation of nuclear weapons all over the world today, with the U.S.A leading the way, followed by Russia (the erstwhile Soviet Union) and China, in that order. All it needs is a lunatic, driven by extreme insecurity to push the Button, to provoke an instantaneous reaction from others to do the same, for the entire world to go up in flames in seconds.

In the film what is stated clearly is the need for America to make the bomb before Nazi Germany does and uses it on the Allies. The outcome of the Second World War is seen to be hanging in the balance. Nazi Germany loses the War and surrenders, but its ally Japan, on its last legs, with hardly any resources—military and financial left, fights on gamely, and possibly may hold out for another month.

The Atom Bomb is dropped over the islands of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, nevertheless. Three hundred thousand people die in moments and very many others are maimed and crippled for life and are afflicted by radiation poisoning in varying degrees. Both Hiroshima and Nagasaki are completely destroyed. The real reason for dropping the two bombs was to judge how destructive they could be. As later facts were to prove that the United States of America, immediately after the end of the war in 1945, fearing the rise of communism and Soviet Union's ever increasing political power, had actually planned to use the A-Bomb over 66 cities of the Soviet Union if the situation got 'out of hand'. Surely Nolan, Kai Bird and Martin Sherwin were aware of these facts. The film is silent about this crucial detail and the U.S. Government's deliberate, completely inhuman dropping of the bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and to use the Japanese as Guinea Pigs, giving an absolute racist angle to the exercise. In addition, there are no images of the aftermath of the bombing and the complete destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the film.

The mounting of the production, in layman's language, is gorgeous. Nolan, is perhaps, the greatest showman of our time. He has an exceptionally talented team working to help realise his vision. Hoyte Van Hoytema (Cinematography), Jennifer Lame (Editing), Jake Cavallo (Art Direction), Ruth De Jong (Production Design), Clair Kaufman (Set Decoration), Oliva Peebles (Set Decorator – New Mexico Unit), Scott R. Fisher, Laurie Pellard, Mario Vanillo, Vincent Vanillo (Special Effects Team), Ellen Mirojmick (Costume Design) and a host of others who worked together to give the film its completely authentic look. The Los Alamos township and testing sight is a most impressive combination of engineering construction and art direction.

The scene of the testing of the Atom Bomb is certainly awe-inspiring but what follows later in the story in the Los Alamos township auditorium when Oppenheimer informs his co-workers, not all of whom are scientists, but have been a part of the project, about the devastation caused by the two bombs dropped over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, is both scary and nauseating. Every member of the audience in the auditorium is cheering manically like a football hooligan! The film does not clearly say anything about the complete devastation of the two cities but is jubilant about the total military defeat of Japan.

There is an attempt throughout the film to deflect attention from the real issue, that of the destruction of human civilisation till 1945, and, not just the poisoning of the human consciousness but a fatalistic acceptance of the new status quo, that is, nuclear weapons shall remain in permanent existence, and the world, henceforth, shall live in fear all the time.

Nolan treats his story differently. He treats President Truman as a callous buffoon in the scene of his meeting with Oppenheimer, who tries feebly to tell him of the enormous destruction caused by the two A-bombs. Truman responds with,

“But we brought our boys home (meaning the Army) safely.” When Oppenheimer, with tears in his eyes, mumbles something about the destruction caused, Truman, draws out his handkerchief and offers it to him and tells his friend, “Take this cry baby away.”Oppenheimer meeting President Truman (Still from movie)

American cinema, certainly in the last fifty years has been gravitating towards a language of misleading heroism and hence machismo. The trial of Oppenheimer, which is the pivot of the film, is cut up in many bits. In a portion, the physicist is called before a Committee of Jurists, mostly from the Armed Forces, who question him about his attitude towards the Atom Bomb (he doesn’t want any more to be made, though he is aware that it is going to be a futile exercise) and, of course, his integrity and character. Strangely enough, Leslie Groves (finely played by Matt Damon), a senior Army Officer, Supervising the Los Alamos operations during World War II, comes to his defence.

Oppenheimer, the former Communist sympathiser, makes his compromises with the System steadily and is given official recognition, not unsurprisingly. Nolan makes a film, with no nuances, saying all the right things, which is visually and aurally breath-taking, but far away from what we consider to be a universal truth.

Girish Karnad – Remembering A Multifaceted Mesmerising Actor, Writer, Director

He became a film actor and give a resounding performance as the school master driven mad by the kidnapping of his

beautiful wife by the lustful brothers of the local Zamindar. He also gave a fine account of himself in Swami directed by Basu Chatterjee. He appeared as an actor in films and Television, not only because he could test himself in another medium but also to buy the freedom to pursue his activities in the Theatre, namely writing plays.

Two Films: Devi and Subarnarekha and Two Masters of Cinema / Partha Chatterjee

Satyajit Ray and Ritwik Ghatak were two masters from the Bengali cinema of the 1950s. They were temperamentally dissimilar and yet they shared a common cultural inheritance left behind by Rabindranath Tagore. An inheritance that was a judicious mix of tradition and modernity. Ray's cinema, like his personality, was outwardly sophisticated but with deep roots in his own culture, particularly that of the reformist Brahmo Samaj founded by Raja Ram Mohan Roy to challenge the bigotry of the upper caste Hindu Society in Bengal in the early and mid-nineteenth century. Ghatak's rugged, home-spun exterior hid an innate sophistication that found a

synthesis in the deep-rooted Vaishnav culture of Bengal and the teachings of western philosophers like Hegel, Engels and Marx.

Satyajit Ray's *Debi* (1960) was made with the intention of examining the disintegration of a late 19th century Bengali Zamidar family whose patriarch (played powerfully by Chabi Biswas) very foolishly believes that his student son's teenaged wife (Sharmila Tagore) is blessed by the Mother Goddess (Durga and Kali) so as able to cure people suffering from various ailments. The son (Soumitra Chatterjee) is a good-hearted, ineffectual son of a rich father. He is in and out of his ancestral house because he is a student in Calcutta, a city that symbolizes a modern, scientific (read British) approach to life.

The daughter-in-law named Doyamoyee, ironically in retrospect, for she is victimized by her vain, ignorant father-in-law, as it to justify the generous, giving quality suggested by her name. After a few "successes", Doyamoyee fails tragically to cure her brother-in-law's infant son, who dies because he is denied proper medical treatment by his demented grandfather driven solely by religion. Doyamoyee goes mad and dies tragically having hovered in the twilight of self-deception and rationality. Her loving husband makes a dash from Calcutta but arrives too late to help avert the tragedy. Her father-in-law's conviction that she was Devi or Goddess remains firm.

Ray's sense of mise-en-scene or literally what he puts in a particular scene, is vigorous, classical. The way he links each scene to tell his story that moves forward inevitably

towards its tragic finish with the surety of a well-aimed arrow, is an object lesson in film craft. His pace is unhurried and yet the editing carries the film forward by giving maximum importance to the content of individual scenes.

The impact of Doyamoyee's first appearance on-screen made up as a Devi, and also like a bride with sandal paste dots just above either eye-brow curving downwards and a large Kumkum bindi, offset by Sharmila Tagore's innocent, liquid eyes, is simultaneously a touching as well as disturbing sign. One realizes the importance of this close-up much after leaving the film theatre. It foretells the sending of a lamb to slaughter, although one's initial reaction to the image is one of admiration bordering on Bhakti. Dulal Dutta's editing, Ray's direction of a fledgling actress and Subrata Mitra's immaculate lensing and approximation of daylight together help create magic.

Ray's visual style is beautiful because it is also understated. Every shot has an organic quality that helps in the unfolding of the narrative, giving it shape, tone, clarity and sensitivity. His camera draws the viewer in as a witness to the happenings that coelesce into a moving story about power arising, ironically, from a lack of knowledge and the certitude that blind faith brings to an economically powerful man who is then free to wreck havoc even on his loved ones with the best of intentions.

Ali Akbar Khan's spare music, helps enunciate the sense of loss that the film carries. He had by then become aware of the need to say more with less in composing background music for cinema.

Khan Saheb, the great Sarod maestro had composed music earlier in Hindi films for *Aandhiyaan* and *Anjali.* His composing skills were not particularly tested except for a raga Mallika based-song sung by Lata Mangeskar for *Aandhiyaan*. His peerless solo sarod carried *Anjali*. He was a little jittery when asked to compose the music for Ritwik Ghatak's *Ajaantrik*.

His score for this film revolved largely around his moving rendition of raga Bilaskhani Todi on the Sarod. There were other interesting bits played by Bahadur Khan (Sarod) and Nikhil Banerjee (Sitar). But here in *Debi*, he seemed to have intuitively grasped the core idea of the film. He uses a simple Shyama Sangeet dedicated to Goddess Kali as a leit motif both as a vocal rendering and as an astonishingly eloquent Sarod Solo. He also uses another Shyama Sangeet as a counter point. The end result is remarkable. It is amongst the very few truly memorable background scores in Indian films.

Subrata Mitra's Black and White photography helps express Ray's innermost thoughts with precision. His lyrical vision blends with that of the director and includes a genuine sense of the tragic. The slow disintegration of Doyamoyee's mind is photographed with unusual understanding. Mitra was to Ray what cinematographer Sven Nykvist was to Ingmar Bergman in Swedish cinema. It is difficult to forget the images of the last quarter of the film.

The idyllic view of a river in the countryside with two boats in either corner of the frame, in early morning

light, just before the return of the young husband from Calcutta in a futile bid to save his young bride's life, is the perfect visual prelude to the onset of the final tragedy that is soon to occur. Doyamoyee's flight from her father-in-law's house with her husband in pursuit through crop-laden fields and her ultimate death amidst enveloping, ever brightening light is a triumph of B/W cinematography.

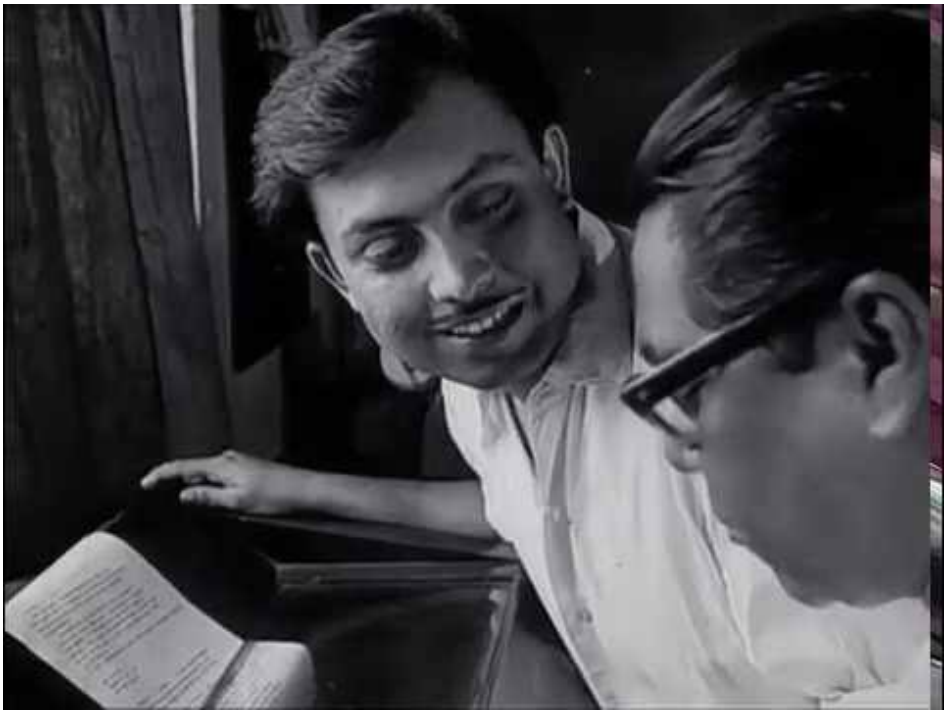
Satyajit Ray's transformation of Prabhat Kumar Mukherjee's competently told tale into a film of abiding value is worth cherishing. His little touches are worthy of emulation by younger filmmakers travelling on the same path. The way he inverses the role of the maternal figure when the ailing baby is placed on Doyamogee's lap is an object lesson in filmmaking.

She is only a very young woman who has "Sainthood" thrust upon her by a superstitious, overbearing father-in-law. Her own potential for motherhood is kept on hold as she is willed by others to become a "Divine Mother" to cure the diseases from which that they may be suffering.

Ray's treatment of the film brings to mind that unique constituent of the Indian psyche which seeks solutions to all worldly problems including the cure of disease through supernatural intervention rather than rationality and science. This attitude is also largely responsible for the choice of political leaders and the exercise of choices, both social and political.

If you want to see the film here is a link to Devi:

https://youtu.be/ittYCEV4nUY



Ritwik Ghatak’s Subarnrekha

Ritwik Ghatak’s *Subranarekha* (1962) is a far cry from the world of Maya (illusion) and blind faith. It is rooted in the sufferings of daily life engendered by wholly avoidable political events. The protagonists are victims of the senseless partition of India in 1947. They have been uprooted from their native East Bengal and have come to a Suburb of Calcutta in Independent India.

Life is a relentless struggle for Ishwar Bhattacharya (Abhi Bhattacharya), his little sister Sita (Madhabi Mukherjee) and foster brother Abhiram (Satindra Bhattacharjee) as it is for the other members of the Refugee camp. Ishwar is befriended by a school master, Harprasad (Bijon Bhattacharya). A chance meeting in the street with an old friend, a marwari, lands Ishwar a job in his foundry near the river Subarnarekha in Bihar. Harprasad accuses Ishwar of being a coward and seeking security only for his family and forgetting his suffering comrades in the camp. The rest of

the story, or rather its unfolding would do credit to Bertold Brecht, who, despite his intractable stand against the bourgeoisie, had imbibed vital lessons from medieval Christian morality plays.

Ishwar and his little family find stability thanks to his job. Sita grows up to be a beautiful, musically gifted woman and Abhiram, a writer of promise. Inevitably they fall in love and marry against the wishes of Ishwar, Sita's blood brother and also a father-figure in her life. They elope to Calcutta. Sita, after a few years of marriage becomes a widow. Ishwar, with his life, in a shambles, is rescued by the Sanskrit-toting, indigent school master, Harprasad. Sita, with a little son to feed, makes her debut as a singing courtesan for her drunken elder brother Ishwar: Recognising him she commits suicide. What follows is a most moving, perceptive rendering of the sufferings of the displaced in the 20th century and their chimeral aspirations to stability.

The film was shot on a day to day basis as there was only the skeletal plot of a long-lost brother and sister meeting as client and singing prostitute provided by producer Radhe Shyam Jhunjhunwala. Ghatak literally had to work his story in both directions without the knowledge of his producer who was expecting an entirely different, perhaps hugely sensational film. This story is true because Ghatak had to do "Scissors", his only Advertising film, courtesy his friend Chidananda Dasgupta, then with Imperial Tobacco Company. The proceeds from this cigarette Ad film went to do the final post-production work on Subarnarekha when producer Jhunjhunwala fled in panic.

Ghatak's cinematographic vocabulary, was no doubt, enriched by disparate sources. Literature, Bengali, Sanskrit and European had a part to play as did his own considerable literary efforts; he was a Bengali short-story writer of high promise when only in his middle-twenties. Music, both Hindustani classical and Folk including Vaishnav Kirtans, Bhatialis, Bhawaiyyas, Baul songs and other forms helped shape his sensibilities. Cinematically he owed almost nothing to Hollywood but had learnt from films by the Soviet masters like Eisenstein and Dovzhenko the art of editing and dramatic shot-taking. His poetically charged depiction of the passage of time was uniquely his own.

He understood instinctively that cinema and music were sister-arts and that both, more than anything else portrayed the passage of time. His handling of cinematic time was both dynamic and lyrical.

Ghatak knew all about the malleability of time in cinema to arrive at what may be a truth, which in turn opens many doors of perception in the viewer . His handling of time in *Subarnarekha*, is on the surface linear but, in truth, is also very interestingly elliptical.

There is a magnificent example of a scene in a deserted airport where Sita and Abhiram are playing on a Second World War airstrip. Sita tells Abhiram that the British pilots would bomb Japanese positions in Burma and then come back to enjoy themselves in the Air force Mess after the mission. A few moments after, the children start imitating the take-off of an aircraft, the Camera suddenly "becomes" airborne. The sound track makes the illusion all the more real. This scene is a symbolic projection of Sita

and Abhiram’s future dreams.

Similarly the adult Sita singing a bandish in raga Kalavati on the same deserted airstrip where she played with Abhiram as children, is full of grief and foreboding because her elder brother is certainly going to reject the idea of her marrying Abhiram, her foster brother, who, on a railway platform discovers by sheer chance his dying “low-cast” biological mother.

There is another scene when, after the elopement of Sita and Abhiram, the assistant manager of the foundary starts reading out from a Bengali newspaper about Yuri Gagarin’s space flight. Ishwar snatches the paper out of the man’s hand and throws it into the foundry as if making a comment, unknown to himself, on the ineptitude of human beings at managing their affairs on Earth.

It is a film of startling transitions. When Ishwar weary of life alone, some years after the departure of Sita and Abhiram, decides to hang himself his old friend Harprasad appears like a ghost at the window and declares “How far gone is the night? There is no answer”. Ishwar’s suicide is averted and the two friends after a brief conversation end up in the morning on the same deserted airstrip where Sita and Abhiram played as children. Near the wreckage of a WWII Dakota airplane Harbilash tells Ishwar that both as individuals and as a generation they are finished. He suggests to the relatively monied Ishwar that they go to Calcutta to have a good time.

In Calcutta they go to the race-course to bet on horses and in a sharply photographed and edited sequence the two friends discover the joy of life which further continues in a Park Street restaurant over dinner and far too many drinks. Not for nothing is “Patricia” from Fredrico Fellini’s La Dolce Vita heard on the sound track. This piece of music is used as a poignant, ironic comment on the state of affairs of two lost souls floundering about in a pitiless world. At one point in the sequence, Harprasad tells his friend, “only what you can touch is true. The rest is bogus.” This revelation from one of the Upanishads is also an apt comment for Ghatak’s time and ours.

The next scene is the one where a drunken Ishwar lands up in a sleepy Sita’s humble home to hear her sing without knowing who she is. Now a widow, she, sleepy from hunger and poverty, recognizes him in an instant and kills herself with the curved blade of a bonti, used for cutting vegetables, fish etc. The choice of a bonti on Ghatak’s part is intuitive but it is connected with cooking food and therefore economics!

When Ishwar returns back to his job as Foundry manager on the banks of the river Subarnarekha (also meaning the ‘Golden Line’) with little Binu, the son of the deceased Sita and Abhiram, he finds that he has been fired. The scandalous case resulting from Sita’s suicide is cited as the reason for his dismissal. Undaunted Ishwar and his little Nephew Binu set out seeking new horizons accompanied by a hauntingly sung ‘Charai Beti’ mantra on the sound track. Very few films in the history of cinema have had such a moving ending.

Ghatak's use of music in *Subarnarekha* is exemplary. He uses Bahadur Khan, Ali Akbar Khan's cousin, and the most lyrical Sarodist in Hindustani music, as music director. Bahadur Khan's theme music subtly emphasizes the illusion suggested by the title of the film. It is one of the most sophisticated and telling background scores in the history of cinema, vying with Joseph Kosma's exquisite work in Jean Renoir's *A Day in the Country.*

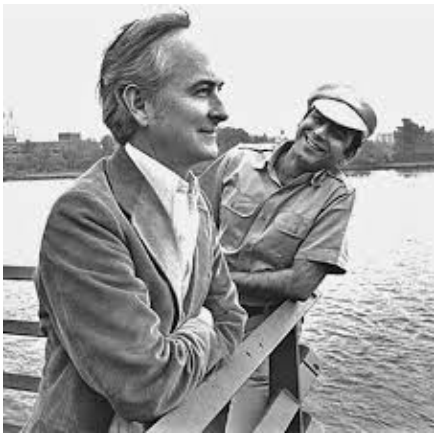
Ghatak's use of wide-angle lenses, particularly the problematic 18.5 mm, indoors and outdoors is an act of great daring. He places his characters in their environment and uses natural and artificial light to reveal their states of mind assisted by his unusual lensing. His jagged editing and carefully selected incidental sound adds to the aural richness and augments the film's mood.

Ritwik Ghatak's *Subarnarekha* is one of the most beautiful and disturbing films about people fighting their destiny bestowed upon them by an unforgivable quirk of history; in this case the partition of India, which had the largest single displacement of human population ever.

If you are excited enough to want to see Subarnarekha you can see it right away on this link:

https://youtu.be/0Qyml5vqvqo

Ismail Merchant: Film Producer Extraordinary / Partha Chatterjee



Ismail Merchant with James Ivory

Ismail Merchant’s passing away on May 25, 2005 marked the end of a certain kind of cinema. He was the last of the maverick film producers with taste who made without any compromise, films with a strong literary bias which were partial to actors and had fine production values. It is sad that he died at sixty eight of bleeding ulcers unable to any longer work his legendary charm on venal German financiers who were supposed to finance

his last production, The White Countess, which was to have been directed by
his long-time partner James Ivory.

Merchant-Ivory productions came into being in 1961 when, Ismail
Merchant, a Bohra Muslim student on a scholarship in America met James
Ivory, an Ivy-leaguer with art and cinema on his mind, quite by accident in a
New York coffee shop. The rest as they say is history. Together they made
over forty films in a relationship that lasted all of forty-four years. A record
in the annals of independent filmmaking anywhere in the world.
Ivory's gentle, inward looking vision may never have found expression on
the scale that it did but for Merchant's amazing resourcefulness that included
coaxing, cajoling, bullying and charming all those associated, directly and
indirectly with the making of his films.

Merchant-Ivory productions' first venture was a documentary, The Delhi
Way back in 1962. The next year they made a feature length fiction film The
Householder in Black and White. It was about a young college lecturer,
tentative and clumsy trying to find happiness with his wife from a sheltered
background. Ironically the script was written by Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, a
Jewess from Poland married to a Parsee Indian architect. James Ivory who
knew nothing about the subject did a fine job of directing his first real film.

He had made a couple of pleasant documentaries earlier.
The crew was basically Satyajit Ray's, a director who was already being
acknowledged the world over as a Master and whose Apu trilogy, Jalsa
Ghar (The Music Room) and other films had made a lasting impression on
international audiences and critics. His cameraman Subrata Mitra, also
lionized, photographed The Householder which was designed by Bansi
Chandragupta, the most resourceful art director in India, trained by Eugene

Lourie, who created most evocative sets for Jean Renoir's The River, shot in
Barrackpore, near Calcutta in 1950.
The success of the Householder in the West was largely due to the efforts of
Merchant's energy and drive. He wooed the Press which responded warmly
almost to a man. His film went to those distributors who could give it
maximum exposure and a decent royalty. His task was made easier by the
rousing reception accorded to Satyajit Ray's lyrical cinema to which
Merchant Ivory's maiden effort owed clear allegiance.

Their second film Shakespearewallah (1965) had an elegiac tone which
added poignance to its lyricism. It was a fictionalized account of a true story.
A well-known English theatre couple Jeffrey and Laura Kendall who play
people like themselves in the film actually ran a peripatetic theatre company

in the British India of the 1930s, and 40s. The troupe got into grave financial difficulties when their audience endowed anglicized Public schools and Country Clubs whose members belonged to flourishing British owned mercantile establishments suddenly lost interest in all things English. The purple patches from Shakespeare done by the company, which also had some Indian actors in real life, as in the film, no longer interested people, whose enthusiasm for culture could best be described as ephemeral.
Only the romance between the young daughter of the English couple and an Indian rake was fiction. The performances were first-rate and Felicity Kendall as the daughter was moving. Beautifully photographed in B/W by Subrata Mitra and scored by Satyajit Ray, whose music sold half-a- million long-playing records, Shakespearewallah was a huge success in America and Europe. Ismail was only twenty-eight years old when he produced his second feature film. He proved himself to be a man of fine taste, possessing the ability to grasp an opportunity when it presented itself.

In retrospect, one can say he best illustrated the idea that artistes are a product of history. They reflect a certain spirit of their times—so too with Ismail Merchant and his alter ego, the director James Ivory. They came at a turbulent moment in Western politics, culture and cinema. The

French New
Wave was about to peak and had already revealed the staggering possibilities of film narration. Filmmakers as disparate in temperament as
Alain Resnais, Jacques Tati, Robert Bresson, Jean Luc Goddard, Eric
Rohmer and Francois Truffaut had enriched film language and proudly
declared it an art form to be taken as seriously as literature, music, theatre or

the plastic arts. In the Anglo-Saxon world classical cinema was in its last
throes, and its greatest master John Ford was unemployed, ignored by know
all young men running Hollywood. There was a niche for a different, gentler
kind of storytelling and Merchant-Ivory films filled it.
Their early productions were devoted to selling exotic India abroad and who
could do it better than Ismail? The third film that Ismail and James did
together was set in Benares. The Guru (1968) had the contretemps of a
famous classical sitarist with his two wives—one traditional, the younger
one modern, as its focal point. Mahesh Yogi's Transcendental Meditation
had swept across America promising deliverance from the ravages of greed
and avarice brought by relentless capitalism. Recognizing this phenomenon,
the story included as a catalyst an English pop star and his girlfriend. India
and its contradictions, the musician attracted to modernity but comfortable
only when maintaining status quo, his celebrity English

disciple and his girl
both hoping to find peace in the holy city where the ustad lives, all this
constituted a visually interesting but not witty or incisive narrative.
Energetic promotion prevented the film from being a dead loss. While it did
not make a reasonable profit, it made money—only some.

Bombay Talkie (1970) the fourth Merchant-Ivory offering was about an
ageing male star, who was unable to cope with his own life, fame that was
soon going to elude him, and the unreal world of Hindi cinema. Apart from
Zia Mohyeddin's powerful performance as an ignored lyricist, and Subrata
Mitra's camerawork, including a long bravura sequence at the beginning,
there was little to recommend about the film. Utpal Dutt, whose dynamic
presence held The Guru together, was just about adequate as a harried film
producer. Shashi Kapoor who was so good in the first two films, looked tired
here.

Bombay Talkie did nothing for Ismail Merchant or James Ivory. Two films
in a row that barely made money, put the company under financial strain.
For the first time in his life, Ismail was forced to deal with the unyielding
Jewish moneymen of New York on less than equal terms. The experience
marked him for life and made him a skinflint. His old friend and colleague

Shashi Kapoor, remarked on television that Ismail did not like paying any of
his actors and technicians anymore than he absolutely had to.
The Savages (1973) was made in the U.S. in an old colonial Restoration
mansion, in Scarborough, forty minutes away from New York. The old place

and the jungle nearby gave Ivory the idea of bringing in jungle dwellers
from Stone Age into the twentieth century. An object the "Savages" had
never seen before, a coloured ball, suddenly descends in their midst. The
retrieval of it by people from the modern era provides material for a
potentially hilarious and wise film. The script based on an idea by Ivory and
not written by Jhabvala, lacked subtlety and humour. Although the director
saw it as a "Hudson River Last Day in Marienbad", his film had all of Alain
Resnais's intellectual tomfoolery but none of his poetic intensity. Merchant
understood right away that original material was not the duo's cup of tea,
and thereafter relied, exclusively on literature to provide the ballast for their
films.

After The Wild Party (1975), a sincere but inept attempt to recreate the
excesses of the Jazz age in sinful old Hollywood, an undertaking the
inspiration for which may well have been the jewelled prose of F. Scott
Fitzgerald, Merchant Ivory production was again in dire

straits. Certain critics including Pauline Kael of the New Yorker even called Ismail and James a pair of amateurs. The energy that drove their first two films seemed to have deserted them.

Merchant would have to turn things around speedily before America wrote them off. Roseland (1977) set in a real ballroom of that name in New York where people come to shed their loneliness was too civilized, too tentative to move viewers. Although it had a solid cast led by old-timer Teresa Wright with Lou Jacobi, Geraldine Chaplin and Christopher Walken who featured in the three inter-connected episodes, it was lacking in drive. Ivory seemed to have found a cinematic language that was true to his temperament, but it still needed polishing. The opportunity came with an adaptation by Ruth Prawer Jhabwala, who else, of Henry James's The Europeans (1979). The interiorized pre-modern drama was just what Merchant Ivory productions needed. Accolades followed and actress Lee Remick's performance in a pivotal role was greatly appreciated. It was more than a success d'esteeme. People in large numbers bought tickets to see it. Ismail and James had finally made it to the front rank of American and European filmmakers. They were still in their late thirties.

The following year in 1980, they tried their hand at an

experimental musical
Jane Austen in Manhattan about various troupes wanting to perform a 19 th
century manuscript by Jane Austen written in her childhood that was
recently discovered. It starred Anne Baxter, who shot to fame thirty years

earlier as Eve Harrington in Joseph L. Mankiewicz's All about Eve and
Robert Powell, also a contemporary of hers. Made on a shoestring budget of
450, 000 dollars, it was like the proverbial curate's cake, good in parts.
Quartet (1981) based on Jean Rhys's despairing existentialist novel about
bohemian Paris in the late 1920s starring Isabelle Adjani, Maggie Smith,
Alan Bates and photographed in luminous low-key by Pierre L'Homme,
cinematographer to Jean Pierre Melville, father of the French new wave, was
a feather in James Ivory's cap. It was possible only because of Merchant's
exceptional organizing skills and uncanny judgment of the artistic and
commercial climate of Europe and America.

There was indeed room then for a quieter, more reflective kind of cinema in
the English-speaking world, especially after Hollywood had expended its
energies on mainly violent moralistic dramas and thrillers. The 'serious'
French cinema, thanks or no thanks to the brilliant cinematic combustions of
Jean Luc Godard, Alain Resnais, Jacques Rivette and Chris

Marker had been forced to virtually abandon the linear narrative, with the notable exception of Francois Truffaut and, more so, Jean Pierre Rappeneau. It secretly welcomed well-told stories from any part of the world. Satyajit Ray's films and those of Merchant Ivory found favour with discerning French audiences, principally in Paris.

Ismail and James returned to the twilight world of Maharajas and 'illicit' love; the consequences of one is probed by a young Englishwoman in Heat and Dust (1983). Julie Christie is the woman who comes to India to understand her late grandaunt's affair with a Maharaja (Shashi Kapoor) and falls in love with a handsome youth (Zakir Husain) and gets impregnated by him. It was a big hit. Though Merchant-Ivory had to take a lot of flak from the critics. Ismail's logic was clear. Someone had to pay for the homes and offices in London, New York and Bombay (now Mumbai).
The next year it was time to regain critical acclaim and the affections of a loyal audience. Once again it was Henry James to the rescue and his Bostonians was Merchant Ivory's key to success. It restored their prestige and gave them an unspoken right to adapt works of 'difficult' writers for the screen.

E.M. Forster, a great but not popular English writer was next

on their
agenda. A Room With a View (1986) featuring Daniel Day Lewis, son of

poet C. Day Lewis, Helena Bonham Carter, Judi Dench and Maggie Smith,
was the first attempt to find a cinematic equivalent to Forster's prose which
was at first glance unsuitable for an audio-visual interpretation. There was
too little physical action in his writing—A Passage to India and Where
Angels Fear toTread have short bursts of it—most of what occurs was in the
minds of his characters. Merchant and Ivory won a fair bit of critical
acclaim, and made decent amounts of money on it.

Their films were always about people, trying to find
themselves—deliberately or not. The price they pay to arrive at an
understanding with life is usually heavy. Most often they are aware of their
dilemma; however, there are exceptions. Does Stephen, the faithful old
butler in Lord Darlington's household really comprehend what an unfair
hand he has been dealt by his former employers in Remains of the Day
(1993)? Only Miss Kenton, the housekeeper, who like Stephens is now
without a job, seems to know despite a stoic acceptance of her fate.
Kazuo Ishiguro's novel helps Ivory make perhaps his finest film: a quiet,
understated, but never the less powerful depiction of class and privilege in

pre-war England. The same pair of actors Anthony Hopkins, and Emma
Thompson from their Forster triumph of a year earlier Howards End were
repeated to great effect in Remains of the Day.

Howards End (1992) was set during the economic depression that swept
Europe and America in the late 1920s through the mid-1930s. It was about
naked abuse of power and ruthless assertion of privilege. Anthony Hopkins
as an aristocrat with a roving eye is riveting but it is the women who elicit
both respect and sympathy. Emma Thompson and Helena Bonham Carter as
sisters from the middle-class whose trust is betrayed heartlessly by the
aristocrat, culminating in the murder of a male friend of the younger sister,
with their accurate reading of social situations, throw the film into a political
perspective which needs no polemics to comprehend.
If this article is as much about Ivory as it is about Merchant then there is a
reason for it. They were joined artistically at the hip. One was at his best
only when complementing the other. It was Ismail who encouraged, even
inspired James, to stretch himself to discover his true métier; to take risks
with complex literary texts that were difficult to film but could be
immensely rewarding once an effective method was discovered.

Who for instance had dared to film primarily uncinematic authors like

Forster and James in an Anglo-Saxon cinema? Who dared to gamble and win but Ivory egged on by Merchant. To make meaningful cinema out of texts with sub-terrainean relationships hidden under a patina of good manners, where what was being said and done often meant the opposite, was no mean achievement.

This kind of interiorized drama was also the highlight of Mr and Mrs Bridge (1990) with Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward playing the eponymous couple. Set in Kansas City during the Depression, it travels over two generations to Paris. The inclusion of the Louvre as a location was a masterstroke, made possible through Ismail's penchant for legerdemain. Apart from Newman and Woodward's stand out performances as a rich couple stultified by time unable to understand the changing world around them, there was the elegant presentation of a difficult idea. Adapted from two novels by Evans Connell, Mr. and Mrs. Bridge was a critical as well as a commercial triumph.

Ismail had once said in an interview that he had brought in Jefferson in Paris (1995) for five million dollars; a feat beyond any producer, independent or backed by a Hollywood studio. To make a period piece about the second president of the United States and him courting his future

French wife, for such a sum was a well nigh impossible task. The film was panned despite Nick Nolte's caring performance and Pierre L'Homme's telling photography.

It was only a year earlier in 1994 that Ismail had made his own debut as a director in feature films. It is not that he had never been behind the camera before. His short The Creation of Women (1960) had been nominated for an Oscar in its category and later Mahatma and The Mad Boy (1974) of twenty-seven minutes duration was highly acclaimed. It is quite possible that he had grown tired of fundraising for large projects that had to be reasonably budgeted to be commercially viable. He wanted to do a small, intimate film he could call his own. He chose Anita Desai's novel In Custody to do as Muhafiz in Urdu. He got Desai and Shahrukh Husain to write the screenplay, which was set in contemporary Bhopal. Noor, a huge, custardy man, a once important Urdu poet is on his last legs, dying of adulation heaped on him by sycophants much like the rich food he so enjoys. He lives with his two wives, one like him old but unlike him reliable and the other a young,

opportunistic tart rescued from a local brothel and the mother of his son. Devan, a young Hindu lecturer devoted to the Urdu language is asked by his

publisher friend to do an interview with Noor for his journal. What follows, is in turn, comic and sad. Noor's interview is botched by a novice sound recordist. He dies suddenly, but Devan somehow manages to bring out a collection of Noor's poems.

Muhafiz is also about a highly expressive language that is being allowed to die out in independent India for exclusively political reasons. All official work in courts and police stations was done in Urdu before the partition of India in 1947. Immediately after, Hindi became the official language of the State. All avenues of Government employment suddenly closed for Urdu students. Noor a poet of sensitivity and discernment became a victim of capricious politics. To add insult to injury, his second wife sang his ghazals and passed them off as her own.

Ismail chose the more difficult intimist mode for his film. Rarely did the cinema go out of the poet's house. There were precisely five other locations, namely Devan's home and his college; his colleague Siddiqui's home and the office of the Urdu weekly which has commissioned Devan to do Noor's interview and the visit by boat to Sufi Saints' Mazar on an island in a lake. The last scene of Noor's funeral procession is seen mostly from a distance, mainly to create scale.

Too many things went wrong for intention to match achievement. For one,
Ismail had been away from home for much too long; true he did come back
periodically to make films, but these were not connected closely with the
imperceptibly changing social scene. He did not really have the time to study
India for he was far too busy administering to the needs of the film at hand.
His knowledge of Urdu, for all his enthusiasm, was at best sketchy.
Choosing the poetry of a revolutionary poet like Faiz Ahmed Faiz to do duty
for most of Noor's was a mistake. Anyone familiar with Faiz's oeuvre will
immediately realize that it does not sit well on the lips of a bacchante like
Noor. Perhaps Josh Malihabadi's poetry would have been more apt, for it
would have been closer to Noor's spirit. More attention should have been
paid to his ghazals especially those picturised on his second wife. They are
sung in a lackluster manner by Kavita Krishnamurthy. Even the one
rendered by Hariharan lacks conviction. They should have had more

melody, more raga content. This was all the more surprising because Ustad
Zakir Husain was the composer.
Ismail was in much greater control doing his second film Cotton Mary
(2000) in English, with a script by Alexandra Viets adapted from her own
play. It was about an Anglo-Indian Ayah who decides to make

herself
indispensable to her English mistress whose baby she helps to nurse. Mary,
though, a servant uses her dominant position over her employer suffering
from post-natal depression, to push her own case to go to England—home
country for the Eurasian. As expected all her schemes fall apart and she is
finally taken in by her relatives who she had till recently despised. Mary
never really comes to terms with her own identity.

This problem of identity forms the core of A Soldier's Daughter Never Cries
(1998) directed by James Ivory and based on an autobiographical novel by
Kaylie Jones, daughter of James Jones, author of From Here to Eternity, Go
to the Widow Maker and The Thin Red Line. The fundamental question of
recognizing oneself is raised once again in The Mystic Masseur (2002) the
last film that Merchant directed. V.S. Naipaul's comic novel about an Indian
from Trinidad trying to discover himself in London allowed for a mixture of
wit and seriousness.

Ismail and James worked together for the last time together in 2003 on
L'Divorce, a farce set in contemporary Paris in which doltish Americans and
French do not know what to do with themselves. An American young
woman, pregnant with her first child, is abandoned by her upper class

French husband for another woman. The hapless mother-to-be is joined by
her younger sister newly arrived from the U.S. only to be seduced by her
estranged brother-in-law’s rake of an uncle! The absconding young husband
dies a gratuitous death; a sweet, chubby baby is born to his wife. Nobody
learns anything from what life has to offer.

Ismail Merchant’s life had a lot to offer. In middle age he had become a
gourmet and gourmand, a television celebrity and a writer of popular
cookbooks. He had proved his worth and durability as a producer of quality
cinema whose foundation lay in good writing and had gifted the world an
unusual and talented filmmaker in James Ivory. He had also paved the way
for those independent producers and directors, not necessarily from India,
who were to follow after him. Last but not least he had proved that if there

was a will to make a really fine film then the means to make it could also be
found. He was a man of rare qualities.

The Elusive Mr Tanvir /

Partha Chatterjee

Habib Tanvir
(Courtesy Outlook)

Habib Tanvir (1923-2009), was perhaps the most famous Theatre personality in north India. An actor-manager in the Old-School mould, he led a crowded professional life, which, over the years, had invariably spilt over into private moments with family, friends and lovers, often to detrimental effect. The Raipur-born Habib Ahmed Khan assumed the nom-de-plume of Tanvir after he started writing poetry in Urdu in his senior years at school. He rose to fame as the founder-director of Naya Theatre along with his wife, Moneeka MisraTanvir, a strong,dedicated and talented theatre person in her own right. The actors were from the folk-theatre of Chattisgarh, near Raipur in Madhya Pradesh. It was through his unknown but highly accomplished actors and actresses that Tanvir was able to create a body of work in the Hindustani (Hindi-Urdu) theatre that stands alone. Two plays that come to mind and were hugely popular in their time, are Agra Bazar, based on the times of Nazir Akbarabadi(d-1830), the great Urdu poet, and, Charandas Chor taken from a Chattisarhi folk tale. Not without reason, he has remained for many, the most important director- playwright in the region. He was, for all his artistic accomplishments, a sadly flawed man. Without purporting to be a review of his memoirs, simply titled

‘’Habib Tanvir : Memoirs’’, (publisher-Penguin-Viking) this piece is a rebuttal of some of its contents to set the record straight.

The book is a translation from the Urdu by Mahmood Farooqui, a well-known historian and performer of Dastangoi, a near extinct art of story-telling, popular in 19th century Avadh, of which Lucknow was the cultural centre. Habib Tanvir’s life has been reconstructed through a series of remembrances dictated to Farooqui. One of the problems to arise from such an excercise is the propensity of the person remembering, to distort facts that may be too painful or embarrassing to remember. There were many such instances in Tanvir’s life but his letting down of Barbara Jill Christie nee Macdonald, a fine trained singer from Dartington Hall, Devonshire, England is the worst because it had a far reaching psychological effect on Anna, the talented singer daughter born of this relationship, on Nageen , his daughter from his marriage to Moneeka. The shadows of Anna and her mother Jill, through no fault of their own, always hovered over Nageen and her late mother Moneeka. Tanvir continued to visit Anna and her mother Jill, in England and France till 1996, when he was seventy three.

When Habib Tanvir had first met Jill, in England, he was thirty two and she, an easily impressionable sixteen. The year was 1955. He was handsome, dashing, a poet, and a student at RADA (Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts) in London. There was no Moneeka Misra then, on the horizon. He was already a man of the world, though with the airs of an idealist. It was easy to capture Jill’s heart. She loved him with a kind of sincerity and intensity that possesses the starry-eyed young, who in their optimism can go through hell and high water in search of the pure and the beautiful. One must also remember that when Habib and Jill had met the Second World War had ended only eight years ago, and the world, then as now, was desperately in need of love and hope.

It was indeed a pleasure and a revelation meeting Barbara Jill Christie and Anna, a couple of years earlier at the India International Centre in New Delhi. An elegant, handsome lady of seventy two, Jill, came across as a cultured, really educated, as opposed to highly literate, though she was that too, person who viewed the past, that is, her relationship with Habib Tanvir, with warmth, and a certain detachment. She was quite aware of the fact that in spite of being treated irresponsibly by him, she had played an important role in his life, not the least because of Anna, their daughter and the three grandsons. Anna's first son, Mukti, is eighteen; his grandmother has addressed her memoirs titled, ''Dreaming of Being'' to him. The recollections are written as a long letter to him, interspersed with his grandfather Habib's letters written to Jill, his grandmother, over a period of nearly twenty years; beginning in 1955, and with the last letter dated 15 April, 1964.

The following quotation appears on page one of the manuscript:-

"*The desire to write a letter, to put down what you don't want anybody else to see but the person you are writing to, but which you do not want to be destroyed, but perhaps hope may be preserved for complete strangers to read, is ineradicable. We want to confess ourselves in writing to a few friends, and we do not always want to feel that no one but those friends will ever read what we have written.*"

_ *T S Eliot*

This beginning, on a note of seriousness, is sustained throughout the narrative of 153 pages. Barbara Jill Christie writes with deep but controlled emotion and respect for her chosen subject.

Anna Tanvir has written the foreword to her mother's Memoirs.

She begins thus, " I first read my father's letters written to my mother a few months after his death. I was sitting in the aeroplane on my way to India to attend a festival celebrating his life and work that was taking place in Bhopal in October 2009. It was a confusing moment as I had not been to the state funeral held in held in Bhopal a few months earlier, and had not had the time to absorb the finality of his absence, nor was I sure why I was undertaking this journey at this particular moment. I simply felt I had to go to where he lived, meet the actors of Naya Theatre whom I knew well, and meet my Indian family; I needed to be in India, on his home-ground, to properly accept that he was no longer physically there."

Nageen, Habib and Moneeka's daughter, and Anna's half-sister, always remained deeply unhappy at her father's philandering with various women over the years, though she would dutifully accompany him when he visited Jill and Anna in England and France in his old age. Once, in Exeter, Nageen, having gone to stay with Jill and Anna, turned hysterical. She kept saying that Jill did not really know Habib, for the compulsive womaniser he was. She also held Jill responsible for her mother's continuous unhappiness. Nageen, all too aware of her father's failings, loved him unconditionally. She could not tolerate the fact that she had to always share her father's love with Anna and Jill. Habib, in his old age called Anna and Jill, "my two pearls". He was spot on. Anna, born in Ireland, seven months before Nageen, is a gifted singer and has several albums to her credit. Nageen is a fine singer of the folk songs of Chattisgarh she learnt from the actors in her father's troupe, is also a trained singer, she has also learnt Hindustani vocal music from the famous Salochana Yajurvedi. Anna and Nageen continue to be distanced from each other.

The release of Habib Tanvir's memoirs on 28 May, 2013 at the Habitat Centre, New Delhi was a sham Public Relations job.

Translator Mahmood Farooqui went on stage with Nageen, and together the two, lionised the deceased Tanvir. The announcer, a young lady, set the proceedings in motion by calling him one of the greatest Indian theatre directors of the 20th century; a fact that can be challenged by the serious followers of the work of Shambhu Mitra, Utpal Dutt and Ajitesh Bandopadhyay, all stalwarts of the Bengali theatre, and Jabbar Patel, a major figure of the Marathi stage. It was a veritable love-in, where critical judgement had been completely suspended. Habib Tanvir, the uncanny spotter of talent hardly got a mention. He was instead hailed as a messiah of Indian theatre, who worked with hardly any props, in the last twenty five years of his career. No one said while his minimalist approach was often very effective, he was not the first to use it well. There was not a word about Jill and Anna, for all practical purpose they did not exist. They are mentioned, albeit in passing, in the closing portion of the book. What Tanvir, with his cavalier attitude to facts related to his private life, could not ignore, his craven fans did.

As stated earlier, this is not a review of his memoirs but an attempt to redress a wrong committed fifty years earlier. Habib,, at forty, is still playing the 'young Lochivar'; this is after his marrying the constant, deeply loving but neurotic Moneeka, and the consigning of Jill far into the background. In a letter dated 21 December 1963, written to Jill from Raipur, MP, he says thus :-

Dearest Jill,

Yes, I know. You have every right to feel sore. It is five weeks since I arrived. Well, this is the first time I am writing any letter at all. But darling, not for a day have you ever been out of my mind. I was having the sweetest thoughts about you and your wonderful letter was so welcome. It came in very good time. And I began to visualise all kinds of lovely

things about you. Actually this is the first time we have ever shared life at all properly and for any length of time – and the whole things haunts.

He proceeds to tell about the acute paucity of funds and how theatre groups were falling all over him to work with them. To quote from the letter once more, "My mind goes back to each detail whenever parallel situations occur striking a contrast and I even think of the peace with which we shared our monies. Oh thank you so much Jill darling for all that most wonderful period of time". Jill, writing to her grandson nearly fifty years after receiving the letter said, "I like this letter so much Mukti and I remember being overjoyed to get it – the longest Habib ever wrote to me and full of warmth and interesting news."

Domesticity never suited him, though he had schooled himself into accepting it, lest he seem an ingrate to Moneeka and Nageen, and vital, rejuvenating romance that had awakened the artist in him after he fell in love with Jill, became a dream he could not sustain with any degree of consistency or loyalty. He was cleaved right down the middle of his being, if such a thing were possible.

Jill remembers in her memoirs, "By this I was still living in London but had to move into the house of a friend called Betsy Phillips, a rare and wonderful being. She had been an art teacher who taught me when i was a child. I had loved her lessons and we had always kept in touch. … She was not censorious, either of myself or Habib, nor particularly worried, which was most unusual under the circumstances! She seemed to be more than a little excited that a baby was coming along. I think the idea of a new life appealed very much to her sensitive, creative nature and she knew that I had loved Habib for many years, and that I would cope. That such a thoughtful person actually believed in me was indeed a great help."

Habib ‘s take on Jill, her pregnancy, and then motherhood, in his memoirs is weary and resigned.

“Somehow, Jill managed to trace me in Dallas, Texas, and landed there. From there she accompanied me to New Orleans, East Virginia and Washington D.C. and stuck to me like a shadow. This was a great phase for my poetry. .. I came back via London and went to Edinburgh from there. Jill’s dream eventually bore fruit. Anna was born on 6 May 1964. Later Jill married Christie who gave her another daughter. … When both daughters joined school, Jill wanted them to have separate identities – one should have Christy as a surname and the other should be called Tanvir. She sent me the school form, and I signed it and sent it back. … But Moneeka did not like it.” (pg 308, Habib Tanvir : Memoirs).

He goes on to say how Moneeka, who had earlier lost their first child in Panchmarhi, had three miscarriages in quick succession. This was after Tanvir’s return to Delhi in 1963. Thanks to the timely intervention of Sheela Malhotra, who advised Moneeka to use a bolster under her feet while lying down, Nageen was born 28 November 1964. “Moneeka was amazed and always considered Sheela to be Nageen’s second mother.” (pg 308, Habib Tanvir : Memoirs).

Habib’s life, over the years, thus rolled on amongst the comings and goings of girl friends, with whom, to his amazement, Moneeka, invariably bonded! Jill, of course was an exception, she was the great love of his life and the mother of his child, and so, was the ‘outsider’ whom, Habib, could neither forget, nor give up. He visited Mother and daughter, whenever he could. His silence, for some years following the birth of Anna was, in retrospect, not inexplicable. He just did not know how to accept responsibility for his actions, especially in his private life, not that he would acknowledge, much less accept, responsibility for his feckless and even cruel behaviour towards colleagues in his professional life. Deep down inside he seemed to be convinced that since he was

an artiste, he was entitled to behave as he pleased.

Habib Tanvir's training in England in Theatre, first at Rada in direction, following which, a stint in acting at the Bristol Old Vic, cured of participating in the joys of the proscenium theatre and the dramaturgy it required. He was for a more spontaneous kind of theatre that had its roots in the Indian soil, where sets and props were imaginative, and could be carried in a couple of suitcases and actors could express themselves with ease and freedom. 1954, found him working with Begum Qudsia Zaidi's Hindustani Theatre in Delhi. She had managed to gather around herself several talented artistes, amongst them Habib Tanvir, the Hyderabadi Urdu poet Niaz Haider, the music composer from Bengal, Jyotirindranath Moitra, who had at one time or another been associated with IPTA (Indian Peoples Theatre Association), the cultural arm of the Communist Party of India

Hindustani Theatre did three Sanskrit plays, Mriccha Kattikam by Shudraka, Shakuntala by Kalidas , and a play each of Bhasa and Bhavbhuti. It was with Hindustani Theatre that Habib Tanvir did his first production of Agra Bazar comprising tableaux of life in the times of Nazir Akbarabadi, the great Urdu poet whose verse sang of the joys and sorrows of everyday life. Habib was to tinker with the script over the years to make it more expressive and lively. Agra Bazar opened the doors to fame and Charandas Chor confirmed it. The grand success of this play was largely due to its blend of satirical comedy and high seriousness. The idea came from a Chattisgarhi folk tale, and which was brought sparklingly alive by a set of actors from there. Charandas Chor with its cast of folk actors, toured internationally, conquering the hearts of audiences everywhere despite its script being in a dialect from Madhya Pradesh.

It was the actors who did the trick with the plasticity of their body language and a gamut of emotions and ideas that their vocal inflections were able to convey to an audience

that did not ostensibly understand the language in which the play was written.

Tanvir's relationship with his actors had always been fraught on and off the stage. In spite of his wide and varied learning he was a little afraid of his actors, most of whom were barely literate. Why? Was it because they possessed an unusual amount of native artistic intelligence and so were able to convey his ideas with ease? It was widely said that they had to be coached in minute detail in the course of the rehearsals. This may have been true in the case of certain actors but certainly not with the gifted ones. His actors were already known names in the folk theatre of Chattisgarh.

Laluram, Punaram, Majid, Bhulwaram, Madanlal, Fida Bai, Teejan Bai, are some of the actors that come to mind who graced the plays staged by Naya Theatre. They were, like some who came in their wake, marvellous, and brought the intentions of the playwright, be it Habib Tanvir or Shakespeare, yes! Habib did do a Chattisgarhi version of A Midsummer Night's Dream! These were poor folk who worked as farmers and artisans, did a little folk theatre, of which Naacha was an essential part, were discovered by Habib and brought to live and work in Delhi in the Naya Theatre plays.

These actors and actresses were poor in their villages and they remained poor in the Metropolis of Delhi. It was a lot more difficult to survive economically in Delhi, where day to day living was murderously expensive. In their villages in Chattisgarh, they could somehow get back, possibly by sharing their meagre resources. Life in Delhi offered no such consolation. Habib had very little money but he was loath to share it with the actors who had made him famous. Theatre is an actor's medium. It is the actors who bring to life a director's vision once the performance begins onstage. Habib's actors from Chattisgarh, served him very well for a long time, but he had little for them once the play was over. The actors led a miserable life, while he managed to lead economically,

an acceptable middle-class existence.

Habib had scrounged around for ‘pennies’ till his early forties, but once he found his actors to interpret his vision of the theatre in the Chattisgarh folk idiom, his fortunes began to change rapidly. He managed to slowly but surely stabilise himself economically. The grants that he got from various state institutions were barely adequate to run his drama company. And what was coming in (from performances abroad) he did not share with the actors. His attitude was, if the Government grants were insufficient to pay his actors, so be it. It was inevitable that his actors go on strike and they did when they and Habib were staying in a number of tiny Government flats in Ber Sarai, New Delhi, in the early 1990s. They went public with their grievances, saying that they knew that Habib had money, but he did not want to give what they thought was owed them.

Habib Tanvir’s career, since his association with the Chhatisgarh actors, progressed steadily. The Government of India first awarded him the Padmashree, and later, the Padmabhushan. The Madhya Pradesh state government, then Congress-led, honoured him and gave him a decent flat to live in. He showed exemplary courage persisting with the production of his play, Ponga Pundit, about religious hypocrisy, when activists of the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) and allied organisations of the Hindu Far Right, made repeated violent attempts to disrupt performances, after the demolition of the Babri Masjid, in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh. His Leftist political upbringing, with its emphasis on the exercise of discipline when under siege, came in handy. When the end came he was given a state funeral in June, 2009.

He had the privilege of courting the Soviet Union, and finding life-saving employment there as a Dubbing artist, and the United States of America, where he was invited as a speaker on theatre, and later with Naya Theatre Troupe, for performances. East and West Germany before the cold war, and then plain

Germany, after the fall of the Berlin wall along with Poland were favourite destinations for work as were England and Scotland; the production of Charandas Chor with Chattisgarh actors was highly appreciated at the Edinburgh and won the Fringe First award.

As far as his sense of entitlement was concerned, he knew how much he could 'squeeze' in a relationship. Women continued to drool over him even in old age, as he smoked his pipe with a preoccupied air. Moneeka and Nageen, as wife and daughter, performed their filial duties with unflinching devotion. Moneeka passed away on 28 May, 2005. After having attempted suicide over Habib, as a young woman, she became indispensible to him, without her support he could not have gone very far in any direction. After her mother, went, Nageen looked after her father very well. The young, particularly those inclined towards the political Left came in droves to worship at his feet. Habib Tanvir had done very well for himself. There are two other participants in his story, namely Jill, the great love of his life, whom he had let down, and their daughter Anna.

When Anna was born in Dublin, her father Habib Tanvir was far away in India. His deafening silence worried her mother Jill terribly. Writing in old age to grandson Mukti, she recalls :

I wrote to Habib and sent pictures, but received nothing in return. You ask me Mukti what I thought had happened? It occurred to me that he might have died, or at least become ill. I read and re-read that last letter with its cool beginning, its preoccupation with theatre productions and its wistful air at the end. At the time I simply didn't know, but felt that if no disaster had befallen him, he must have withdrawn. It was a horribly chilling sensation to feel that closeness simply disappearing as if it had never been,with no explanation. … Having a small person to care for who took up almost every waking moment meant I did not sink into despair. Even so his silence was insupportable; a dead-weight on my

life, and totally bewildering. Looking after my dark-haired daughter who I so badly wanted him to see, made me wonder each day what momentous happening was stopping him from being in touch.’’

After two years of silence Habib responded to a letter from Jill informing him of her brother Kev’s death. Jill remembers, ‘’ I was surprised to get a reply. He wrote rather formally but comfortingly and asked after our daughter Anna, saying he would love to see her one day. … At long last, he did manage to come to see us, and continued to visit from time to time right up to the end of his life. There remained a genuine fondness between us and always unspoken efforts on his behalf to put things right.”

Anna responds to her father Habib’s absence in her childhoodin the Epilogue to her mother’s memoirs :

My first meeting with my father was unforgettable. It was not until I was nine years old that he came to meet me, by which time my mother had married, and I had a half-sister Vickie, who was as fair as I was dark. I spent my childhood conjuring up his image in my imagination, inventing him over and over again, in more and more exotic colours. My mother had always talked of him, trying to give me a sense of my Indian heritage through her stories and descriptions. … My father accompanied us in our daily lives in the imagination, and for me his image was so strong that he was somehow present despite his physical absence.”

Anna remembers her first meeting with her father:

“ He arrived clutching a chillum pipe that he puffed continuously that he puffed at continuously clouding him in wreaths of smoke, and wearing a large colourful shawl, a beret, a hand-made kurta and stylish jeans. … He seemed to create magic wherever he went, and as for telling a story without a book, he recounted to me hour after hour stories

from the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, and I was utterly mesmerised.”

Anna and her mother Jill loved Habib devotedly, despite the years of absence and neglect, and that things came a full circle to bring hope and optimism before he passed away is indeed lovely.

Courage in his private life had never been Habib Tanvir’s strength, despite professions of often real love towards those he had, in some way, wronged. He gave Nageen exclusive rights over all his writing, including his correspondence. She is not keen that her father’s letters to Jill, and, hers to him should ever be published. It is perhaps out of a misplaced sense of loyalty to her mother Moneeka’s memory that she is acting in this manner. Who would know better than Nageen, how much her mother and Jill had suffered because of her father’s irresponsible behaviour towards both. It is time for a mature reconsideration of the past. It is time to let wounds heal. It is time to look forward rather than back. It is time to understand that life is the source of all art and that artists are, at once, both strong and frail creatures, who are but mortals.

Marcello Mastrianni- An Actor for All Seasons / Partha Chatterjee

Marcello Mastrianni with Sofia Loren in Yesterday Today Tomorrow

Marcello Mastrianni (1924-1996) was for many the most charismatic of European actors, and along with Jean Paul Belmond, the most subtle.He was, for many the most versatile actor in the world. There is something loutish about the obviously gifted Gerard Depardieu as there was about Marlon Brando, but there was nothing but finesse about Marcello Mastrianni's screen performances, even when he played negative characters. In his own gentle, self-effacing way he became the embodiment of the Italian, and even the European male, marooned, between the romantic, poetic memories of a not too industrialised Italy/ Europe before the First World War, and the aftermath of the Atom bombs dropped over Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the United States of America to end the Second World War. His first memorable role was opposite the young, sassy Sophia Loren, already with her talent for comedy in place, in Alexandro Blasetti's, Too Bad She's Bad. He played a harried taxi driver pushed beyond his bounds of patience by a beautiful girl-pickpocket (Loren) and her bogus professor father (Vittorio de Sica). Mastroianni revealed a flair for comic timing, and held his ground against a formidable actor/ comedian like de Sica, who was also one of the giants of Italian Neorealism having directed emblematic films like Bicycle Thieves, Umberto D, and Miracle in Milan.

His throwaway good looks also made him over the years a huge star in Italy, and eventually internationally. He wore his stardom lightly as he did his enormous acting talent.Chiara, his daughter by longtime lover and dazzling French cinema actress Catherine Deneuve, remembers him as a father who came to fetch her from school when she was a child. He was the embodiment of an extraordinary man hidden inside an ordinary man; perhaps that is the reason why women found him so attractive. Both his strength and his vulnerability can be seen in that sequence from Luchino Visconti's, White Nights, in which he is dancing frantically in a public place, and suddenly falls down Visconti's interpretation o a tale by Dosteyevski became both controvertial and famous, and Mastroianni's performance remained in people's minds. Federico Fellini found in him the ideal actor to play his frazzled, alienated characters, funny in an off-centre way in two flms, La Dolce Vita, and 81/2. The first film dealt with the Roman glitteratti at the end of the 1950s determined to live it up as if there was no tomorrow, the second, was about a film maker who is trying to shoot a film with autobiographical dimensions but does not know what to do.When asked by journalists how does he plan to end the film? the Stetson-hatted director (Mastroianni) repilies " I am looking for an answer. " His reply rings true.

Michelangelo Antonioni, between the two Fellini films, cast him in La Notte, in 1961. There was no scope for humour, even implied, in this dour master's films, not in this one. Mastroianni took it in his stride and delivered a quitely moving performance alongside the sultry French actress, Jeanne Moreau. Antonioni's angst-ridden film captured the imagination of intellectuals in Europe and America.It was time to get back to comedy with a serious touch.

Vittorio de Sica cast him opposite Sophia Loren in Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow. It was a three-part film about Naples and Neopolitans. In the first story he is a harassed husband and father of a large family, whose wife has been sent to prison for selling American cigarettes in the blackmarket; in the second he is a journalist having a clandestine affair with a multi-millionaire's wife whose Rolls Royce car he manages to damage while saving a child; finally he is a foolish son of a rich man in love with a religious prostitute! Loren and Mastroianni excelled themselves in tthis film, need one add.

He showed his versatility again by playing a turncoat who literally puts on the wrong coat and gets shot dead in Allonsanfan by the Tavianni brothers, which was set in the Garibaldi period and the unification of Italy in thein late 19th centur A little before that he had played Mersault, the accidental killer, veryconvincingly in Visconti's , The Stranger, a rather academic version of Albert Camus's profound novel, The Outsider. Of course, there was that wonderful chemistry with Sophia Loren, in Dino Risi's bitter-sweet comedy, The Priest's Wife.

The 1980's saw him reunited with Fellini: He played himself in Intervista, a film about Fellini, and then in Ginger and Fred, he was paired with Guieletta Masina a marvellous actress and Fellini's wife. It was a poignant story of a couple of old time Music Hall performers who do the dance routines of Fred Astair and Ginger Rogers from old Hollywood musicals on a Television Christmas Special. It is dfficult to forget him as a middle-class homosexual with whom a fading, overworked housewife (Loren, who else) falls in love during the Fascist late 1930s under Mussolini.

He remained married to his wife from 1948, Flora Carabella, and the union produced a daughter, Barbara. When he died of cancer, his last partner film maker, Anna Maria Tato was with him. The most enduring image of him, that weds the person to his art, is of him as Mandrake the Magician dancing with the aging but still voluptuous Anita Ekberg, first in front of the camera, and then in silhoutte behind a transluscent screen in Intervesta. It was the acme of romance.

The Cinema of M.F. Husain

M.F. Husain's two feature length fiction films, Gaja Gamini and Meenaxi are classic examples of having one's cake and

eating it too. In each case, the cake is delectable. True that the two films are not for a mass audience whatever that may mean, but that there is a sizeable audience for them, mainly urban, is beyond dispute. Had they been promoted properly, there would have been jam for the distributors and exhibitors. These two films are genuinely experimental and also eminently accessible to those with open minds-not necessarily intellectual or in tune with European Cinema-but just receptive to new ideas. They share certain avant-garde qualities with Ritwik Ghatak's 'Komal Gandhar' (1961) and are even more advanced in terms of ideas and equally fluid in execution.

It is both unfair and unrealistic to compare Husain's achievements with that of other artists – painters and sculptures – who have also made films. In 1967, his Short, Through The Eyes of a Painter won the top prize in its category at the Berlin Film Festival. Shortly afterwards, an illustrious colleague Tyeb Mehta also made a Short for the same producer, Films Division of India (Government run) in which a slaughterhouse figured prominently. It too was widely appreciated. Then Gopi Gajwani, a painter who also worked with Span Magazine an organ of the United States Information Service, made from his own pocket two abstract short films in 35mm. They were shown once or twice and disappeared for nearly 30 years only to surface during the recent Golden Jubilee Celebrations of Lalit Kala Akademi. Both Mehta and Gajwani were interesting film-makers who might have found a voice in the New York underground cinema of the 1950s and 60s. Sadly neither proceeded further with film-making for whatever reason.

Husain never let go of his dream of making fiction films while he continued to paint with his customary zeal. As a lad he wanted to be an actor in Hindi cinema, but that did not happen. He, instead started to paint large banners and hoardings to publicise popular movies, an exercise that gave

his line power and eloquence. He has always been an avid filmgoer nursing a secret desire to direct. When the opportunity came he was becoming bored with his celebrity status. Everything he did was fodder for gossip columnists.

Husain's relationship with women for over four decades has intrigued many, but his understanding of the feminine psyche has seldom if ever been appreciated. He is one of the few men anywhere in the world truly at ease in the company of women. Gaja Gamini and Meenaxi are his tribute to womanhood : playful, subtle, witty, humorous and even wise. He is without consciously intending to be one, a woman's director.

Neither Madhuri Dixit (Gaja Gamini) nor Tabu (Meenaxi) has ever been directed with more finesse. In each case there seems to have been a complicity with the director; a rare oneness.

Both Gaja Gamini and Meenaxi are episodic in nature, supple in there handling of time. They are, for all the narrative ballast they carry, essentially explorations in feminine psychology.

Meenaxi is about a blocked writer's muse in Hyderabad who sells perfume, more so metaphorically, for she sets him on a course of self-discovery and understanding. This journey takes the form of a novel-in-progress, which she helps Nawab (Raghuvir Yadav) the protected old world aristocrat man-of-letters, write. It is a process that we the viewers share in with continuous pleasure.

It begins with a celebration of the engagement of Nawab's youger sister where he fortuitously meets Meenaxi (Tabu). A qawwali, Noor Alla is being sung which runs like a leit motif in the film and is crucial towards its understanding. When in the final sequence of the three-episode film the words Yeh Barkeye Tajjali (This bolt of lightening) are sung from this very qawwali, Husain's cinematic intentions and credo for

living are made transparent. There is a joy that communicates itself, a transformation of dull and mundane reality into beauty-fleeting but recurring; each time new and significant. Here, as in Gaja Gamini Husain's understanding of cinema is truly remarkable, he knows that its prime business is to create and sustain an illusion.

Here content has no meaning by itself but only when it is expressed through completely filmic means. Realistic and un-realistic cinema and all else are but convenient labels. What counts is the sudden discovery of the truth through paradox, humour, wit and intelligence. A touch as light as Husain's is essential for such an undertaking.

Ashok Mehta's camera in Gaja Gamini serves Husain's vision faithfully, even beautifully in patently artificial surroundings. It relies on building atmosphere and capturing facial expressions to help articulate conceptions that attempt to find a mean between what seems to be painterly and musical preoccupations. His lighting, compositions and camera movements veer towards classicism. It is after all a move from the world of P.C. Barua's Devdas (1935) and hence Husain's youth-a strategically placed bullock cart in an early sequence confirms this view-to a sparking creative life in wise octogenarian splendour. It is both a stylish and a stylized film.

Shamistha Roy is art director in both films. In Gaja Gamini her challenge was to create a poetic reality out of deliberately artificial settings. Meenaxi of course, gave her more freedom because of its sweep and its intimate association with the naturalistic (physical) world. She comes through admirably on both occasions.

Gaja Gamini had veteran Bhupen Hazarika for the songs and dynamic young tabla player Anuradha Pal doing the background score. Hazarika's songs are melodic and unusual without being intrusive. Pal's racy tabla acts in dynamic counter point to a

gently flowing story.

Nawab's literary odyssey and Meenaxi's pivotal role in it is what propels the film forward. The second episode is set in Jaisalmer, where she is transformed into a Rajasthani prince's niece, beautiful aware and socially committed. An ardent water conservationist. By this time Nawab has 'invented' Kameshwar (Kunnal Kapoor) so that he can be her suitor. This tale embraces abstract and concrete ideas like desire, emotional fidelity, illusive stirrings of love, and they are highlighted by two sparkling songs, Rang Haiye-Rang Haiye, and Ye Rishta, whose picturisation show an acute awareness of current marketing and advertising trends in electronic and print media.

The vocabulary of chic Advertising and Travel films is stood on its head with impish delight to create genuine romance. This is to be sure, a trapeze act without a net and Husain and his young son Owais, also his indefatiguable associate, come through with flying colours. **Meenaxi** shows a greater daring in the recognition of primary feelings than **Gaja Gamini** and a youthful energy charges every frame in it.

Bombay Film Industry wizard Waman Bhonsle of the Waman-Guru duo edited Gaja Gamini and rose to the occasion. His vast skill and experience was invaluable in making such a complex film a success. Meenaxi has availed of Sreekar Prasad's exceptional editing skills. He brings an easy flow to a story that could have easily gone out of hand.

Meenaxi, of necessity looks and feels improvised, even tentative but its tentativeness is its strength. **Gaja Gamini** is more centered its emotions more distilled, there is the voice of experience in every idea expressed and its wit and humour is more worldly. Here Madhuri Dixit playing the heroine with the majestic female elephant's gait is a fully realized woman in each of her several avatars. It is a terrific adventure in time and the nature of memory.

Husain painting dark rain-laden monsoon clouds on a canvas in the first sequence and then, the repeated descent of a bundle (gathari, usually carried by woman) from top frame in double quick time with the immortal blind singer from the early talkies, K.C. Dey singing Teri Gathari Main Laga Chor Musafir Dekh Zara (Beware Traveller, A Thief is about to steal your belongings) to bridge a time lag of over 65 years, on the sound track, sets the tone. Already ambiguity and awareness are harnessed together for what will be a poetic exploration of woman and her role in different civilizations spread over a time span of a millennium.

Kalidas, Leonardo da Vinci, C.V. Raman, are all aware of Gaja Gamini and care for her. Only Shahrukh, played by superstar Shahrukh Khan, an international photographer, is in love with her. She loses him in a war. Husain's ideas of life and art find deeply satisfying expression in a studio bound production.

Meenaxi, is film mostly out in the street or in nature. It is an onward journey of a staid, middle-aged writer and his attempts through his writing, aided by the mysterious, feminine Meenaxi to find out what constitutes life and makes it worth living. Nawab travels from Hyderabad to Prague to thank Maria, a character of his ongoing novel who works as a stage actress and waitress and is really a metamorphosed Meenaxi, for giving him a perspective on his work and therefore life. Maria loves the traveller Kameshwar, who has 'progressed' from the previous episode in Jaisalmer to this one. Originally, he was a belligerent Hyderabadi motor mechanic who wanted to become a singer. Theirs' is a youthful love full of creative potential.

Nawab's novel is not complete but a new realization of life's beauty has dawned on him. He 'dies' in his quest and re-awakens to the strains of the qawwali, Noor Alla and sees Meenaxi with new eyes as dancers, darvesh-like, whirl around her. He is enchanted all over again. A cycle of understanding

life and its myriad possibilities completes itself and a fresh one begins. Nawab achieves Barkat (progress, realization really) through Harkat (activity) thanks to Meenaxi's guidance.

Santosh Sivan's cinematography in Meenaxi is lively, buoyant and many a time, air borne. It is important to keep the camera moving in what is an impressionistic film. A series of impressions instead of incidents comprise the narration. Each one is clear yet ambiguous, pulling in opposite direction creating a poignant feeling of truth, though not always by design.

A.R. Rahman in Meenaxi has composed melodies that are beautiful because they are apt and vice-versa. His background score evokes youthful romance. His music is a bridge between the past and the present pointing towards the future.

Songs have a crucial role in this film. Clarity and ambiguity play hide and seek in each of the six that are there. They chart Kameshwar, Meenaxi and therefore Nawab's progress in their journey through life and their appreciation of it. Owais Husain, the painter's younger son started out as his father's assistant in Gaja Gamini. Here in Meenaxi, he is associate director and screenplay writer. Much of the film's coltish, romantic vigour comes from him. Song picturisation seems to be his forte. He even integrates dance into the film's flow with aplomb. Raeima Husain, his young, talented wife has been of considerable help in these areas as she has been in producing an unusually demanding film. But the overall visualization, aesthetic and philosophical slant, not to forget its sense of fun, is all M.F. Husain's despite his having reportedly said, "It is seventy percent Owais's film and thirty percent mine". In this project he has been like the great jazz bandleader and pianist Count Basie, who directed his band with precise, economic piano playing. It was said of him that he needed only two notes to express a musical idea when others needed twenty.

There is a seamless poetic continuity of ideas and feelings running through Gaja Gamini and Meenaxi. They joyously affirm the continuous cycle that nature goes through to renew itself.

Water as a Metaphor in Indian Cinema and the Films of Ritwik Ghatak

Water is both a word and a many hued idea. Its presence along with oxygen is crucial to life on Earth. Considering that India is a land of many rivers, water does not figure prominently in Indian cinema either as an image or a metaphor, save for the work of a few film-makers most notably Ritwik Ghatak and Jahnu Barua, not to forget Ramu Kariat.

It is amusing and instructive to note that the first two are from the East: Ghatak born in East Bengal and the product of the cinema of West Bengal because of the partition of India in 1947, Barua, a native of Assam and Kariat, the third director from Kerala, a land also blessed by nature with many waterways and water bodies and mercifully spared devastating floods that are a yearly occurrence in Assam and Bengal.

Each director is, so to say, the product of his environment. In Ghatak there is an ancient grieving that refuses to go away; messages of hope seem to come only as an after thought. In Assam, peasants are largely at the mercy of nature. Barua’s characters stoically accept any hand destiny deals

them.

Kariat’s characters go through great tragedies usually against a beautiful backdrop of water. Star-crossed lovers from a poor fishing community in Chemmeen, are found dead on a beach, a calm sea bears witness to this tragedy. In Dweep (Island) water is a recurring motif to highlight the contradictions within people who are marooned within themselves as they are on the island.

Arriflex of West Germany designed a rugged, portable motion-picture camera that was to revolutionarise film production. Indian producers too imported this expensive instrument but rarely allowed it to be used in inclement weather, fearing damage, and much worse, loss. It was after all an expensive piece of equipment-by Indian standards. Ritwik Ghatak, a reckless character by temperament, risked his own life and that of his associates to get what he wanted. In Ajaantrik (1957) he shot in pelting rain, and over unfriendly terrain to get powerful visuals. He was obsessed, not with cosmetic perfection as many of the Hollywood directors of his time were, and continue to be so, to this day. His quest was for the correct emotional note. Film making for him was like composing music.

This gambler’s streak was evident when he shot Titash Ekti Nadir Naam (A River Called Titash), his comeback film in 1972 in Bangladesh. Since water was the driving force in both, the eponymous novel by Advaitya Malla Burman and Ghatak’s script based on it, he would stake everything to get the absolutely necessary visuals to make what is generally considered his last great film.

Hindi cinema rarely used water as a leit-motif. Only in song picturisation did it play a significant role. Guru Dutt, in his first film, Jaal (The Net, 1951), had coastal Goa as his location. It was a crime thriller with an obligatory moral ending. Four songs, two of them memorable, have the sea as an integral part of their camera choreography. Pighla Hai Sona Doore Gagan Meye (Molten Gold Lights The Far Horizon) was filmed at dusk with fishing boats returning home after a day at sea, and their presence add imperceptibly to the romantic mood of the song. Yeh Raat Yeh Chandni Phir Kahan (On A Glowing Moonlit Night This, Memories Nudge And Stir The Heart), has judiciously selected sea images and convincing B/W photography to simulate moonlight. Maria (Geeta Bali) a simple, giving Catholic girl pines for Tony (Dev Anand) her absent lover. Hemant Kumar and Lata Mangeshkar's singing, Sahir Ludhianvi's lyrics and Sachin Dev Burman's composition together create an unforgettable experience.

Tony, fleeing from the police, tries to board in swirling waters a boat that will take him to safety, but is unsuccessful. As he is arrested and is being lead away, Maria offers him her own crucifix in forgiveness. Love, however inadvertently, triumphs over greed.

Bimal Roy was the other director from Hindi films to use water as a poetic symbol in some of his films but only in songs, while observing intelligently the conventions of commercial cinema. In Madhumati (1957), a ghost-romance written by Ritwik Ghatak, the song Suhana Safar Aur ye Mausam Haseen (Such a Joyous Journey, Such Sweet Weather), has brief shots of mountain Springs that eloquently bring out the male protagonist's euphoric state of mind. He also used water images in the heart-rending climax of Bandini (The Captive-1963) when the heroine fresh out of jail fortuitously

hears of her consumptive revolutionary lover's presence on board a steamer that is about to leave. She is disturbed because the man is inadvertently responsible for all her woes in the past. Just as the steamer sounds its final departure, she rushes out of the passenger shed, down the gangplank to scramble aboard and embrace her man and her own destiny. Together they embark on a journey of self-discovery with courage and conviction. Here the director uses the river as a witness and a catalyst, in the making and shaping of events that give meaning to life. Need one add that this overwhelming scene is punctuated by Sachin Dev Burman's haunting rendering of O Re Maajee Morey Saajan Heye Uss Paar…(My Love Waits On The Far Bank, Quick! Get Me Across O Boatman) based on an East Bengali folk air.

Jagte Raho (1957) directed by Shambhu Mitra and Amit Maitra for Raj Kapoor's R.K. Films banner was a decisive breakthrough, although an extremely short-lived one, from the company's earlier mushy, pseudo-socialist productions. Directed by two worthy former members of IPTA (Indian People's Theatre Association) the culture wing of the undivided Communist party of India, it was the first serious attempt by commercial Hindi cinema to use water as a metaphor.

In it a peasant (Raj Kapoor) comes to the metropolis of Calcutta to find work. Hungry, penniless, alone he tries to get a drink of water from a public tap and is chased away by a policeman who thinks he is a thief. He runs into a block of flats and discovers in his nightlong flight from State tyranny what corrupt and dissolute lives most of the tenants lead. Throughout the night he is chased by a group of vigilantes who obviously represent extra constitutional authority much like the R.S.S. He finally quenches his thirst at dawn given water by a devotee (Nargis) from her kalash (bell metal pot) who

sings Jaago Mohan Pyaare (Awake My Beloved Krishna! The New Sun's Rays Kiss Your Brow) set to Salil Choudhury rousing music and Shailendra's words that subtly alter the traditional Bhajan to suit the socialist ideal. The hunted peasant finds dignity, courage and self-worth in this the final sequence of the film.

Water, quite simply, represents the dignity of the Have Nots, the collective, in Jagte Raho; it also stands for the need for justice, social and political, and a more humane way of life. The adroit serio-comic treatment that the directors give the film entertains the viewer while making him think. That it came exactly after a decade of independence from British rule is no surprise. The Nehruvian ideal was already a spent force and Big Business was raising its ugly head. A film that called for a reconsideration or reclamation of lost values was in order, and that water, something you do not deny even an enemy when he is parched, should act as a catalyst for bringing all right minded people together in their quest for a decent, equitable society was the confirmation of civilised ideals.

Jagte Raho was the only Hindi film where water had been used so powerfully as a political symbol. It was the most distinguished production of R.K. Films. But other films by the same banner with Raj Kapoor as director, as opposed to this one in which he was only the producer, use water solely as a romantic, sexual image usually with considerable technical skill. Unforgettable is the picturisation of the song Pyaar Hua Iqraar Hua… (The Heart Chooses, The Heart Exults, Why Is It Then Afraid Of Love) from Shree 420 (1954).

Nargis and Raj Kapoor, in his Chaplinesque tramp avatar, give lip synchronisation on camera to this exquisite (the adjective

is appropriate) melody sung by Manna Dey and Lata Mangeshkar, composed by Shankar-Jaikishan with lyrics by Shailendra. The artistic intent is direct. The two protagonists huddle under an umbrella in steady rain at night and the intention is to bring them together in matrimony. Raincoat-clad little children walk past the couple to reinforce the idea. Since the duo is not a part of the privileged classes the pictorial suggestion is of a happy, socialist future for them with lovable children of their own like the ones just shown. On camera, a line from the song Hum Na Rahengeye, Tum Na Rahogeye, Rahengeye Yeh Nishaaniyaan [Gone! Gone! We Will Be Forever Gone! Our Love Shall Take Seed, Go On…] bolsters the idea lyrically.

Hawa Meye Urtaa Jaaye Meraa Laal Duptaa Mulmul Kaa (My Red Mul Mul Scarf Flutters gaily in The Breeze) from Raj Kapoor's first big hit Barsaat (Rain) in 1949 captured the imagination of the youth in newly independent India. The Song composed by Ram Ganguly, based on Raga Pahadi, continues to be heard and appreciated fifty five years later. It was erroneously credited to Ganguly's two assistants Shankar and Jai Kishan, who teamed up to become a legendary duo of Hindi Film Music. The melody was picturised on Nimmi, one of the two female leads in the film and an actress who projected intensity, sensuality and vulnerability in a heady mix. The other actress was the gifted, sprightly Nargis. The picturisation of Hawaa Meye…. contained images of Nimmi by a gushing mountain stream that were playful, innocent and sexual and flattered both men and women in the audience.

In later years, after Nargis, the glowing actress-star and inspiration behind R.K. films left, the artistic quality of the productions dropped noticeably. There was a marked deterioration in the use of water imagery from Jis Desh Meye Ganga Behti Heye (1961) to Sangam (1964) and then the fall came with Satyam, Shivam, Sunderam. By the time Raj Kapoor

made Ram Teri Ganga Maili (1986) blatant carnality had come to dominate his sensibility so completely that it was difficult to believe as a young man he had so deeply moved a large viewing Public with films that were genuinely felt if, a trifle sentimental.

It is interesting to note that most of the filmmakers who used water as a part of their cinematic conception in Hindi films were from the eastern region. The Bengali Shakti Samanta, used the Hooghly in Calcutta, albeit for song picturisation in Amar Prem. In an earlier film Sawan Ki Ghata, he picturised a song by a gushing river tributory in the Himachal. Aaj Koi Pyaar Se (A Stranger Came By And I Fell In Love, The World Stood Still And I Moved On) is remembered almost forty years later as much for its cinematic rendering as for O.P. Nayyar’s composition and Asha Bhonsle’s melodious, singing that had a flowing, feminine, erotic quality.

1. Aravindan’s Esthapan (Stephen-1979) is one of the most intriguing films to be made in Kerala. Esthapan, is an elusive vagabond with the gift to heal and to prophesize. He is, predictably, a suspect in the eyes of the Church and many of the flock. It is even suggested that he traffics with the Devil! But the truth is quite different.

Without resorting to any special effects Aravindan evokes his much loved character’s innocence, transporting humanity and ability to suggest magical happenings, by photographing him from almost ground level from an elevation on the beach as he “emerges” out of the sea. He achieves the illusion by compressing the perspective with a telephoto lens so that Esthapan appears to be bobbing in and out of the waves.

Water is used in the film to cleanse and bless as if to suggest divine sanction. Christianity here has a folksy, local flavour though technology has made its inroads and traders of various kind have a visible presence. The local priest, contrary to all expectations is a champion of Esthapan and his humane qualities. The sea helps Aravindan to introduce the right tone of ambiguity to skirt or indeed subvert useless ideological debate and sustain the mystery that makes his hero so endearing.

Pather Panchali(1955) was the first Indian film in which rain became a memory-image. Apu and Durga, two siblings, dance in pouring rain to express their joy, and so become, at one with the elements. Ironically, it is Durga who catches pneumonia and dies in their decrepit village home in Nishchindipur. Rain, in Satyajit Ray's hands becomes both giver and destroyer. There is a sense of the inevitable about the rain sequence, a poet's intuition about the cycle of life and death. Never again did Ray in his long and illustrious career create such moments, where life revealed its complex workings so simply.

It is true that he did use water as a metaphor occasionally in his films later but never as spontaneously as in Pather Panchali. His reference to water as a cinematic idea thereafter became oblique, even sly. Aparajito, the second part of the Apu trilogy, was filmed in Banares, through which the holy Ganga flows. The most ancient of rivers figures only in a few sequences. First, it is seen in the background as Apu's father Harihar, a brahmin, preaches to Hindu widows on the steps of the Ghats on its banks, and then, more dramatically as he lies dying and his wife Sarabajaya sends

little Apu running to fetch a Ghoti (a small bell metal pitcher) of holy water to perform his last sacrament.

Jalsa Ghar (The Music Room-1958) opens majestically. Bishambar Ray, a paupered zamindar is seen lounging in an easy-chair on the terrace of his crumbling mansion with the immense Ganga in Murshidabad far in the background. The broken landlord asks of his faithful servant: “What month is it Ananta?” Unwittingly, to be sure, the picture of endlessness suggested by the retainer’s name and the panoramic sweep of the river become one at that moment.

Unlike Ray, Ghatak was a reluctant city man; the partition of India forced him to become one. His relationship with the city of Calcutta, now Kolkata, was one of love and hate, in equal measure. Until his tragic and untimely death in 1976, Ritwik Ghatak, remained at heart a boy from the riverine culture of East Bengal, where there always was a surfeit of water, the dominant colour in nature, green in its myriad shades, and there was the promise and, indeed dream, of bloom and fulfillment. The presence of water, thanks to these formative experiences became integral to his cinema.

There is a long, comic sequence in heavy rain in Ajantrik (1957). Bimal who drives a 1920 Chevrolet as a cab in rural Bengal is engaged by a bridegroom and his eccentric uncle to drive to the bride’s for the wedding. The jalopy gets stuck in slippery mud and Bimal gets his two passengers to push it as the rain pours down relentlessly. The scene, in retrospect, seems to be a droll comment on the marriage that is soon to take place, and for that matter, most marriages in this world. Rain affecting human lives by chance, or atleast, influencing it in some mysterious way, is indicative of the paradoxes that are at the heart of human existence.

Titash Ekti Nadir Naam came at a time when his health and morale had been broken by years of unemployment, alcoholism and often near destitute conditions. He had in his dark period tried to make Manik Bandopadhyay's immortal novel, Padma Nadir Maajhi (The Boatman of Padma) into a film but his drinking prevented producer Hitin Choudhury from investing money in the project. The offer from Praan Katha Chitra in Dacca was a godsend. He understood, perhaps better than anyone else the all important role water was to play in Titash…. It was the very reason for its existence. He had also to maintain the spirit of the novel by a journalist who belonged to the uprooted fishing community portrayed in it. Reshaping the narrative to express his own vision of life in telling images and sound became an obsession.

The story of a river changing course to influence, change and even destroy a fishing community, robbing it of its source of sustenance and dignity, for him, a betrayed leftist flung on the debris of history, perhaps unconsciously, if not sub-consciously, represented all humanity paupered by a conspiracy of businessmen, big and small, working in tandem with equally corrupt politicians. Water, arbiter of human destiny is used as a leitmotif. On occasion it is a giver and sustainer and at others a destroyer: one by its presence and the other by its absence. Everybody who is a part of the fishing community that lives on the banks of the river Titash is beholden to her-water is feminine in Indian mythology-for his livelihood.

Ghatak's version of Titash… is soaked in water for more then three-quarters of its running time. It begins with shots of rain and boats out fishing, some of them trying to get back before a killer storm overtakes them. The black and white

photography captures almost tactile images of water. Absence of colour is a blessing here because it helps concentrate the image, and that done, to invest it with an abstract quality.

H2O is a physical reality in most of the shots, and, an ever-changing metaphor as well. Things come a full circle when Basanti, betrayed by fate, time and hence history, lies dying on Titash's dry river-bed clawing at sand to draw just enough water to perform her own last sacrament. Both, the hopelessness, and the tragedy in the scene are real. One is left asking is that all there is to life, endless sorrow and unremitting struggle for existence?

It is a relentlessly tragic film-the only one in the eight that Ghatak completed. Even overwhelming tragedies like Subarnarekha and Meghe Dhaka Tara have brief moments of lightness and laughter. The folk song accompanying the opening credits attempts to unify the entire goings on between earth and sky with water between the two. It is water that changes its form in accordance with the laws that govern nature. The lyrics also suggest how important fish is to a fisherman providing him with food and livelihood. 'What happens when a river changes its mood and withdraws its bounty? is the song's rhetorical query. A note of foreboding is introduced in anticipation of an unavoidable tragedy that nature will bring upon fishermen to wipe them out as a community.

His vision of life was as engagingly contradictory as his personality. In his films many people accept fate and fight it at one and the same time. The visual metaphor would be swimming against the current. The idea gains credence taking his Barendra Brahmin background into consideration. His cussedness, his iconoclasm, his awareness of the nourishing

aspects of tradition all added up to a delightful contradiction both in the man and his films.

It was certainly not possible for him to be a fatalistic Hindu like his cinematic forebear Debaki Kumar Bose whose tear-drenched Sagar Sangameye (Flowing Into The Ocean, 1958) was a hopeless tragedy about people desperately seeking divine redress for their woes in the material world.

Water in this film shot in the Sagar islands in West Bengal, served only to accentuate the pain of the poor. Ghatak's own awareness, largely intuitive, of the limitations of Marxism and the salutary effects of mysticism, together, forced him to passionately embrace life with all its existential problems and paradoxically, to maintain a certain distance, in order to understand and appreciate its workings.

Jahnu Barua, the filmmaker from Assam trained at the Film and Television Institute, Pune, has a remarkably clear, levelheaded view of life. Assam is a province that has suffered violence continuously in the last twenty years. Various warring tribal factions and militant separatists there have made life extremely difficult. Extortion and murder are an everyday reality, as is divided loyalties amongst families with members involved in different political activities. The Indian government's use of continuous terror has added fuel to the fire and, not one whit of clarity towards an understanding of the situation or the needs of the people.

The magnificent Brahmaputra flows through the land unmindful of the passing hopes and sorrows of human beings who inhabit

it. It is an illustration of nature’s grand indifference to human folly and greed; of its complete impartiality as witness to man’s succumbing to his own selfishness. Barua’s characters have to fend for themselves, like the old peasant and his orphaned grandson in Hrhagoroloi Bohu Door (Far Away Is The Sea).

The story is quite simple really. An old, relatively poor peasant lives with his grandson in a hut on the banks of the Brahmaputra. Life is difficult, money is scarce and age is catching up. He is worried about the future of the child, who, he feels has it in him to make good. He takes him to his successful younger son living in Guwahati, the state capital. He feels his grandson deserves a proper education, which will equip him to enjoy all that life has to offer. Returning home to a lonely existence, he soon receives a letter from the boy asking to be taken back to the village because he is deeply unhappy at his uncle’s house. The old man goes despite thinking that the young one is cooking up a story to return to his former carefree life in the village. To his shock and surprise he finds his grandson being treated as a servant by his aunt, with the tacit approval of his uncle. He returns home with his charge to face life bravely and with full faith in natural justice.

Water imagery is cleverly used to capture hidden nuances in many scenes. They suggest without appearing to, the reverberation of each hurt, each humiliation similar to the last, but somehow different. Time of day, Quality of light in keeping with the season, come together to articulate what words cannot. Most of the time the Brahmaputra looks brown and muddy likes the lives of the grandson and grandfather. Then suddenly as the most knotty problem in the old man’s life is resolved when he decides to do his best to bring up the

boy, the light suddenly acquires a glowing, honeyed quality. Even the river literally reflects glints of hope. Barua's film, like the man himself, comes to grips with life and its complexities in the most disarming and straightforward manner.

If Barua is simple and dignified, Ghatak is complex and turbulent. His water imagery is deceptive though not misleading. There is a clinging to the body of moisture, and a feeling of wetness in the air. This is especially true of Titash… as it is of certain parts of Meghe Dhaka Tara (1960). Visuals and sounds are full of interpretative possibilities in Ghatak's films.

Nita, trying to leave home in a heavy downpour after learning of her tuberculosis, carrying a childhood photograph, and, being discovered and stopped just in time by her singer brother, is an attempt to erase her past and along with it herself, from her ungrateful family's memory. Carrying away a memento in the rain in the hope of making a fresh start actually suggests an ending. Her attempt fails and, her caring brother quickly takes her to a sanitarium in the Shillong hills in Assam.

Every scene in the justly famous extended last sequence in the film is photographed under a cloudy sky, promising rain. When Nita, after hearing of all the good news about the family members including her little nephew who has just learned to walk, cries out, "Dada I want to live!" the camera goes "dizzy" and right afterwards, a montage follows, of water gently trickling down a hillside soon succeeded by a shot of a flock of sheep coming down a slope shepherded by a boy. Tinkling of bells is heard, and just after, a plaintive song about Uma (Durga) returning home to her husband's, is carried

on the soundtrack. Water in its short visual appearance represents among many things, perhaps a sudden effulgence in a life that has been devoted to and sacrificed in, the service of family, the most dynamic and ironically, destructive of social units.

Interpreting a work of art is always retrospective, and a task fraught with peril, more so if it is a film by a filmmaker as idiosyncratic and alert as Ghatak. His stories usually verged on the banal, even if their source was distinguished. He had a way of reducing the original to the basics and then adding myriads of visual and aural complexities. He used water in many forms to depict states of mind of his characters, to take the narrative forward, to make a comment and, possibly, as a poetic abstraction. These qualities are best illustrated in Komal Gandhar (E-Flat-1961), which has very many shots of the river Padma at Lal Gola; heavy rains over landscapes and many sequences under cloudy skies.

Titash….., however is quite different from any other film of his; it is part nostalgia and part prophesy. As a child growing up in lush green, East Bengal with its endless waterways leading to rivers flowing into the sea, he was able however intuitively to grasp the joys of a slow, more humane way of life. There was then enough for everyone’s need but not for everyone’s greed, to quote M.K. Gandhi. The senseless slaughter that led to the partition of British India put an end to it. Titash… mourns the loss of such a society.

Memory images from his childhood stayed with him all his life. In a sense his entire cinema was about lost innocence and about journeys in search of a retrieval and a renewal. Here, in Titash… there is a sense of conclusion, although he does

show a child running through a paddy field at harvest time blowing a leaf whistle. The land once belonged to the fishermen but the river changed course. Businessmen in collusion with corrupt Government officials took it over, had them forcibly evicted and then rented it out to tenant farmers.

Ghatak's approach to cinema was essentially anti-decorative. His films can be compared to stone carving or sculpting where the artist chips away in search of the unexpected. Rajen Tarafdar, a communist fellow traveller and a fine commercial artist from advertising like Satyajit Ray, though not as gifted or well organised, despite his genuine intentions, was seduced by an urged to decorate in his second fiction film, Ganga (1958). Shot after shot, lovely to behold but without a cohesive place in the storyline, taken by Dinen Gupta, also Ghatak's cameraman, made the film work, of course unintentionally, like a documentary on the lives of the (so-called) fisherman shown in it. They were after all actors playing a role.

Steering a film's dramatic narrative smoothly had never been Tarafdar's forte, rather, he found his touch in the accumulation of tiny details and their juxtaposition with and against each other. His films fell into place accidentally. When they did not; they petered out. Water in Ganga is its raison d'etre. But the introduction of a gratuitous female character in the second half completely upset the film's balance. Ghatak summed it up in his usual forthright manner: "It was like sprinkling a few drops of cow piss in a bucketful of wholesome milk."

Titash… had its own demands. The novel's spirit had to be

retained without cluttering up the screen with too many characters and sub-plots. Water was of paramount importance because it ruled and shaped people's destinies. Crucial scenes took place in the 'presence' of water: either on it or nearby. Kishore, the virile young fisherman, to whom Basanti had pledged herself when they were children, looses his new bride to dacoits who raid his boat at night, as it drifts slowly in midstream.

Kishore and Subol, both childhood friends, and fishermen travel by boat in company of Tilak, their senior, from island to island on fishing expeditions. On one such trip, Kishore marries the gently beautiful woman who comes to be known as Rajar Jhee. He comes to her over water to take her away from her parent's house, and, is deprived of her over water, when, to avoid dishonour, she throws herself overboard and is found later in an unconscious state floating in with the tide. Is she a gift, a benediction or a harbinger of tragedy?

Kishore returns home deranged. . Subol dies after some years; time is stretched to the borders of cinematic credibility- with the arrival of Rajar Jhee, a pre-pubescent boy in tow. She has sailed on for years in the hope of finding a husband whose name she does not know. Memory here is like a river, whose presence and reliability is taken for granted but is seldom so in reality. As in a picaresque tale with a moral edge, Rajar Jhee, who knows neither her husband's name nor his home, begins to take care of the bearded madman who has so far been in Basanti's charge.

On the auspicious day of Magh Mandla, when young girls ask the Gods for suitable husbands, Basanti and Rajar Jhee take the mad Kishore to bathe in the waters of the Titash. In keeping

with rural Bengali custom Rajar Jhee is now known as Anantar Ma or Ananta's mother, because of the son conceived a decade ago in blissful union with Kishore at her parent's.

As they lead the troubled man to the water, the soundtrack plays a Vaishnav Kirtan suggesting that Kishore and his lost bride have the same affinity for each other as Radha and Krishna in myth and legend. A completely senseless fight takes place and kishore and his wife are mortally wounded. As they roll into each other's, arms in the wet mud, in a flash of lucidity, he recognises her, then dies. As if by divine order, she too dies. Waves from the river wash over their bodies. Water, at this moment, comes to represent time-endless, faceless, detached, the liberator from the pains of existence.

Penniless Basanti looks after the deceased couple's orphan son Ananta, facing stiff opposition from her parents and several other neighbours. The boy sees a vision of his dead mother as Goddess Bhagavati, a manifestation of Durga, source of all creative energy in Hindu mythology. As she looks at her son with sad, kind eyes, she silently beckons him to join her. There is rain in the air. Soon she will be a memory, a vision of motherhood reaching back to the beginnings when humankind experienced the first stirrings of its own creative potential.

Basanti is incensed when Ananta leaves one day but others around her are relieved, as if of a burden. He becomes a handyman in a fishing craft. She sees him again, during a festive boat-race and tries to bring him back, when he turns away from her she calls him an ungrateful cur. Human beings change course like rivers, only their reasons are different: in the first case it is psychological and in the second, geological.

The starving fishing community is quite easily evicted. Prolonged hunger usually breaks human will, however stubborn. One of the women declares, “I am going to the city because I want to live.” What kind of fate awaits her can only be imagined. This scene recalls a similar one in Satyajit Ray’s Ashani Sanket (1973), on the Bengal famine adapted from Bibhuti Bhushan Bandopadhyay’s novel. A famine in 1943 Bengal happened despite a bumper harvest. The British, fearing a Japanese invasion let it. Five million lives were lost. In both films hunger drives women to take desperate steps: in Titash… because of nature withdrawing its bounty; in Ray’s film despite it. Since the river has gone away in another direction, it no longer exists, not even in name. It may belong in the collective memory of the living but shall slowly fade away after their death. An analogy that comes to mind is of evaporating moisture.

Ghatak’s earlier films were about arrivals and departures that promised a new arrival. Titash… is a farewell, and there is no looking back over one’s shoulders. There is a moving forward but not towards a new horizon as in Subarnarekha. The movement here is outward and, the dispersal of grief horizontal, over a seemingly endless, benign landscape.

A year before he was offered Titash…, The war for liberation from Pakistani rule was on in Bangladesh. Ghatak, native son of East Bengal was busy shooting Durbar Gati Padma, to bolster the war effort, whatever that may mean. It was the strangest film of his career: confused, listless even indifferent. But whenever he focused his camera on his beloved river Padma, his pride as an artiste returned. The visuals are exquisitely composed, and the presence of water, in retrospect, seemed to

cleanse him, and make him whole again.

Indications of art being still alive in a mind and body much abused by alcohol were clear but they found rousing confirmation when he got to shoot Titash…. Seeing huge stretches of water with his own eyes and then, through the view finder of the 35 mm camera fitted with a 16 mm ultra wide-angle lens, which he later claimed to have filched from his producers, his dormant creativity was reawakened.

His last film, Jukti Takko Aar Gappo (1971-74) was an anti-climax. Four excellent sequences not withstanding, it was a wordy, boring film. There was however, a flash back sequence in which the protagonist, an alcoholic played by Ghatak himself, remembers happier times with his wife. It was a scene by a waterfall in Shillong, where lovemaking is symbolically reenacted with a song to match in the background. The scene works, for all its quaintness, more so because the actors, are middle-aged trying to recapture their youth, and water is there only to help conjure up the past, perhaps an imagined happiness, or, possibly real.

His acquaintance with Sanskrit and classical India was made in his father Sudhir Chandra Ghatak’s library but most of what he knew of folk culture came from an arduous apprenticeship in the field. What he understood of time and its cinematic interpretation came from childhood experiences and perhaps, even earlier, from race memory. There was a constant tug-of-war between the classical and the folk in his personality and his work. In the classical world the past is a point of reference, like the ancient river Saraswati that is believed to run underground in the Punjab; the present is alive in the moment and the future, a part of eternity. In the folk

tradition the past, the present and the future all exist on the same plane as part of a single indivisible body of water that flows into the ocean. In all of Ritwik Ghatak's films, save Titash…, life exists palpably, simultaneously, as a memory, an immediate happening and a projection of hope into the unknown. Ambiguities hidden underneath tragic certainties make Titash an exception. A playful little boy with a leaf whistle at harvest time appears just before Basanti's death. It is a wrenching revelation of a cruel natural process. However, seen in totality Ghatak's films do suggest a resurgent humane consciousness. Recurring water images encourage this view.

Myths are born in People's culture and get refined and transformed as they make their way into more intellectual and exclusive company. Ghatak had dreamt of filming the eighth canto of Kalidas's Kumara Sambhava and written a detailed script in preparation. His approach had been elemental and water figured prominently as sustainer and inspirer of life.

Other filmmakers before him have also used water as a metaphor in their work. Robert Flaherty, Irish-American documentarist and one of cinema's most enduring lyric poets did so in two films: first in Moana (1925) a South Sea Saga, when cinema did not speak and then in 'Man of Aran' (1934) five years after sound had come in. Joris Iven's 'Rain' also a Silent, had people reaching out for their umbrellas after a screening on a sunny day. Andrei Tarkovski, undisputed genius of post-war Soviet Russain cinema used water to great effect in his films. Although, his intensely poetic imagery was often too private and dense for most viewers, it was crystalline in the last but one reel (in colour) of his B/W masterpiece, 'Andrei Rublev'.

Shots of ponies grazing by a pristine stream are indeed memorable. Having said that one would still insist that there

was hardly a director in modern cinema with Ritwik Ghatak's fecund imagination in using water as a metaphor in a body of work.

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 fledging playwright, actor and director. He took his first tentative steps in the cinema in Nemai 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 spend 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 earnings, 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 Jaggadal 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 spoilt! 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 1ater 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 Partymen. 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 Bhusan 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 Blassetti'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 A1i 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 looses 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.