

# Who's afraid of the documentary film / Keval Arora



Remember the cynical manoeuvring by which the Film Federation of India had, some years ago, denied entry to video documentaries in their festival? And how this had brought home the threat that this medium can pose to vested interests? After initially denying space to video films in its international film festivals, ostensibly because these were 'in a different format', the Federation had inserted a censorship clause for all Indian entries to the festival. The row that ensued had been extensively reported in the media, so a bald re-iteration should do for now. Film-makers had come together to form an organisation named VIKALP with the aim of safeguarding the rights of documentary film-makers. Launching a Campaign Against Censorship (CAC), they had run a widely attended 'Films for Freedom' programme of screenings and discussions at educational institutes.

This proactive initiative has had an interesting spin-off. It has placed the agenda of activism and its methods on the

front-burner for a generation that is often written off as a self-absorbed 'I' rather than a 'why' generation. (By the way, what is this generation's current alphabetic habitation? Is it still Generation Y, or is it now staging its last stand as Gen-Z?) The video documentary has, as a result, been so comfortably privileged as the conscience keeper of the nation that I'm tempted to play the devil's advocate and ask if theatre isn't a better mode of communication through which activist agendas can be carried out. However, before outlining crucial differences between the video documentary and theatre, let's identify some strengths that both share.

The video documentary and theatre performance have, unfortunately, often been disparagingly prized as no more than a handmaiden to other activisms – as techniques by which grass-root actions extend or advertise their interventions. Such a view has treated video and theatre as little more than a courier service, as blandly variable vehicles of a relentless messaging. Put another way, the medium has been equated with its message; and has therefore been valued, from its aims to its achievements, for the literal directness of its effort. NGOs have been particularly susceptible to this lure of social advertising, perhaps in the belief that generating the same message through a variety of formats extends its effectiveness, even though all it really does is relieve the tedium. If Doordarshan was obsessed years ago with televised puppet theatre as its favoured mode of disseminating advice to farmers and pregnant women, it's the NGOs' turn now to patronise street theatre with a similarly deprecatory optimism.

Why puppet theatre and street theatre is anybody's guess. I don't think the social sector's preference for these two forms is based on any insight into their potential. Rather, these forms are trivialised when used as a platter for pre-digested data and handed-down attitudes, as a dressing-up that goes hand in hand with a dumbing-down. Obviously, state television

and the NGO sector rate the urban proscenium stage as the 'true' theatre, and puppet theatre or street theatre as cute country cousins suitable for rustic and other under-developed tastes. (Not that its performers have seemed to mind: in a shrinking market, even wrong attention is welcome as preferable to none.)

Yet, it must be pointed out that there is a faint glimmer of wisdom in the social sector's choice of theatre and documentary film for carrying out its activist agendas. This wisdom is hinged on two features common to all performance: greater accessibility, and the affective power of storytelling. Performative cultural modes are accessible to audiences in a special way because they circumvent the barriers of literacy and the drudgery of reading. Such accessibility is then magnified through the affective power of stories that theatre and film usually place at their centre. To the extent that the theatre and the documentary film tell stories, they can never be reduced to mere data transcription codes. It is immaterial whether their stories are real or fictional, or whether these are particular instances or typical cases, because performative modes that tell stories irradiate even simple statements with a penumbra that deepens, authenticates and often problematises the business of a literal messaging. Clearly, the potential of theatre and film for activist causes remains unrealizable if these are used merely to sugar-coat mundane fare.

It is when we define accessibility in physical terms that differences crop up in the respective potential of film and theatre as activist space. Film is unrivalled in its ability to reach out to vast numbers of people. There is no gainsaying the seduction of spread: if maximising contact with people is vital to the activist impulse, the medium that reaches out more effortlessly will obviously be regarded as the more enabling one. In contrast, theatre performances exist in the singular and have to be re-constituted afresh for each act of

viewing. Not only does this call for much more forward planning, it also implies that there can be no guarantee that later shows will work exactly like the earlier ones. Films, on the other hand, travel to venues more rapidly than do theatre troupes and offer an assurance of stable replication (every spectator gets to see exactly the same thing as created by its crew, give or take some transmission loss on account of projection equipment).

Of course, problems of technology and finance do cramp film-makers, sometimes so severely that I think 'accessibility' should be defined not just in terms of audience comprehension and taste, but also in terms of the artist's access to the tools of her art. However, recent developments in video technology have ensured that these twin pressures are less burdensome to today's film-maker – high-end digital cameras have become cheap enough for independent film makers to acquire their own hardware; sophisticated editing software, faster computer processors and capacious storage disks now enable footage to be processed at home. The result: a fresh impetus to the documentary film movement which is evident in the range and number of films being made today.

It is interesting to note that if this celebration of accessible technology and reduced expenditure were to be taken to a logical conclusion, it is theatre rather than the video film that would shine in an advantageous light. It's cheaper to make plays than films, and it's possible to make them without recourse to equipment of any kind other than the human body. Most theatre performances can be designed without technological fuss in a way that even the barest film cannot. Such a theatre gains a quality of outreach that far outstrips the reach of film. For, what technology can ever hope to compete with the affordability and the portability of the body and the voice? Sure, this isn't true of all theatre productions. But I would argue that productions which depend on technological assists for their effects (take, for

instance, the romance with projected images that most plays glory in nowadays) end up shackling themselves in ways that erase their fundamental nature. I say this fully aware that some of us believe that the facility which technology brings in some ways is well worth the price that has to be paid in others.

Take another difference between film and theatre. Films possess a huge advantage in terms of authenticity in reportage. They have no peer if the business of activism is to disseminate images and narratives of actuality, to show things as they actually are. But, if the primary purpose of activism is to persuade and engage with people, then the advantage that film enjoys over theatre is considerably neutralised. The very attractions of the film medium – stability, replication, transportability – become limitations from this point of view.

It is a truism worth repeating that the uniqueness of theatre performance is that it is a live event. People come together at a particular time, to a particular place, for a transaction where some people show things to others who watch. In film, there is no equivalent scope for interaction and therefore no lively relation between actor and spectator. The idea of a collective spectatorship – where the audience becomes a prototypical community – is of course common to both film and theatre. But, in the latter, this ‘community’ includes the actor as well. It is not just the audience that watches the actor, but the actor too who ‘reads’ his audience and subtly alters his performance accordingly. Interaction, engagement and persuasion between the performers and audience is so central to theatre that it is often the richest source of dialogue in the performance event.

Where, pray, is any of this possible during a film screening? The film spectator remains more or less a passive recipient of a fixed structure. The film may well ‘play’ with the spectator’s responses, but even such playing is welded to a grid that is frozen unalterably on videotape or celluloid.

Interactions in the theatre between performer and spectator are, in contrast, dynamically dependent on the particulars of that performance. In other words, the fragile instability of theatrical performance becomes a powerful opportunity for an activist intervention, as is evident in the way Augusto Boal has actors interrupt the performance and address audiences directly in his Theatre of the Oppressed. Techniques used in Theatre-in-Education methodologies ('Hot-seating', for instance, where spectators talk back to 'characters' in the play and offer their comments) is another case in point.

As I said, where, pray, is any of this possible with film?

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## **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 him 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 their 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 younger 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 lightning) 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 unrealistic 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 indefatigable 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 Hyderabad 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.

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## **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 Mehe Urtaa Jaaye Meraa Laal Dupatta Mulmul Kaa (My Red Mulmul 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 Mehe... 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 Mehe Ganga Behti Hehe (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 tributary 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 at least, 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 than 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.

H<sub>2</sub>O 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 like 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'être*. 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, loses 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 notwithstanding, 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 Russian 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.

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

*Ajantrik* too was based on a literary work like his very first venture, *Bedini* (1951), abandoned after a 20-day outdoor schedule when the shot footage got spoilt by a camera defect. Tarashankar Bandopadhyay's tale about gypsies never got to the screen but Subodh Ghosh's memorable short story did. It was about a cranky, poetic cab-driver's attachment to his 1926 model Chevrolet named *Jaggadal* that he drives in the Chota Nagpur tribal belt in Bihar. It was Ghatak's first major artistic success. He had prepared for it by directing a two-reel documentary simply entitled *The Oraons of Chotanagpur* on the tribe of that name for the Aurora Film Corporation, Calcutta, and another short, *Bihar Ke Kuch Darshaniye Sthaan*, for the state government. These exercises helped him develop a grasp of the landscape that became an organic part of *Ajantrik*'s narrative. Perhaps it was for the first time that nature was used with such poetic authority in an Indian film to bring into focus both its concrete and abstract elements. When the jalopy is sold as scrap after its final breakdown following an expensive restoration job to a dealer wearing diamond 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 Jagad Dal down a steep slope, with fields of ripening paddy on either side, during its test run after Bimal has spent all his savings towards repairs. Then, of course, there is that deceptive shot that follows soon after.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Another example of the syncretic culture that existed in undivided Bengal is the chorus literally crying out "Dohai Ali!" (Mercy Ali!) in gradually accelerating tempo as the camera simulates the movement of a train hurtling forward towards the end of the railway tracks that are closed to acknowledge the presence of the new country – Pakistan. There is also repeated use of the wedding song from East Bengal – Aam Tolaaye Zhumur Zhaamur / Kaula Tawlaaye Biyaa / Aayee lo Shundorir Zhaamaayee / Mukut Maathaye Diyaa (A stirring of breezes cool in the mango grove / A wedding blessed by the auspicious green plantains all around / Comes now the groom for the beautiful 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 film's 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 Debabrata 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 obligatory-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 Jhunjunwala, was willing to finance a feature film in Bengali with Abhi Bhattacharya in

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

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

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

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

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

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

It is about rational elements like history, war and its

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

the Bengalee Club, Kali Bari, New Delhi.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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# The Elusive Mr Tanvi

**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 exercise 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 Hyderabad 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 sparkingly 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 indispensable

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 childhood in 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.

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## The film 'Manto'—A Review by Raj Ayyar



'I am a walking, talking Bombay.'  
'Saadat Hasan Manto, RIP. He lies in that grave, wondering: Who is the greater storyteller? God or Manto?'  
—Saadat Hasan Manto.

I enjoyed watching the biopic 'Manto', A great Indo-Pakistani genius comes alive in this film. A man whose life-world is torn apart by the brutal Partition, one whose life thereafter would always bear the scars of that trauma.

Manto's intense, and yet funny Urdu storytelling elan comes to life, as does his quirky humor, his roving gaze that took in

details of street life with merciless precision (always privileging the marginalized street person, sex worker or insane victim of the India-Pakistan partition), and stitched them into narratives.

It is a measure of Nandita Das' skill as a director, that five Manto stories are woven into the fabric of the film, one each for his five most creative and tormented years—often, the film slips from a 'realistic' biographical description into the heart of a Manto story. Only later does the viewer come to realize that s/he is now out of the story, and back to Manto's life.

Hats off to Nawazuddin Siddiqui for pulling off such a complex role with elan—he captures the humor and dark irony of Manto's personal conversations, as also of his stories with a seemingly effortless ease.

Rasika Dugal has a sidekick role—as Manto's wife Safia, she is reduced to the role of a codependent, mothering wife, who takes care of him in his darkest moments.

I loved Rajshri Deshpande as Ismat Chughtai—she looks a bit like the young Ismat and portrays her love-hate for Manto well ('Manto my friend, Manto my enemy').

The film reminded me of a forgotten Bollywood matinee idol—Shyam Chadha. He was Manto's closest friend and might have broken the rule of the filmic triumvirate—Raj Kapoor, Dilip Kumar, and Dev Anand, had his life and career not ended tragically in an accident on the sets.

Tahir Bhasin is adequate to the role but lacks Shyam's extreme good looks, and his flashy personality.

The film relives two of Manto's best stories—'Thanda Gosht' (Cold Meat), and 'Toba Tek Singh'. The former about a man stabbed to death by a jealous sweetheart confessing that he had an extra-marital quickie with a corpse, and the latter the ultimate Indo-Pakistani story about the horrors of Partition, seen through the eyes of a madman.

One wishes that the film had spent more time re-creating 'Toba Tek Singh', and less on Manto's rehab and therapy. It does capture Manto's depressive alcoholism after his move from his

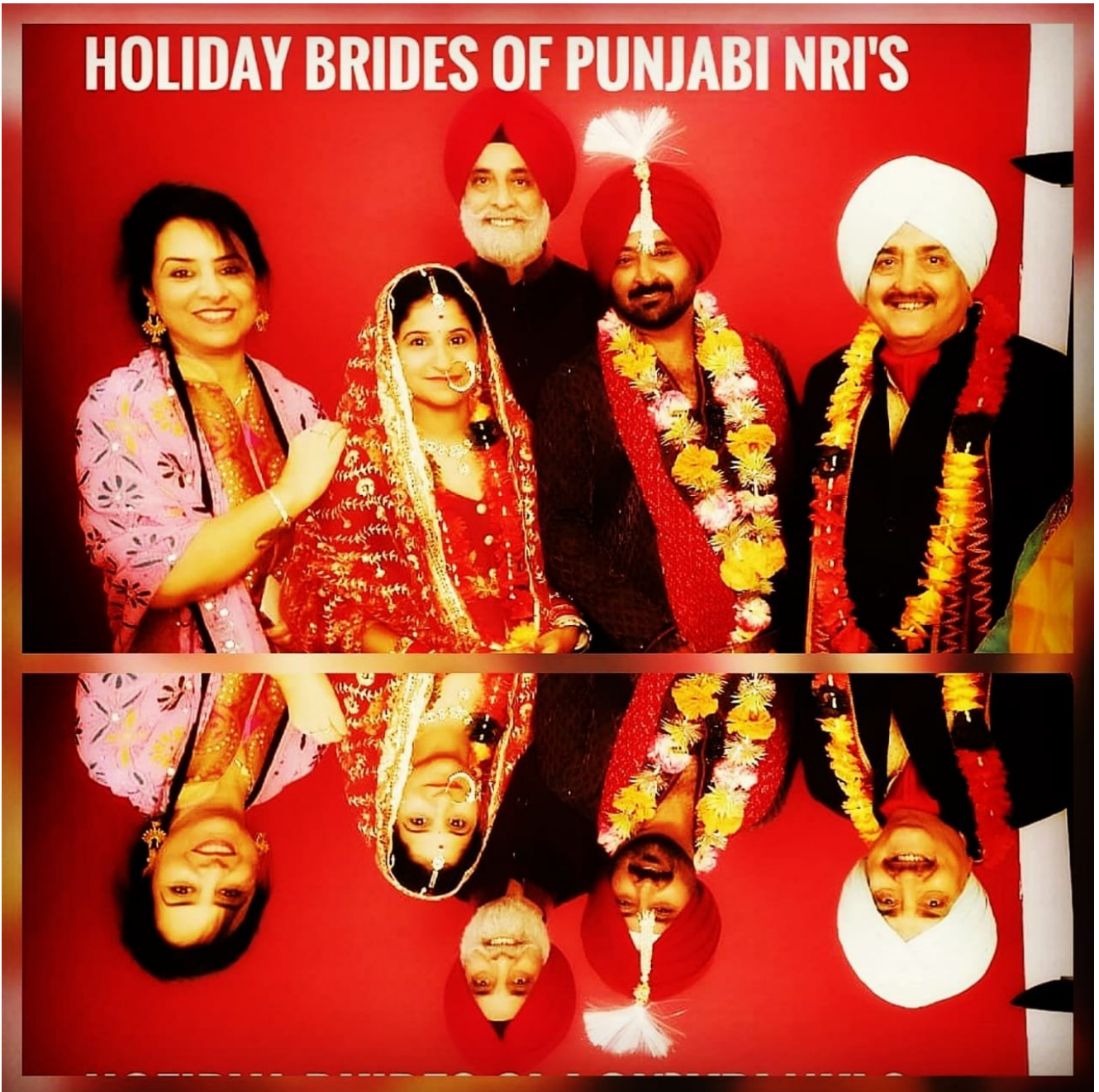
beloved Bombay to Lahore, but those scenes could have been shortened without losing the overall effect.

–Raj Ayyar

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**A film about how unsuspecting  
brides of Punjab fall victims  
to some NRIs**

## HOLIDAY BRIDES OF PUNJABI NRI'S



“Thousands of Brides are waiting for their NRI grooms in Punjab... This is perhaps amongst the top social malice of Punjab...” According to the director of the film, Satya Prakash Sabarwal, “These Runaway Grooms should be given capital punishment for this heinous crime.” You can watch this film and see if you agree with him.

This film is the latest, in a continuing web based series on Social Issues by TVNF.

Watch the film on this link

# Doordarshan Schedule July 2018



PRASAR BHARATI  
(India's Public Service Broadcaster)  
Directorate General: Doordarshan  
Copernicus Marg: New Delhi-110001  
Films Division

File No-26/1/2017-P-6. Film Dated: 12.06.2018

Subject: Schedule of Hindi Feature Films to be telecast from 01.07.2018 to 31.07.2018 on DD-NATIONAL Network.

(Shahrukh Khan Special movies will be telecast from 01st July'18 to 10th July'18)

S.NO

DATE AND TIME OF T/C

NAME OF THE FILM

STAR-CAST

01.07.2018

Sunday Retro At 12:00 Noon

(Guru Dutt Special)

KAAGAZ KE PHOOL

Guru Dutt,

Waheeda Rehman

Mehmood

01.07.2018

Sunday Blockbuster at 09:00 PM

Shahrukh Khan Special

MAIN HOON NAA

Shahrukh Khan,

Sunil Shetty, Zayed Khan

02.07.2018

Monday-Funday at 07:00 PM

Shahrukh Khan Special

PHIR BHI DIL HAI HINDUSTANI

Shahrukh Khan, Juhi Chawla,

Paresh Rawal

03.07.2018

Tuesday Action at 07:00 PM

Shahrukh Khan Special

ASHOKA

Shahrukh Khan Kareena Kapoor Danny

04.07.2018

Wednesday Romance at 07:00 PM

Shahrukh Khan Special

DIL TO PAGAL HAI

Shahrukh Khan, Madhuri Dixit, Karishma Kapoor, Akshay Kumar

05.07.2018

Thursday Drama at 07:00 PM

Shahrukh Khan Special

DEVDAAS

Shahrukh Khan, Aishwarya Rai, Madhuri Dixit

06.07.2018

Friday Houseful At 09:00 PM

Shahrukh Khan Special

FAN

Shahrukh Khan

07.07.2018

Saturday Jubilee At 09:00 PM

Shahrukh Khan Special

OM SHANTI OM

Shahrukh Khan,

Deepika Padukone, Arjun Rampal

08.07.2018

Sunday Retro At 12:00 Noon

(Guru Dutt Special)

CHAUDHHVIN KA CHAND

Guru Dutt, Waheeda Rehman

08.07.2018

Sunday Blockbuster at 09:00 PM

Shahrukh Khan Special

CHALTE CHALTE

Shahrukh Khan, Rani Mukherjee, Satish Shah

09.07.2018

Monday-Funday at 07:00 PM

Shahrukh Khan Special

BILLU

Shahrukh Khan, Irfan Khan, Lara Dutta

10.07.2018

Tuesday Action at 07:00 PM

Shahrukh Khan Special

HUM TUMHARE HAI SANAM

Shahrukh Khan, Salman Khan, Madhuri Dixit

11.07.2018

Wednesday Romance at 07:00 PM

TEEN PATTI

Amitabh Bachchan, R. Madhavan, Ben Kingsley, Siddharth Kher

Abhay Deol

Preeti Desai

12.07.2018

Thursday Drama at 07:00 PM

CHOR MACHAYE SHOR

Shashi Kapoor, Mumtaz, Asrani

13.07.2018

Friday Houseful At 09:00 PM

TUMHARI SULU

Vidya Balan, Neha Dhupiya,

Manav Kunal

14.07.2018

Saturday- 'Divanjali' At 12:00 Noon

(Sh. Jagannath Rath Yatra will be held on 14.07.2018)

JAI JAGANNATH

Sarat Purari, Sadhu Meher, Sritam Das

14.07.2018

Saturday Jubilee At 09:00 PM

BUDHIA SINGH- BORN TO RUN

Manoj Bajpai, Mayur Patole

15.07.2018

Sunday Retro At 12:00 Noon  
(Guru Dutt Special)  
SAHIB BIBI AUR GHULAM  
Guru Dutt, Meena Kumari, Waheeda Rehman

15.07.2018  
Sunday Blockbuster at 09:00 PM  
BOMBAY VELVET  
Ranbir KapoorAnushka Sharma

16.07.2018  
Monday-Funday at 07:00 PM  
BUDHA MAR GAYA  
Paresh Rawal,Om Puri

17.07.2018  
Tuesday Action at 07:00 PM  
OMKARA  
Ajay Devgan,  
Saif Ali Khan, Kareena Kapoor

18.07.2018  
Wednesday Romance at 07:00 PM  
DESI BOYZ  
Akshay Kumar,John Abraham, Deepika Padukone

19.07.2018  
Thursday Drama at 07:00 PM  
CHUPKE CHUPKE  
Dharmendra, Amitabh BachchanSharmila Tagore, Jaya Bhaduri

20.07.2018  
Friday Houseful At 09:00 PM  
MOM  
Sridevi, NawazuddinSiddiqi, Akshay Khanna

21.07.2018  
Saturday Jubilee At 09:00 PM  
HUMSHAKALS

Saif Ali Khan Ritesh Deshmukh Tamannaah Bhatia

22.07.2018

Sunday Retro At 12:00 Noon

DEVAR

Dharmender, Sharmila Tagore, Shashikala

22.07.2018

Sunday Blockbuster at 09:00 PM

HEROPANTI

Tiger Shroff Kriti Sanon, Prakash Raj

23.07.2018

Monday-Funday at 07:00 PM

CHINTU JI

Rishi Kapoor, Priyanshu Chatterjee

24.07.2018

Tuesday Action at 07:00 PM

GHAJINI

Aamir Khan, Asin

25.07.2018

Wednesday Romance at 07:00 PM

LOVE AAJ KAL

Saif Ali Khan,

Deepika Padukone

26.07.2018

Thursday Drama at 07:00 PM

THAKSHAK

Ajay Devgan Manoj Bajpai, Tabu

27.07.2018

Friday Houseful At 09:00 PM

PYAAR KA PUNCHNAMA-2

Kartik Aaryan, Nushrat Bharucha, Sonalli Seygall

28.07.2018

Saturday Jubilee At 09:00 PM

ROY

Ranbir KapoorJacqueline Fernandez, Arjun Rampal

29.07.2018

Sunday Retro At 12:00 Noon

HAATHI MERE SATHI

Rajesh Khanna, Tanuja

29.07.2018

Sunday Blockbuster at 09:00 PM

JOLLY LLB

Arshad WarsiAmrita Rao, Boman Irani

30.07.2018

Monday-Funday at 07:00 PM

TOM DICK AND HARRY

Dino Morea, Jimmy ShergillAnuj Sawhney, Kim Sharma

31.07.2018

Tuesday Action at 07:00 PM

RAAVAN

Abhishek Bachchan, VikramAishwarya Rai, Govinda

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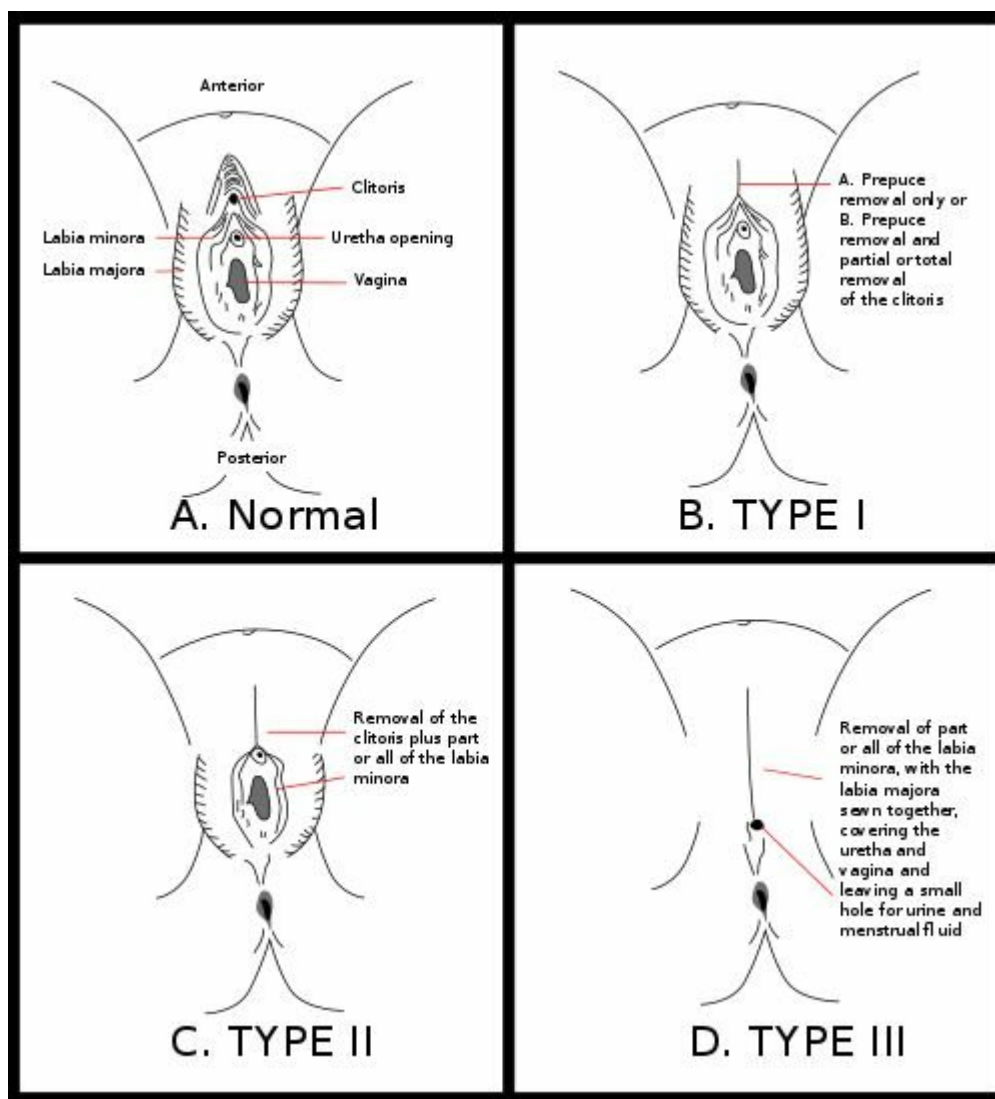
**Introduction to a Film on  
Female Genital Circumcision  
by it's lead Meenal Kapoor**



[ratings]

*The film is based on an important issue which has been overlooked because of ignorance about the subject. This film fills that void. It creates awareness about the urgency for banning the horrid medieval practice. Meenal's performance holds the film together. The intensity with which she has delineated her character reflects on a conviction in the actor about the theme of the film. One must also congratulate the Director for communicating about the practice in such a short film. – Editor*

Female Genital Circumcision or FGC as it is commonly known is India's best kept secret. This tradition is practiced in 21st century India within a small and conservative community of Dawoodi Bohras. This is a curse to any women and must be banished. We have made this film to bring awareness to our fellow citizens to abolish this draconian era act which has no place in our society.



This short film 'Female Khatna', directed by Shashank Upadhyay, is on Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) or also known as Female Genital Circumcision (FGC). Similar to circumcision of boy's FGM, it's a reality that is still practiced in our country albeit by a small minority community. Our team received threats from several people demanding to drop the film, they infact have vowed to cut the young director's throat. However, he is determined to release this movie which

focuses on the draconian era practice of circumcision of little girls often between the age of 6 to 12 years. This is a bitter truth which almost 90% of Indians are unaware about. Our mission is to bring awareness on this cruel, secretly performed practice and ensure that FGM is not allowed in our civilized society. Most developed nations like the USA, Australia, France & many more have banned FGM/FGC. There are however no such laws yet in India to stop this social evil practice. Ironically this is the nation where girls are revered as Sita Maata or devi, yet there is such blatant human rights violation on a girl child. We have also petitioned with the government to enact laws to make FGM illegal and bring a complete ban on this practice although yet to receive any concrete reply.

So we seek the public support to make the movement against FGM in India a success. Remember everyday more than 10,000 girls between the age of 6-12 years are subjected to this cruelty. We urge you to create awareness against FGM and share about this to as many people as you can. Perhaps one day the government may listen to us. You may join our group and on our Facebook page. With your support we are certain that India too will ban the practice of FGM/FGC sooner or later.

<http://stagebuzz.in/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/VID-20180629-WA0015.mp4>

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**Bollywood 's Shadowy  
Underbelly – Partha  
Chatterjee**



Far away and long ago in 1959, Guru Dutt made Kagaz Ke Phool in Black and White and Cinemascope. In it an unhappily married director falls in love with his protégé. It was a truly felt love-story, which was a resounding flop, commercially. Now, in 2006, it is a cult classic appreciated even by non-Hindi speaking audiences in Europe and America. Nothing has been produced of its calibre in Hindi Cinema in the last forty years.

In truth, the Hindi Cinema of Mumbai, erstwhile Bombay, has regressed into an infantilism that can be attributed to spiritual malnutrition. This decline is part of a larger social malaise, a lumpenisation following the abdication of all responsibility, social and political, by a microscopic educated elite, which has allotted to itself every financial and political privilege.

Cinema, in India as elsewhere, has been an entertainment industry. In other parts of the world hedonism, as a logical

upshot of rampant consumerism endorsed by America, has found expression in films. Notwithstanding a very small coterie of dissent representing artistic, mature, committed cinema. In India, particularly Bollywood – as Mumbai's Hindi film Industry has come to be known – no such force exists.

Legitimate financing of films has always been a problem. Producers, beginning their careers, and even later, have to borrow money from loan sharks at a back-breaking 4 per cent per month (or 48 per cent per annum), thus inflating costs due to production delays; mostly attributed to clashing dates of Stars who 'sell' films and try to make the most of their usually short-lived careers. Banks, rarely if ever, back films for they regard them as high-risk investments.

Corporatisation can certainly streamline production methods; keep films within budget by completing them on time. It can, in the near future, also attempt to create an exhibition chain, parallel to the existing one, which represents certain unseen, vested interests. What corporate investment in mainstream Hindi film production cannot guarantee is meaningful yet entertaining films. Entertainment translates as 'manoranjan' in Hindi. It is an exquisite word, meaning painting or rather illuminating the mind – since any idea of painting involves light.

Things are quite different in reality. The average Hindi film celebrates mindless sex and violence, and mirrors consumerism imposed from without by America and its adjunct, satellite television. In Bollywood, there is hardly any attempt to open the mind to beauty. It is assumed that the average filmgoer whether the rural poor, middle class, rich and city bred is no more than a creature responding to limited aesthetic stimuli.

He likes to see on screen flashy clothes, fast cars, skimpily-clad women, huge gaudy sets with the latest gadgets and people putting away enormous quantities of alcohol and rich food: to top the topper – blood and gore punctuated by inane dialogue

and 'item numbers' that show acres of female flesh gyrating to loud music. This assumption is both true and untrue because it is precisely those Bollywood products that contain these elements that succeed financially. But box office success also has a rider, that the film be interestingly narrated. It is incorrect to assume that people, rural and urban, cutting across class barriers, want to see only one kind of cinema. For the record, only ten percent of the commercial Hindi films released make money, another fifteen percent break-even and the rest sink without a trace.

The exhibition, distribution and financing of motion pictures in Mumbai is usually controlled by a shadowy Underworld. It dictates the kind of films that get made and seen. The strategy of this conglomerate is simple – limit the choice of the paying customer and make him believe what he sees is what he likes. This formula does not always work, because of the shabbily written scripts and badly structured, sluggishly paced editing.

It is no secret that black money had entered the film industry by the mid-1960s. There is a photograph still in circulation of Hindi Cinema's greatest showman – Raj Kapoor touching the feet of Mirza Haji Mastan, the first known gangster-smuggler of Bombay who started as a coolie on the docks. Ratan Khatri, king of the numbers racket, even had a film made on himself. The Dholakiya brothers, who once owned Caesar's palace, a nightclub, which was mainly a rendezvous for prostitutes and their clients also had a financial interest in certain films. Dawood Ibrahim and his lieutenant Chhota Shakeel had others front the productions they had backed. Producer S H Rizvi – said to be Chhota Shakeel's man – was picked up by the police on the basis of a tapped cell phone conversation in which he had named a prominent Indian right-wing politician who had always gone out of his way to help him. To say that gangsters and politicians work hand in hand these days is an unassailable fact.

It is now possible for a fugitive from justice to be a resident of Dubai and actually dictate through his operatives in Mumbai the kind of films that are to be made and the people who will feature in them. Recent revelations in the press of non-controversial singers like Alka Yagnik and Kavita Krishnmoorthy having sung at Dawood Ibrahim's sister's wedding fifteen years ago only confirms the idea of the Hindi film industry as always having been an extension of the Underworld. The prospect is both frightening and revolting.

Amitabh Bacchan's biggest hit in 2005 is Sarkar, modelled on Mario Puzo's The Godfather. It is directed by Ram Gopal Varma, a Hyderabadi entrepreneur who rode to fame and fortune on the crime wave. He did Satya, a well-researched glamourised look at the world of crime, then followed it after several years and films later with Company. His assistant E. Niwas did Shool, on an honest police officer whose wife is violated by thugs and who is himself largely marginalized by politicians and gangsters working in tandem – till the last ten minutes before the finish.

What of Prakash Jha's two films that profess to be on the side of the law? In Gangajal you have a strong committed cop going hammer and tongs to straighten out a corrupt town run by a nexus of thugs and politicians. Apaharan has a decent, unemployed boy forced to take up with gangsters and to kidnap a Chief Minister's daughter. Whatever the message tacked on at the end of either film, violence is glorified and the triumph of evil over good obliquely suggested.

If gangland money is not involved in the production of a large number of Hindi films, why then is there a glorification of the gangster? Why is there a palpable suggestion that the State itself is in connivance with organized crime and is indeed giving it a fillip? No matter which party in power, crime and politics seems to feed off each other and terrorize the law-abiding citizen through the police.

Samuel Johnson had observed that patriotism was the last resort of the scoundrel. A rash of patriotic films like Refugee, Gadar, Border, LOC Kargil and Lakshya only make clear that dubious intentions of the filmmakers and the backers, seen and unseen. Wars from time immemorial have been fought for strictly commercial reasons. The only morality involved is amorality.

The advent of the multiplex in cities has raised the price of admission tickets by at least three-fold. But the films that get shown in these claustrophobic halls, usually equipped with state-of-the-art projection facilities, are mostly mediocre. There is, contrary to the vociferous claims of the industry and its supporters, a woeful lack of talent. Not technical talent – God knows there are enough cameramen, sound recordists, editors and special effects personnel who can deliver a product of international quality. But there are no directors or scriptwriters of vision and integrity. Bollywood perhaps does not need them.

What would corporatisation achieve other than a cosmetically pleasing product that can be marketed to captive NRI audiences in the U.S., Canada, Australia and England? Today a film's national box office revenues account for only 40 per cent of the total earnings; the other 60 per cent comes from overseas rights, sale of music albums and DVDs. Unless there is a clear segment of the market a corporate film concern wishes to target with films that are not only technically fine but aesthetically pleasing, nothing of lasting value can be achieved.

The Italian, Irish and Jewish mafia in the USA went legitimate by gradually laundering its black money through investments in big, reputed industrial concerns. It is rumoured that something similar is happening on the Indian subcontinent. Although there are new players in the game, Dawood Ibrahim's shadow continues to loom large over Bollywood. The content of a film is as important as the technique used to express it.

Hindi films continue to be caught in a reactionary political, social time warp. What good then can possibly come of Adlabs being bought by the Ambanis who own Reliance?

Will the day ever come when simple, elegant, deeply felt films shall engage with an audience of mainstream Hindi cinema? Will such efforts be made possible by the active patronage of a paying audience? One can only hope.