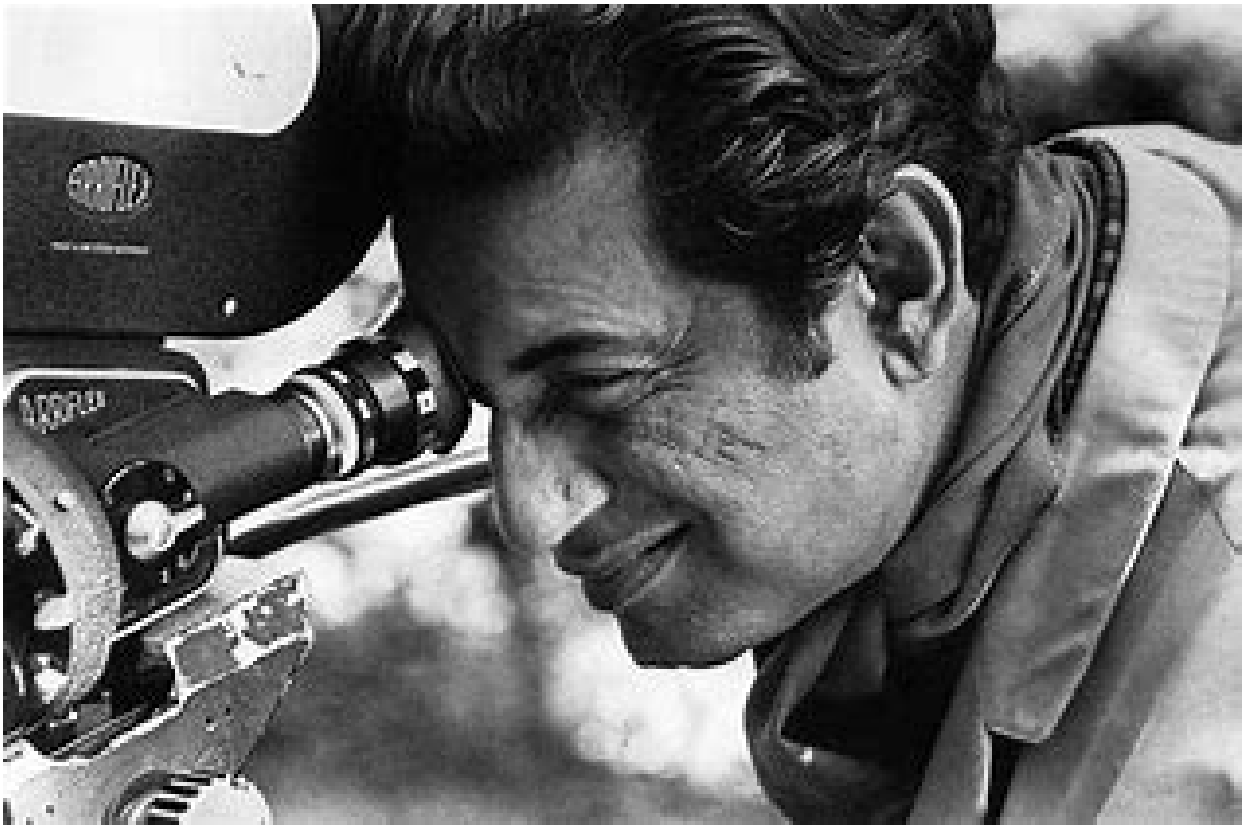
Remembering Ray | Kanika Aurora



Rabindranath Tagore wrote a poem in the autograph book of young Satyajit whom he met in idyllic Shantiniketan.

The poem, translated in English, reads: ‘Too long I’ve wandered from place to place/Seen mountains and seas at vast expense/Why haven’t I stepped two yards from my house/Opened my eyes and gazed very close/At a glistening drop of dew on a piece of paddy grain?’

Years later, Satyajit Ray the celebrated Renaissance Man, captured this beauty, which is just two steps away from our homes but which we fail to appreciate on our own in many of his masterpieces stunning the audience with his gritty, neo realistic films in which he wore several hats- writing all his screenplays with finely detailed sketches of shot sequences and experimenting in lighting, music, editing and incorporating unusual camera angles. Several of his films were

based on his own stories and his appreciation of classical music is fairly apparent in his music compositions resulting in some rather distinctive signature Ray tunes collaborating with renowned classical musicians such as Ravi Shankar, Ali Akbar and Vilayat Khan.

No surprises there. Born a hundred years ago in 1921 in an extraordinarily talented Bengali Brahmo family, Satyajit Ray carried forward his illustrious legacy with astonishing ease and finesse.

Both his grandfather Upendra Kishore RayChaudhuri and his father Sukumar RayChaudhuri are extremely well known children's writers. It is said that there is hardly any Bengali child who has not grown up listening to or reading Upendra Kishore's stories about the feisty little bird Tuntuni or the musicians Goopy Gyne and Bagha Byne. He also launched Sandesh, perhaps the first children's magazine in India. Satyajit revived it in 1961 and it is currently available online as well.

He also established the Calcutta Film Society in 1947 with some like mind friends and film enthusiasts; the first film club of its kind in India, dedicated to watching and discussing the best of world cinema.

Pather Panchali (The Song of the Road), directed by Satyajit Ray is rightly considered as one of the greatest landmarks in Indian film history, placing our country firmly on the world's cinematic map inspiring several generations of film directors.

After watching Vittorio De Sica's Bicycle Thieves, he recalled his emotions in a lecture in 1984. The film had "gored" him. "I came out of the theatre with my mind firmly made up. I would become a filmmaker. The prospect of giving up a job didn't daunt me any more. I would make my film exactly as De Sica had made his: working with non-professional actors, using modest resources, and shooting on actual locations."

“I was familiar with the camera, possessing a second-hand Leica. And paying homage to a photographer I considered to be the greatest of all—Henri Cartier-Bresson—I wanted my film to look as if it was shot with available light a la Cartier-Bresson… I had absolutely no doubt in my mind that I would become a filmmaker, starting my career with Pather Panchali. If it didn’t work out, I would be back at my desk at Keymer’s, tail between my legs. But if it did work, there would be no stopping me.” (My Years with Apu.)

But there was no money to make the film. After failing to procure the bare minimum amount required to even contemplate filming, Ray decided to ask some of his friends to contribute a thousand rupees each. The budget of the film had been fixed at ₹ 70,000. He collected ₹ 17,000, and started filming in the October of 1952. The very first sequence that was shot is perhaps the most iconic of the film: Apu and his elder sister Durga running through a field of kaash flowers to see a train for the first time in their lives.

Pandit Ravi Shankar would provide the music and Subrata Mitra was the 21-year-old cinematographer who had never operated a motion picture camera before this. Today he is acknowledged in the cinema world as one of the finest ever to operate a movie camera.

The rest as they say is history.

Pather Panchali went to the Cannes Film Festival and there is a popular anecdote about how initially it was exhibited late at night at a small theatre with less than a dozen people watching including Francois Truffaut, then a critic who would eventually go one to become a great film director, leaving the hall within 10 minutes, bored by the slow pace of the film. Truffaut later apologized several times and Ray and he became good friends.

Lotte Eisner, who would go on to become the chief curator of

the Cinematheque Francaise, as Providence would have it decided that the film deserved a second screening. She lobbied and campaigned for it, resulting in a second show which was well attended and Pather Panchali won the special jury prize for the ‘Best Human Document’.

Ray could now become a full-time film director. He started work on Pather Panchali’s sequel Aparajito (The Unvanquished), which depicts Apu’s teenage years is arguably the finest and most touching film of the Apu trilogy.

Although the first film he wanted to make was Ghare Baire, the one that got made was of course, Pather Panchali. An adaptation of Tagore’s 1916 novel, Ghare Baire (The Home and the World) eventually did get made in 1984 and got nominated for the Palme d’Or at the Cannes Film Festival that year.

In 1982, delivering a lecture, Ray spoke about his work.

“There is a special problem that faces one who must talk about films. Lectures on art should ideally be illustrated. One who talks on paintings usually comes armed with slides and a projector. This solves the difficulty of having to describe in words, what must be seen with the eyes. The lecturer on music must bless the silicon revolution, which enables him to cram all his examples into a cassette no bigger than a small bar of chocolate. But the lecturer on cinema has no such advantage—at least not in the present state of technology in our country. If he wishes to cite an example, he can do no more than give a barely adequate description in words, of what is usually perceived with all one’s senses. A film is pictures, a film is words, a film is movement, a film is drama, a film is music, a film is a story, a film is a thousand expressive aural and visual details. These days one must also add that film is colour. Even a segment of film that lasts barely a minute can display all these aspects simultaneously. You will realize what a hopeless task it is to describe a scene from a film in words. They can’t even begin to do justice to a language which

is so complex.”

Ray thought of cinema as a language. “Cinema is images and sound,” he said.

“The problem,” he wrote, “was over the word ‘art’. If the word ‘language’ was used instead, I think the true nature of cinema will become clearer and there will be no need for debate.” Cinema was a language defined by fade-ins, and fade-outs, camera angles, clever editing and quick cuts complemented by classical music.

Composing music for his films was essential to him too. “How interesting to know… that film and music had so much in common!” he wrote (Speaking of Films). “Both unfold over a period of time; both are concerned with pace and rhythm and contrast; both can be described in terms of mood—sad, cheerful, pensive, boisterous, tragic, jubilant.”

Ray had mastered the art of conveying the message without actually making it explicitly obvious. In Apur Sansar, for instance, the audience gets a sense of the intimacy and comfort that Apu (the incredibly gifted Soumitra Chatterjee, who passed away recently and worked with Ray in fourteen films) and his wife Aparna (Sharmila Tagore in her first film role, who was apparently expelled from her convent school for appearing in a film) enjoy from the little sequences like Apu waking up in the morning, looking decidedly happy and satiated, opening his packet of cigarettes and finding a note by Aparna inside, asking him not to smoke too much.

Ray also ensures that women in his movies exhibit dignity and courage in the face of adversities.

Charulata, based on a Tagore novella called Nashtaneer, whose literal translation is The Ruined Nest (home in this instance) with the English title, The Lonely Wife is a masterpiece by any standards.

The opening sequence which establishes her soul destroying loneliness with no dialogues is fascinating and portrays her unique disposition in seven minutes of near silent shots.

In Ray's own words the seven minutes were about (from Speaking Of Films) attempting to use a language entirely free from literary and theatrical influences. Except for one line of dialogue in its seven minutes, the scene says what it has to say in terms that speak to the eye and the ear.

Madhabi Mukherjee, his rumoured muse and more accomplished the job with practiced ease in the scene which is still etched in his fans' collective memory; the embroidery, the chiming of the grandfather clock, casual lifting of the piano lid and striking a note; the monkey man, the palki, lorgnette and all.

Another personal favourite is her swinging gaily with fairly unusual camera angles and positioning perhaps influence by his mentor Renoir's A Day in the Country. So is the brilliant montage announcing the arrival of rains in Pather Panchali.

Everyone has a list of their cherished sequence, I daresay from scores of profound, layered and thematically rich Ray films, such as Jalsaghar, Devi or The Calcutta Trilogy: Pratidwandi, Seemabaddha & Jana Aranya.

One is spoilt for choice out of his 28 films which he directed in over four decades.

Most of these are based on classic Bengali literary works, and two; Shatranj Ke Khilari and the telefilm Sadgati on stories written by Munshi Premchand. Others are based on contemporary novels and short stories, and some, like Kanchanjungha and Nayak are original scripts written by Ray himself. One of his last films, Ganashatru was inspired by Ibsen's play, An Enemy of The People.

A few of his films like Parash Pathar (The Philosopher's Stone), and the two Feluda detective novels of his which he

made into film—Sonar Kella (The Golden Fortress) and Joi Baba Felunath (The Elephant God) are breezy and immensely entertaining. His two Goopy-Bagha films, Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne and Hirak Rajar Deshe (The Kingdom of Diamonds) delighted the children as musicals.

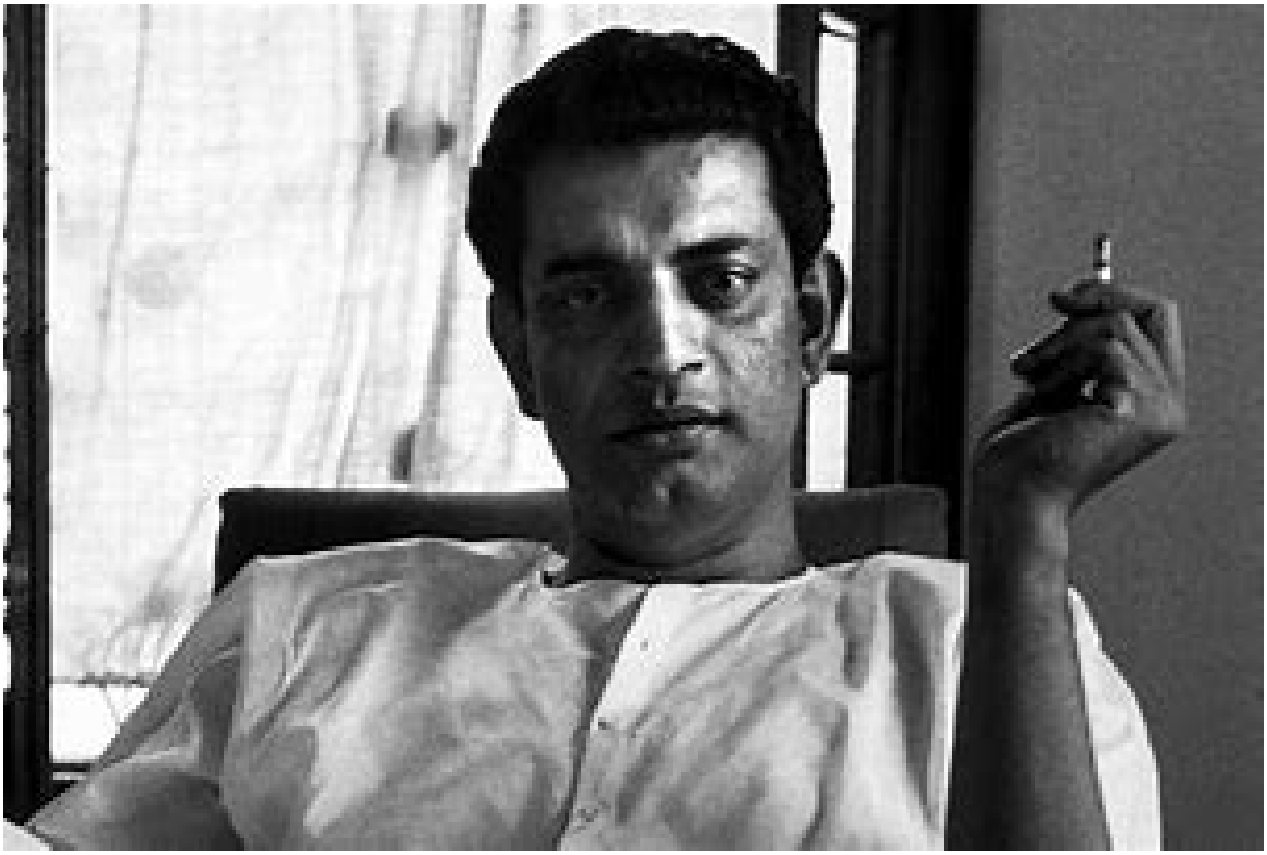
A little known fact about Ray is that without knowing it, he was indeed the first “graphic designer” in India. He even designed two English typefaces -Ray Roman and Ray Bizarre.

One of the most influential, multi-faceted and greatest filmmakers of all times, Satyajit Ray mastered the art of telling intimate human stories, the journey, the trials and tribulations of the ordinary men and women with extraordinary expertise embodying and showcasing the magic of cinema at its very best.

To recognize his enormous contributions to cinema, he was awarded the Academy Honorary Award days before his death. He was also awarded India’s highest civilian honour Bharat Ratna by the Government of India

The legendary Japanese auteur Akira Kurosawa one famously remarked about Ray, “Not to have seen the cinema of Ray means existing in the world without seeing the sun or the moon.”

Satyajit Ray shall forever continue to illuminate and inspire.



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



Satyajit Ray and Ritwik Ghatak were two masters from the Bengali cinema of the 1950s. They were temperamentally

dissimilar and yet they shared a common cultural inheritance left behind by Rabindranath Tagore. An inheritance that was a judicious mix of tradition and modernity. Ray's cinema, like his personality, was outwardly sophisticated but with deep roots in his own culture, particularly that of the reformist Brahmo Samaj founded by Raja Ram Mohan Roy to challenge the bigotry of the upper caste Hindu Society in Bengal in the early and mid-nineteenth century. Ghatak's rugged, home-spun exterior hid an innate sophistication that found a synthesis in the deep-rooted Vaishnav culture of Bengal and the teachings of western philosophers like Hegel, Engels and Marx.

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

The daughter-in-law named Doyamoyee, ironically in retrospect, for she is victimized by her vain, ignorant father-in-law, as it to justify the generous, giving quality suggested by her name. After a few "successes", Doyamoyee fails tragically to cure her brother-in-law's infant son, who dies because he is denied proper medical treatment by his demented grandfather driven solely by religion. Doyamoyee goes mad and dies tragically having hovered in the twilight of self-deception and rationality. Her loving husband makes

a dash from Calcutta but arrives too late to help avert the tragedy. Her father-in-law's conviction that she was Devi or Goddess remains firm.

Ray's sense of mise-en-scene or literally what he puts in a particular scene, is vigorous, classical. The way he links each scene to tell his story that moves forward inevitably towards its tragic finish with the surety of a well-aimed arrow, is an object lesson in film craft. His pace is unhurried and yet the editing carries the film forward by giving maximum importance to the content of individual scenes.

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

Ray's visual style is beautiful because it is also understated. Every shot has an organic quality that helps in the unfolding of the narrative, giving it shape, tone, clarity and sensitivity. His camera draws the viewer in as a witness to the happenings that coelesce into a moving story about power arising, ironically, from a lack of knowledge and the certitude that blind faith brings to an economically

powerful man who is then free to wreck havoc even on his loved ones with the best of intentions.

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

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

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

Subrata Mitra's Black and White photography helps express Ray's innermost thoughts with precision. His lyrical vision blends with that of the director and includes a genuine

sense of the tragic. The slow disintegration of Doyamoyee's mind is photographed with unusual understanding. Mitra was to Ray what cinematographer Sven Nykvist was to Ingmar Bergman in Swedish cinema. It is difficult to forget the images of the last quarter of the film.

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

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

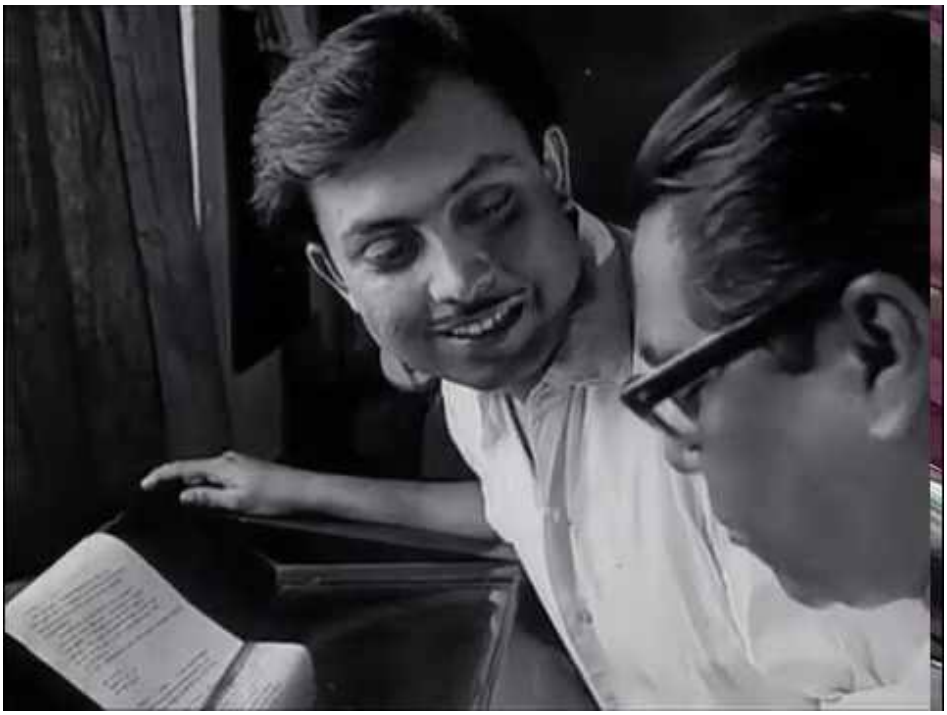
She is only a very young woman who has "Sainthood" thrust upon her by a superstitious, overbearing father-in-law. Her own potential for motherhood is kept on hold as she is willed by others to become a "Divine Mother" to cure the diseases from which that they may be suffering.

Ray's treatment of the film brings to mind that unique

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

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

https://youtu.be/ittYCEV4nUY



Ritwik Ghatak's Subarnrekha

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

Life is a relentless struggle for Ishwar Bhattacharya (Abhi Bhattacharya), his little sister Sita (Madhabi Mukherjee) and foster brother Abhiram (Satindra Bhattacharjee) as it is for the other members of the Refugee camp. Ishwar is befriended by a school master, Harprasad (Bijon Bhattacharya). A chance meeting in the street with an old friend, a marwari, lands Ishwar a job in his foundry near the river Subarnarekha in Bihar. Harprasad accuses Ishwar of being a coward and seeking security only for his family and forgetting his suffering comrades in the camp. The rest of the story, or rather its unfolding would do credit to Bertold Brecht, who, despite his intractable stand against the bourgeoisie, had imbibed vital lessons from medieval Christian morality plays.

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

The film was shot on a day to day basis as there was only the skeletal plot of a long-lost brother and sister meeting as client and singing prostitute provided by producer Radhe Shyam Jhunjhunwala. Ghatak literally had to work his story in

both directions without the knowledge of his producer who was expecting an entirely different, perhaps hugely sensational film. This story is true because Ghatak had to do "Scissors", his only Advertising film, courtesy his friend Chidananda Dasgupta, then with Imperial Tobacco Company. The proceeds from this cigarette Ad film went to do the final post-production work on Subarnarekha when producer Jhunjhunwala fled in panic.

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

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

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

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

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

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

It is a film of startling transitions. When Ishwar weary of life alone, some years after the departure of Sita and Abhiram, decides to hang himself his old friend Harprasad appears like a ghost at the window and declares "How far

gone is the night? There is no answer". Ishwar's suicide is averted and the two friends after a brief conversation end up in the morning on the same deserted airstrip where Sita and Abhiram played as children. Near the wreckage of a WWII Dakota airplane Harbilash tells Ishwar that both as individuals and as a generation they are finished. He suggests to the relatively monied Ishwar that they go to Calcutta to have a good time.

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

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

When Ishwar returns back to his job as Foundry manager on the banks of the river Subarnarekha (also meaning the

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

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

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

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

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

https://youtu.be/0Qyml5vqvqo