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

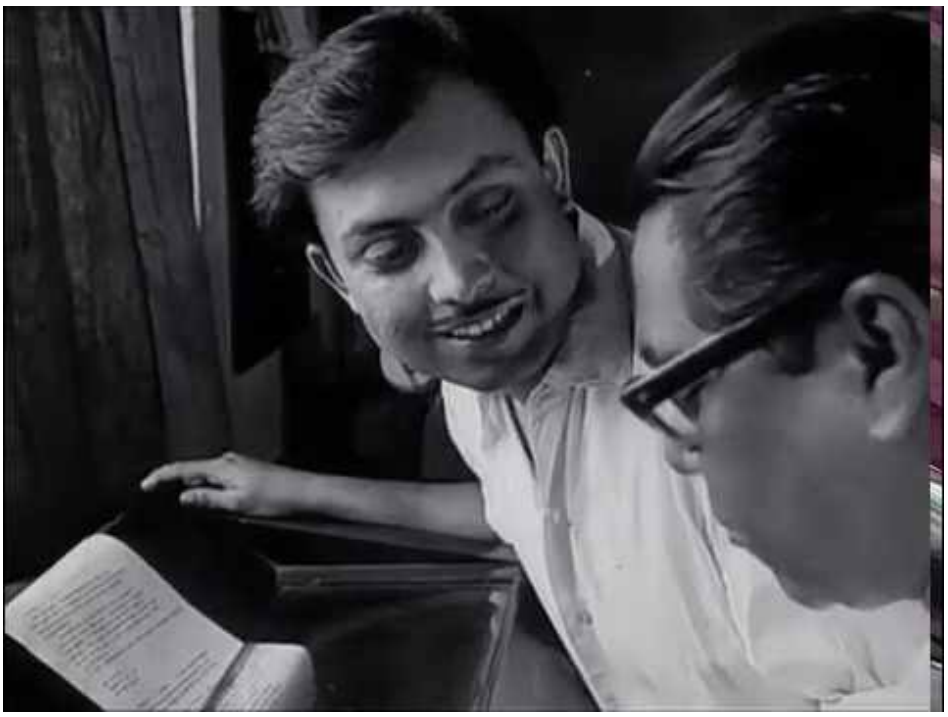
cherishing. His little touches are worthy of emulation by younger filmmakers travelling on the same path. The way he inverses the role of the maternal figure when the ailing baby is placed on Doyamogee's lap is an object lesson in filmmaking.

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

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

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

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

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

Kariat's characters go through great tragedies usually against

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

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

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

Hindi cinema rarely used water as a leit-motif. Only in song picturisation did it play a significant role. Guru Dutt, in his first film, Jaal (The Net, 1951), had coastal Goa as his location. It was a crime thriller with an obligatory moral

ending. Four songs, two of them memorable, have the sea as an integral part of their camera choreography. Pighla Hai Sona Doore Gagan Meye (Molten Gold Lights The Far Horizon) was filmed at dusk with fishing boats returning home after a day at sea, and their presence add imperceptibly to the romantic mood of the song. Yeh Raat Yeh Chandni Phir Kahan (On A Glowing Moonlit Night This, Memories Nudge And Stir The Heart), has judiciously selected sea images and convincing B/W photography to simulate moonlight. Maria (Geeta Bali) a simple, giving Catholic girl pines for Tony (Dev Anand) her absent lover. Hemant Kumar and Lata Mangeshkar's singing, Sahir Ludhianvi's lyrics and Sachin Dev Burman's composition together create an unforgettable experience.

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

Bimal Roy was the other director from Hindi films to use water as a poetic symbol in some of his films but only in songs, while observing intelligently the conventions of commercial cinema. In Madhumati (1957), a ghost-romance written by Ritwik Ghatak, the song Suhana Safar Aur ye Mausam Haseen (Such a Joyous Journey, Such Sweet Weather), has brief shots of mountain Springs that eloquently bring out the male protagonist's euphoric state of mind. He also used water images in the heart-rending climax of Bandini (The Captive-1963) when the heroine fresh out of jail fortuitously hears of her consumptive revolutionary lover's presence on board a steamer that is about to leave. She is disturbed because the man is inadvertently responsible for all her woes in the past. Just as the steamer sounds its final departure,

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

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

In it a peasant (Raj Kapoor) comes to the metropolis of Calcutta to find work. Hungry, penniless, alone he tries to get a drink of water from a public tap and is chased away by a policeman who thinks he is a thief. He runs into a block of flats and discovers in his nightlong flight from State tyranny what corrupt and dissolute lives most of the tenants lead. Throughout the night he is chased by a group of vigilantes who obviously represent extra constitutional authority much like the R.S.S. He finally quenches his thirst at dawn given water by a devotee (Nargis) from her kalash (bell metal pot) who sings Jaago Mohan Pyaare (Awake My Beloved Krishna! The New Sun's Rays Kiss Your Brow) set to Salil Choudhury rousing music and Shailendra's words that subtly alter the traditional Bhajan to suit the socialist ideal. The hunted peasant finds

dignity, courage and self-worth in this the final sequence of the film.

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

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

Nargis and Raj Kapoor, in his Chaplinesque tramp avatar, give lip synchronisation on camera to this exquisite (the adjective is appropriate) melody sung by Manna Dey and Lata Mangeshkar, composed by Shankar-Jaikishan with lyrics by Shailendra. The artistic intent is direct. The two protagonists huddle under an umbrella in steady rain at night and the intention is to

bring them together in matrimony. Raincoat-clad little children walk past the couple to reinforce the idea. Since the duo is not a part of the privileged classes the pictorial suggestion is of a happy, socialist future for them with lovable children of their own like the ones just shown. On camera, a line from the song Hum Na Rahengeye, Tum Na Rahogeye, Rahengeye Yeh Nishaaniyaan [Gone! Gone! We Will Be Forever Gone! Our Love Shall Take Seed, Go On…] bolsters the idea lyrically.

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

In later years, after Nargis, the glowing actress-star and inspiration behind R.K. films left, the artistic quality of the productions dropped noticeably. There was a marked deterioration in the use of water imagery from Jis Desh Meye Ganga Behti Heye (1961) to Sangam (1964) and then the fall came with Satyam, Shivam, Sunderam. By the time Raj Kapoor made Ram Teri Ganga Maili (1986) blatant carnality had come to dominate his sensibility so completely that it was difficult to believe as a young man he had so deeply moved a large viewing Public with films that were genuinely felt if, a

trifle sentimental.

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

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

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

Water is used in the film to cleanse and bless as if to

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

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

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

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

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

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

Titash Ekti Nadir Naam came at a time when his health and

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

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

Ghatak's version of Titash… is soaked in water for more then three-quarters of its running time. It begins with shots of rain and boats out fishing, some of them trying to get back before a killer storm overtakes them. The black and white photography captures almost tactile images of water. Absence of colour is a blessing here because it helps concentrate the image, and that done, to invest it with an abstract quality.

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

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

His vision of life was as engagingly contradictory as his personality. In his films many people accept fate and fight it at one and the same time. The visual metaphor would be swimming against the current. The idea gains credence taking his Barendra Brahmin background into consideration. His cussedness, his iconoclasm, his awareness of the nourishing aspects of tradition all added up to a delightful contradiction both in the man and his films.

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

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

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

The magnificent Brahmaputra flows through the land unmindful of the passing hopes and sorrows of human beings who inhabit it. It is an illustration of nature's grand indifference to human folly and greed; of its complete impartiality as witness to man's succumbing to his own selfishness. Barua's characters have to fend for themselves, like the old peasant and his orphaned grandson in Hrhagoroloi Bohu Door (Far Away

Is The Sea).

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

Water imagery is cleverly used to capture hidden nuances in many scenes. They suggest without appearing to, the reverberation of each hurt, each humiliation similar to the last, but somehow different. Time of day, Quality of light in keeping with the season, come together to articulate what words cannot. Most of the time the Brahmaputra looks brown and muddy likes the lives of the grandson and grandfather. Then suddenly as the most knotty problem in the old man's life is resolved when he decides to do his best to bring up the boy, the light suddenly acquires a glowing, honeyed quality. Even the river literally reflects glints of hope. Barua's film, like the man himself, comes to grips with life and its complexities in the most disarming and straightforward manner.

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

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

Every scene in the justly famous extended last sequence in the film is photographed under a cloudy sky, promising rain. When Nita, after hearing of all the good news about the family members including her little nephew who has just learned to walk, cries out, "Dada I want to live!" the camera goes "dizzy" and right afterwards, a montage follows, of water gently trickling down a hillside soon succeeded by a shot of a flock of sheep coming down a slope shepherded by a boy. Tinkling of bells is heard, and just after, a plaintive song about Uma (Durga) returning home to her husband's, is carried on the soundtrack. Water in its short visual appearance represents among many things, perhaps a sudden effulgence in a life that has been devoted to and sacrificed in, the service of family, the most dynamic and ironically, destructive of

social units.

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

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

Memory images from his childhood stayed with him all his life. In a sense his entire cinema was about lost innocence and about journeys in search of a retrieval and a renewal. Here, in Titash… there is a sense of conclusion, although he does show a child running through a paddy field at harvest time blowing a leaf whistle. The land once belonged to the fishermen but the river changed course. Businessmen in collusion with corrupt Government officials took it over, had

them forcibly evicted and then rented it out to tenant farmers.

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

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

Titash… had its own demands. The novel’s spirit had to be retained without cluttering up the screen with too many characters and sub-plots. Water was of paramount importance because it ruled and shaped people’s destinies. Crucial scenes took place in the ‘presence’ of water: either on it or nearby.

Kishore, the virile young fisherman, to whom Basanti had pledged herself when they were children, looses his new bride to dacoits who raid his boat at night, as it drifts slowly in midstream.

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

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

On the auspicious day of Magh Mandla, when young girls ask the Gods for suitable husbands, Basanti and Rajar Jhee take the mad Kishore to bathe in the waters of the Titash. In keeping with rural Bengali custom Rajar Jhee is now known as Anantar Ma or Ananta's mother, because of the son conceived a decade ago in blissful union with Kishore at her parent's.

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

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

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

The starving fishing community is quite easily evicted.

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

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

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

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

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

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

save Titash…, life exists palpably, simultaneously, as a memory, an immediate happening and a projection of hope into the unknown. Ambiguities hidden underneath tragic certainties make Titash an exception. A playful little boy with a leaf whistle at harvest time appears just before Basanti's death. It is a wrenching revelation of a cruel natural process. However, seen in totality Ghatak's films do suggest a resurgent humane consciousness. Recurring water images encourage this view.

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

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

Shots of ponies grazing by a pristine stream are indeed memorable. Having said that one would still insist that there was hardly a director in modern cinema with Ritwik Ghatak's fecund imagination in using water as a metaphor in a body of work.

Memories and Vagaries – Ritwik Ghatak

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

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

He forgot that he lived in a country that was simultaneously half-feudal and half-capitalist and was still emerging from the shadow of colonialism. Directness and honesty in private and professional life were qualities lauded in the abstract but viewed with suspicion, even fear, in the real world. In

his case it was inevitable that alienation and unemployment would lead to alcoholism, bankruptcy and an early death. His worldly failure was somehow seen as the touchstone of ‘artistic worth’ by a certain section of the Indian elite and they claimed him as their own ten years ago. This is indeed ironic, for they have neither knowledge nor intuition of the Bengali language or the culture that made a genius like him possible.

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

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

IPTA travelled from village to village and to the small towns in Bengal apart from playing in Calcutta and its suburbs and soon had roots all over India. It did contemporary Indian plays and significant Western ones as well. In addition the ‘song squad’ was famous for its musical acumen and rousing repertoire. The organisation’s role in the evolving of

positive cultural values in independent India was seminal. To say that modern ideas in India theatre and cinema grew out of the activities of IPTA would not be an exaggeration.

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

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

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

Nagrik's lack of outward polish could not suppress its innate qualities, which included a fine sense of camera placement, an ear for music and incidental sound, a passionate involvement with social issues. As a communist film-maker he was committed to speak up for the deprived. Prova Debi, an Exceptional Bengali stage actress was moving as the nurturing mother. Kali Prasanna Das's music, including the song Priya Praan Kathin Kathore set to Maithili mystic poet Vidyapati's

lyrics was another high point. There was enough in this first work to suggest a major director awaiting the right opportunity. But that was five years away.

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

Ajantrik too was based on a literary work like his very first venture, Bedini (1951), abandoned after a 20-day outdoor schedule when the shot footage got spoilt by a camera defect. Tarashankar Bandopadhyay's tale about gypsies never got to the screen but Subodh Ghosh's memorable short story did. It was about a cranky, poetic cab-driver's attachment to his 1926 model Chevrolet named Jaggadal that he drives in the Chota Nagpur tribal belt in Bihar. It was Ghatak's first major artistic success. He had prepared for it by directing a two-reel documentary simply entitled The Oraons of Chotanagpur on the tribe of that name for the Aurora Film Corporation, Calcutta, and another short, Bihar Ke Kuch Darshaniye Sthaan, for the state government. These exercises helped him develop a grasp of the landscape that became an organic part of Ajantrik's narrative. Perhaps it was for the first time that nature was used with such poetic authority in an Indian film to bring into focus both its concrete and abstract elements.

When the jalopy is sold as scrap after its final breakdown following an expensive restoration job to a dealer wearing diamond earnings, the most stone-hearted viewer's heart is wrenched despite the premonition of the inevitable that hovers over the film almost from the beginning. The final moments; have indeed the clarity of a parable as Bimal (Kali Banerjee), the taxi driver, hears and sees a little boy playing with the

discarded horn of his beloved car on which he had lavished the attention he would on a dearly loved wife. Ajantrik's charm is elusive, almost metaphysical, although it deals with a very real situation in human terms. The Communist Party of India welcomed the film with open arms after driving away its director on grounds of being a Trotskyite. The Left felt it depicted the dialectics between man and machine to great effect. Still others saw it as a satire on random imposition of modernity on the countryside in newly independent India. But there were too many disparate elements within the story to ensure a clear-cut, all-embracing interpretation.

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

It looks pat but is not. Bimal pushes his broken-down car over a high bridge with the help of Adivasi men and women, some of whom are seated in the vehicle. Just as they reach the middle, a steam locomotive comes roaring in on the tracks below. There is also the charming little scene of Bimal all dressed up with his boy assistant to get himself and his car photographed by the local view-camera master who asks him not to smile foolishly lest the picture be spoilt! Bimal attends a night of revelry with Oroan tribals in a nearby forest. It is a fleeting, poetic moment, mysterious and clear at the same time

like shots of Jagad Dal sputtering, chugging, fighting its way through rain-lashed landscapes. Ustad Ali Akbar Khan's haunting rendering of raga Bilas Khani Todi on the sarod to helps create a film that makes the viewer feel he has been on to important things, indeed privy to secrets related to man and nature.

A fairly low negative cost of one lakh thirty five thousand rupees was difficult to recover during its release. Even the money spend on prints and publicity expenses was not recouped. Bengali audiences in 1957 were bewildered by a film in which a recalcitrant old Car was the lead character and its eccentric driver only of foil, although a most effective one. But the viewers in Calcutta, despite Pather Panchali and Aparajito by Satyajit Ray, were completely unprepared for Ghatak's cinematic poem. More than a quarter of a century went by before recognition came for its path-breaking qualities. Cahiers du Cinema compared its director's unique juxtaposition of sound and image, after its Paris screening in 1983, to the explorations of great European experimentalists like Jean Marie Straub, Jacques Tati and Robert Bresson. Sadly, recognition first came abroad. Small sections of so-called discerning viewers in India gradually woke up to its merits. Incidental sound in Ajantrik was used in a most interesting manner, adding another 'voice' to that of the old automobile.

Pramod Lahiri, its producer, had already made Paras Pathar, a touching serio-comedy, with Satyajit Ray and was about to embark on a new film with him when, at Ray's insistence, he decided to do Bari Theke Paliye, based on a story by humorist Shibram Chakravarti, in 1959 with Ghatak in the hope of making up his losses on Ajantrik. The story of a stern village schoolmaster's pre-teenage son who runs away to the metropolis of Calcutta in search of the EI Dorado that he has read about did not gel. What could have been a sparkling children's film became a dull tract on the heartlessness of city life where only the poor have humanity and the rich are indifferent. The director fell prey to the necessity of having a sabak or moral lesson for the prospective young viewer. What remains after

all these years is young Param Bhattarak Lahiri's charming performance and Salil Chaudhury's lilting musical score. Predictably the film failed at the box office. Even Khaled Choudhary's lovingly designed humorous poster could not attract children in sufficient numbers to see it.

A married man with responsibilities, Ghatak turned desperately to 'saleable material'. For his new venture he chose a well-written popular novel, Koto Ajaana Rey by Shankar. Mihir Law, a successful paint manufacturer, agreed to finance an expensive production-by Bengali standards. Ghatak bought additional insurance by engaging a big star like Chabi Biswas to play Barwell, the English barrister, a crucial figure in the novel. He also had Anil Chatterjee, a fine actor whose star was rising at the box-office, and a supporting cast that included Karuna Banerjee of Pathar Panchali and Aparajito fame and a powerful young left-wing theatre actor named Utpal Dutt. The shooting progressed well and both director and producer were happy with the results. Then, as in many other times, in the artiste's 1ater life, shooting came to a halt over an absurd incident. He had instructed the literal minded Gorkha watchman (durwan) of the studio not to let anyone in as he was shooting a crucial scene in the script. The producer, Mihir Law too was denied admission by the zealous sentry. Startled and insulted, Law returned home and decided to withdraw all financial support after having already sunk a considerable sum of money.

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

of the existential dilemma of the Indian lower middle class, where the sacrifice of the one good, meek, dutiful daughter – she dies tragically of TB in the end – ensures the survival of the rest of the family. Shaktipada Raj Guru's ordinary melodrama, Chena Mukh, became the source of one of the most emotionally rich films ever made anywhere in the world.

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

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

myopic party ideologue by the name of Sudhi Pradhan. Most of them, like Ghatak, Balraj Sahni, Salil Chowdhury, Majrooh Sultanpuri, Kaifi Azmi, Shailendra, Vishmitra Adil and K.A. Abbas, left to earn a living in the cinema while Shambhu Mitra, Bijon Bhattacharya and Utpal Dutt prospered in theatre. Ghatak criticism of the party's cultural policy in his new film was seen as gross misdemeanor by the bosses and worthy of severe punishment. Of that later.

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

Laughter and tears are good companions in this moving film that makes nonsense of artificial geographic borders and manufactured history. A common heritage of language, music and customs brings people together and the machinations of demented politicians forcibly divide them along with the land where they have their roots. All the wars fought in the last hundred years have been over purely commercial considerations; racism has always been used alongside as an excuse to

consolidate business gains. A snatch of an old folksong is heard in the film – Aey Paar Paddaa 0 Paar Paddaa/ Moddi Khaaney Chaur/Tahaar Moddeye Bosheye/Aachen Shibo Saudagor (On this bank is the river Padma / On the other bank is the Padma too / And an island lies between them / Where lives Lord Shiva / The trader-great).

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

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

Komal Gandhar, for all its adolescent preoccupation with the idea of Mother and Motherland and at the same time the authentic poetic connection between the two, is also a loving

tribute to the nation-building energies that went into the activities of the IPTA which was, before it was sabotaged from within by the CPI, an organisation of idealists who had a purity of purpose and dreamt of building a contended egalitarian India.

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

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

He took Ghatak back with him to Bombay, where he lived and worked, to help him recuperate from the excesses of his

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

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

In the three years between the completion of the film and its release in 1965, Ghatak's life went up and down like a see-saw. He tried unsuccessfully to get backing for a film based on Bibhuti Bhusan Bandopadhyay's novel, Aaranyak. Set in the wilderness, it ran as a moral, possibly ethical counterpoint to the urban world and was worthy of anything written by W.H. Hudson, the greatest interpreter of nature in English Literature. If there was anyone who could grasped Bibhuti Bhushan's novels intensity and transfer it on screen it was Ghatak. Scarcely any other director had responded to nature with such lyrical understanding since Robert Flaherty, the

American documentary poet of Irish origin. But the film was not to be. Jagannath Koley, heir to a well known Calcutta biscuit company and Minister for Information and Broadcasting in the state government, failed to convince the bureaucracy under him to waive the mandatory bank guarantee Ghatak was required to provide.

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

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

improviser like the Swiss-French director Jean-Luc Goddard, had ever been through such an ordeal.

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

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

The most illuminating moments occur in Ghatak’s cinema like in Luis Bunuel’s, a director he particularly admired, not in great bursts of dramatic action but in the gaps between them. Bravura scenes are there only to confirm what we have intuitively gathered to be the essential ingredients of the unfolding story. These are the real moments of revelation. This is true particularly of Subarnarekha, where plainness and exaggeration coexist in a technique born out of necessity; the

producer had to be lulled into believing that a lurid melodrama was in the making, which would on its release make a killing at the box-office.

The most talked about revelatory moment in the film is of course when the child, Sita, accidentally runs into the bohurupee (quick change artiste) dressed as Mahakaal, the scourge of time, and is shocked at the sight of him. When he is scolded by the broken- down old accountant of the factory where Ishwar is manager, for scaring a little girl, he says, "I did not try to scare her, sir, she sort of ran into me." The little scene takes on a new dimension when it is learnt that the old man consoling her has been in a precarious emotional state himself ever since his own daughter eloped with her lover. The scene is further enriched when he and Sita walk away from the camera and we hear him ask her name and on hearing it tell her the story of Janak, the king of Mithila, who one day found his daughter, Sita, in the very soil he was tilling. When seen in the context of the whole film, the scene's function seems to be oracular, a prediction, as it were, of Sita and Abhiram's tragic future together as adults.

There is a sudden flash of prophetic intuition in a scene from Sita and Abhiram's childhood when they pretend to be aircraft taking off from a long-forgotten, dilapidated Second World War British airstrip near Panagarh in the Bengal countryside. At the climax of their game, through the use of a subjective camera, they appear to personify an aircraft taking flight. Truth in the arts, particularly the cinema, is achieved through such enunciatory acts. There are other instances of poetic insight in a film where the paradox and irony of life become apparent all of a sudden.

On the same desolate airstrip Sita sings a bandish in raga Kalavati, Aaj Ki Anando (Oh, How Joyful is the Day). The raga is also used to create a somber mood, when she sings a different composition at the same sight at dusk, after her elder brother, who is like a father to her, rejects the fact that she and Abhiram are in love and would like to marry. The abandoned airstrip is used for the last time in the final

quarter of the film when Ishwar and the ghost from his past, Harprasad, the idealist school teacher and founder of Navjeevan Colony, arrive there after a night of despair, when he is prevented by his friend’s sudden appearance from hanging himself out of grief following Sita’s elopement with Abhiram.
The final scene, heart-breaking and of surpassing beauty with Ishwar and Binu, the orphaned little son of Sita and Abhiram, walking away towards a craggy landscape with the horizon far in the background, accompanied by choral chanting of the Charai Beiti mantra on the sound track, in search of a new life, sums up the forced political and hence historical displacement of millions, in our own times and earlier, whose only crime was that they had sought a little peace, dignity and happiness in their lives.
While Ishwar and his nephew were able to go out to find a new life at the end of Subarnarekha, Ghatak’s own was fast reaching a point of no return. A cherished documentary on Ustad Allauddin Khan of Maihar, the father figure of Hindustani instrumental music in the post-1940 era, had to be abandoned after the shooting because Ghatak had the first of his alcohol-related breakdowns. After waiting for a recovery that did not come quick enough, producer Harisadhan Dasgupta, reluctantly patched together a version for the Films Division of India. It was predictably, not the film Ghatak had conceived.
Sheer economic necessity had forced him to join the Film and Television institute of India, Pune, in 1965 as Vice Principal. His controversial 18 months there proved him to be an outstanding teacher. He did ghost-direct the haunting short, Rendezvous, a diploma film credited to Rajendranath Shukla, photographed ingeniously by Amarjeet Singh at the Karla Caves in Lonavala near Pune. Always a teacher who taught by example, Ghatak once filmed a tree in early morning light in black & white to help his students connect with nature. Needless to say, the result was exquisite. This single shot of three hundred feet or three minutes and twenty seconds in 35mm was preserved in the institute vaults for many years and may

still be there to inspire new generations of filmmakers.
He came back to Calcutta, having resigned his job at Pune, to resume a career that was already in the doldrums. He wrote a short story, Pandit Mashai (now lost), in a non-stop seventeen-hour session, and collapsed immediately afterwards. A screenplay entitled Janmabhoomi was gleaned from it and has survived. It was about a Sanskrit scholar and teacher who seeks refuge after the partition in a traditional crematorium or burning ghat along with his young daughter. Their lives are destroyed in the course of events like that of the millions in Ghatak's generation who could not adapt to the cruelty and indifference of changing times in order to live. They were people who believed in the regenerative powers of love for themselves and for others and were betrayed for their beliefs.
He wrote a film script from Manik Bandopadhyay's classic novel, Padda Nadir Majhi and carried a bound copy with him till the end. And even tried to get his old friend, producer Hiten Choudhury, sculptor Sankho Choudhury's elder brother, to produce it in colour. He also wrote the script for the Ashtamsarga of Kalidas's Kumara Sambhava. These were two projects that he wanted to do very badly. But failing health and hospitalisation for psychiatric disorders, including a diagnosis of dual personality by doctors at the Gobra mental asylum, Calcutta, and chronic lack of even basic expense money prevented him from filming them. His wife Surama in the meanwhile, had gone out to teach and keep the wolf away from the door.
In 1968, he began Ranger Golam, an adaptation of a novel by Narayan Sanyal, "with amazing confidence", in the words of Anil Chatterjee, who was playing the lead. He had earlier played a cameo as an irresponsible, thieving young husband in Ajantrik and then stellar roles in Meghe Dhaka Tara as Shankar the classical singer to whom fame and money come in time to pull his family out of the financial mire but too late to save the life of the beloved tubercular elder sister, Nita, and of course, as the rebellious, thinking theatre actor in Komal Gandhar. He recalled years later, "Seeing him work, you

wouldn’t believe he had been so ill just before he began Ranger Golam.” A melancholic story and his refusal to stop drinking at work led to the closure of this production too. He was unable to understand that people investing money in a production directed by him also had the right to feel emotionally secure in his presence.

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

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

He had known Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in the distant past and liked to call her his Santiniketan connection. She had as a girl been all too briefly a student there during Rabindranath Tagore’s lifetime. He happened to know people close to her, namely P.N. Haksar, an ex-communist and her main

advisor. It was through her good offices that he got the National Film Development Corporation of India to finance Jukti Takko Aar Gappo in 1971. The selection committee felt that he was too much of an alcoholic to actually complete and deliver a film within a given time-frame. Indira Gandhi herself overruled their objections.

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

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

declared in March 1975 to this writer after a screening at Sapru House, New Delhi, during the first ever retrospective of his work in his lifetime, organised by Sanjib Chatterjee of the Bengalee Club, Kali Bari, New Delhi.

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

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

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

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

When death came, he had for some years borne a resemblance to King Lear. His hair had turned white, his body had shrunk and

he looked thirty years older than his actual age. Yet there was something majestic about him. Broken in health but optimistic, he was full of plans. He had always wanted to make a real children's film and actively engaged in negotiations with the Children's Film Society of India to produce Princess Kalavati, based on a famous Bengali folktale, Buddhu Bhutum. He devised ways of achieving Special effects elegantly and effectively for the film within a modest budget.

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

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

The best of Ritwik Ghatak continues to be invigorating cinema twenty-seven years after his death: prescient, plastic and rich with possibility. He always claimed that he did not care for storytelling in his films and that for him the story was only a starting point. But in his own way he was a terrific storyteller, who could, like the Indian literary masters before the industrial age and much earlier, digress from the main story in a seemingly arbitrary fashion and always return to enrich it. In this respect he resembled his friend, Ustad A1i Akbar Khan, the supreme improviser in Hindustani music, who at his best can take the listener by complete surprise with his digressions from the main composition in a given

raga; by his sly asides, and his startling return to the dominant theme to create new, unforeseen avenues of thought and feeling.

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

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

For a further understanding of the artiste, one must go back to Paras Pathar, a story he wrote as a young man of twenty-three. Chandrakant Sarkar, a humble colliery clerk and connoisseur of Hindustani music is given by a traveling Shaman, a secret formula for bringing the recently dead back to life. He attacks and robs a company official carrying the weekly payroll to fund his own research that entails several trips to the Himalayas to get rare herbs. Chandrakant looses

the piece of paper that has the miraculous formula on it by a waterfall and goes mad. Ritwik Ghatak’s greatness and his vulnerability are symbolically predicted in this story.