

Tribute: Ritwik Ghatak Birth Centenary

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Documentaries and Short Films of Ritwik Ghatak



Ritwik in his IPTA days

It is the birth centenary year of Ritwik Kumar Ghatak, the unforgettable people's film artist of India of all time. Discussions are currently resurfacing about his eight full-length feature films, and these discussions are particularly relevant on the occasion of Ritwik's birth centenary. Ritwik began his work in cinema as an assistant to Bimal Roy, where he also served as an assistant director and actor in the 1950 film *Tathapi*. After that, in 1952, he directed his first feature film, *Nagorik*. This Film was released in 1978, two years after his death. I want to discuss a few words not only about the fiction but also about the 15 documentaries and short films directed by Ritwik Ghatak.

In 1955, he directed a documentary titled *Adivasion ka Jeevan-srot* (The Life of the Tribals), produced by the Department of Public Relations of the Government of Bihar. Here, we see a fast-paced movie about the lives of tribes living in Bihar and Jharkhand. Shots of Mother Nature come with its vastness and tranquility. Streams of water, whether as falls or small canals, are used as a metaphor for the flow of the dancing lives of the tribals. For this Film's background music,

Ritwik used tribal instruments such as flutes, mridangam, dhamsa, and more. This Film was shot entirely in daylight. It features narration that sometimes switches between the first and second person, creating an engaging intimacy that makes it feel very personal and close. For instance, when describing a tribal market, he suddenly exclaims, "Ah, what's the hurry?" as if directly asking the characters (Tribal Ladies going to the 'haat').

He described the life of the Adivasis, saying, "Adivasiyon ka nritya hi unka jeevan hai athava kahiye ki unka jeevan hi ek nritya hai" (The dance of the Adivasis is their life, or rather, life itself is a dance to them). The documentary portrays the various aspects of the lives of these Indian Tribal People in many shades, but what is most important is the liveliness of these people. We see busy people all around the body of that Film, moving dramatically.



Stills from "Adivasion ka Jeevan-srot"

Ritwik had always said that his Gurus, Robert J. Flaherty (American) and John Grierson (British), had encouraged him to make documentaries, this way. Ritwik himself said, "To shoot documentaries, you need a much stronger love for people... I do not consider documentary films to be a separate art form. They are documents of human life. I do not know a whole lot about documentary films, even though I have made quite a few, as I made those to make a living."

Ritwik confirmed that the earnings from these documentaries ran his livelihood. It is 1955. Ritwik was very much involved in the Film Industry of Kolkata. Paradise Café, opposite to the Basushree Cinema Hall in the southern part of the city, remained full with

Mrinal Sen, Banshi Chandragupta, Salil Chowdhury, Tapas Sen, Panu Pal, Kali Banerjee, Hrishikesh Mukherjee, O C Ganguly, Nripen Ganguly, Satyen Chattopadhyay, Nemai Ghosh, Bijan Bhattacharya, Ritwik Ghatak and many more. All were jobless. All used to lend money to each other. A bidi cost 1/3rd a paisa at that time, and Ritwik had a loan of Rs. 80, only for his bidis in a shop nearby the Café.

Ritwik initiated a movement among the cine workers of Tollygunj, under the Cine Technicians Association of Bengal, for fair wages, and he consistently remained at the forefront, carrying posters and placards in all the rallies. Although he was expelled from the B.T. Ranadive-led Communist Party for questioning the Party with his thesis, "On the Cultural Front," which he had signed along with Surama Bhattacharya and Mumtaz Ahmad Khan, he continued his movements. Ritwik Ghatak and Mrinal Sen organised a meeting on the issue after a prolonged strike by the workers, presided over by Pramathesh Barua, and managed to persuade the studio owners to fulfil their demands for cine technicians partially.



Ritwik in 1957

Ritwik was a member and leader of the IPTA during its formation stage in the latter

part of the 1940s and the early 1950s. Ritwik started living in his elder brother, Asish Ghatak's, house on Harish Mukherjee Road in South Kolkata. He shifted to his other elder brother, Manish Ghatak's house in Bullygunj Place shortly after. Manish was a cinematographer. Here he saw the historical play, "Nabanna" by Bijan Bhattacharya. His play, "Dalil", was acclaimed in the historical IPTA convention in Bombay in 1952.



Some shots from the documentary "Oraon" by Ritwik Ghatak

At this stage of his life, Ritwik was not only participating in the forefront of the movements of cine technicians, but he and his comrades also had a regular connection with at least seven to eight factory workers in the Garden Reach and Metiaburj areas. Kali Banerjee said, "Ritwik has seen life always in rallies".

I am writing these few lines to focus on the attitude of Ritwik towards life and his work as a preparatory chapter to his documentary making.

Indian documentary cinema began its journey after independence, and some of Ritwik's comrades were thinking about documentary cinema in a new form, distinct from fictional cinema.

Ritwik said, "Film is not a form; it has forms. Nobody denies the special privileges

of the cine camera. Still, one should not approach the issue from that side at all—one should approach it from the point of view of the emotions aroused and intellects sharpened by one's end product—the result that accrues, after all you create 'for' the people".

In 1955, Ritwik directed his second documentary, *Places of Historic Interest in Bihar* (also known as "Bihar Ki Kuch Darshaniya Sthan"), produced by the Bihar Government's Tourism Department. This Film highlighted the historical significance of places in Bihar, such as Nalanda, Taxila, and Bodhgaya, on the international stage. Even today, this Film is a guide for countless students researching Buddhism. This Film is available on IMDb. If we watch it, we'll see how astonishingly the images of Buddhist stupas and Buddha statues are captured in daylight alone, and how the vastness of Buddhist monasteries and centres of sacred knowledge are portrayed with such extraordinary artistic vision.



Two Posters made out of the Ad Film on "Scissors"

We can also relate to Ritwik's vast knowledge of Indian Historical Tradition and the depth of his thoughts regarding Indian myths and cultural texts. The narration of this Film is in simple Hindi, with classical background music. Another noteworthy

aspect is the presence of people in the Film. The Film conveys how easily ordinary Bihari people have embraced these places, how lovely the ordinary people are, and how the solemn sighs of history haven't overshadowed them.



Some Stills from "Baba"

In 1957, Ritwik Ghatak's remarkable documentary, *Oraon*, was made. We know that he would later use parts of this Film in his feature film *Ajantrik*. *Oraon* captures the life, customs, festivals, marriages, and, above all, the unique and original music of this ancient Indian community, which forms the soul of the documentary. In this documentary, Ritwik created some startling perspectives. Whose gaze is this? The narrator's, the Oraon people's? The film-maker's? Or some ancient divine gaze that has been observing the life of this community through the ages?

In this Film, the background music transcends the narration. The large Oraon horns, shaped like a snake's hood, appear in some frames, and the striped triangular 'Bairakhi's of the Oraon people signify their triumphant survival. This Film is incredibly fast-paced. Frame after frame, the vibrant life of the Oraon people rushes forward. Ritwik wrote later, "Koha Benja, 'Khatura,' 'Chali

Bechana,' 'Jhumer,' 'Lujhri' and many other symbolic dances were included in that grand procession scene. This expressed the cycle of birth, hunting, marriage, death, ancestor worship, and rebirth."

He also wrote, "I became somewhat acquainted with the Oraons over about five years while making documentary films among them, and I was repeatedly astonished by the richness of their imagination."

Subsequently, in 1962, Ritwik made an advertisement for Imperial Tobacco Company, named "*Scissors*", which was a cigarette brand.

I haven't been able to find this Film despite much searching.

In 1963, Ritwik directed a documentary titled *Baba* on the music maestro Baba Allauddin Khan. The Sangeet Natak Akademi produced this Film. Dinen Gupta was the cinematographer, and Satyen Chatterjee handled the sound recording and the sound re-recording. Tarun Dutta edited the Film. Sukhamay Sur was the production in charge. The narration was recorded in Barun Halder's voice. It was a Harisadhan Dasgupta production.



Ritwik Ghatak in FII Convocation in 1965

Ritwik Ghatak's name is not mentioned anywhere in this Film. Although later, Nikhil Banerjee, Ravi Shankar, Annapurna Devi, and Ali Akbar Khan repeatedly spoke of Ritwik Ghatak. Surprisingly, this Film contains the only existing minor example of Annapurna Devi's sitar playing. It is a national treasure of India and remains an essential source for Allauddin research.



“Fear” Poster

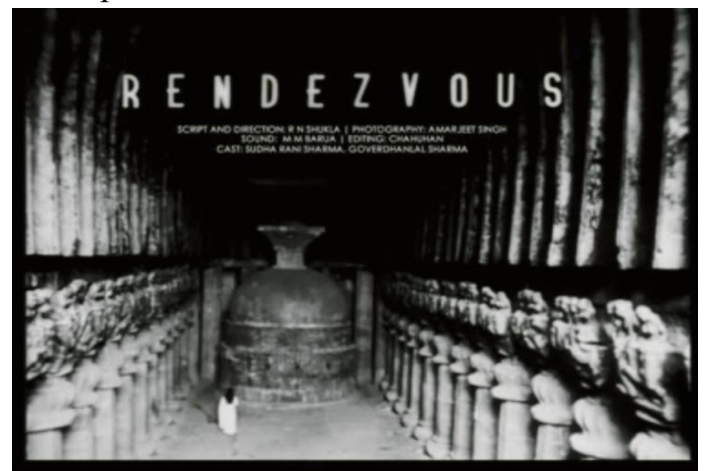
After three years of visiting lecturership, finally, in 1965-66, Ritwik Ghatak joined the Film Institute in Pune as Vice Principal. He worked there for about three months. In a letter, Ritwik wrote to Surama Ghatak, his wife, as he was one day travelling on Law College Road between the Film Institute and the National Film Archive and met Puranchand Joshi, the first general secretary of the undivided Communist Party of India. PC Joshi hugged him and called him the only “People’s Film-maker”. Ritwik wrote to Surama that it was the best prize he had ever received, and he thought no other prize could be more prestigious than it.

This period marked the birth of a new wave of film directors in India. Mani Kaul, Kumar Shahani, John Abraham, Ketji John,

Shatrughna Sinha, Rehana Sultana, Sukhdev, KK Mahajan, Dhrubojyoti Bose and many other experimental filmmakers studied cinema under Ritwik Ghatak during that time, a period that they have all respectfully remembered throughout their lives. Ritwik also said that this phase of his life was significant.

During this time, Ritwik made three short films with the students of the Pune Film Institute: *Fear*, *Rendezvous*, and *Civil Defence* (also known as "Nagorik Sangrakshan"). These three works are timeless masterpieces of Indian cinema.

In the film *Fear*, the bomb panic of a few citizens trapped in a set resembling a bunker is shown astonishingly. As an Acting Workshop film, Ghatak allegorically portrayed several human qualities and flaws: love, jealousy, fear, scientific awareness, apprehension, and the desire for liberation. The use of sound in the Film is unprecedented in Indian cinema. The artistic expression of human emotions in a simple black set is remarkable. However, the Film is theatrical. It has no resemblance to reality. The Film reminds me of Fritz Lang's silent sci-fi film *Metropolis*.



“Rendezvous” Poster

The next Film, *Rendezvous*, is Ritwik's attempt at a Directorial workshop to capture a girl's mental state amidst the natural primitiveness of Pune and its surrounding Deccan Trap plateau's rain-shadow region. The incredible vastness of the Ajanta and Ellora caves, along with their association with Buddhist monasteries, has come into play. The timeless flow of Indian culture is captured in the classical musical resonance of this Film. There is no dialogue in it.



Two Frames from "Civil Defence"

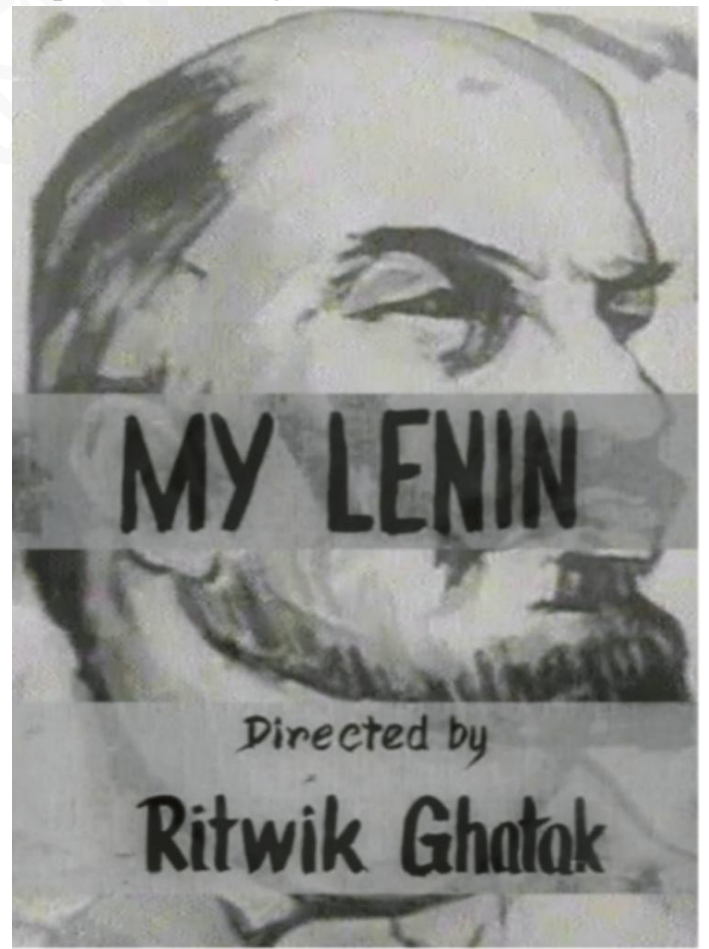
Nagorik Sangrakshan (Civil Defence), in Marathi, is a public awareness film made with the ordinary people of Pune. This Film deals with what the public should do for self-protection in case of a foreign invasion in post-war India.



Two Frames from "Scientists of Tomorrow"

In 1967, Ritwik directed a documentary titled *Scientists of Tomorrow*, produced by Films Division, Mumbai. This was a promotional film about the government's educational opportunities for future scientists in India. From this time onwards, Amarjeet started working with Ritwik Ghatak as a cinematographer. Ramesh Joshi has always been Ritwik's editor. Vijay Menon worked in VO.

In 1970, Ritwik directed a film called *Yeh Kyun?* (Why This?). Before making this Film, He was in a mental asylum in Gobra, Kolkata, for three years. At this time, preparations for the Bangladesh Liberation War were underway. Ritwik revisited the eternal question of why the partition of the country occurred in this Film. Mahendra Kumar worked as Cinematographer, Amalesh Sikdar as Editor, Kamalesh Maitra as music director, and Priti Banerjee, Montu Ghosh, and Bacchu Rahman sang for the Film. Chitra Prarthana produced it. Arun Kumar, Atanu Roy, Radhagobinda Ghosh, Bula Sengupta, and Manas Dey acted in *Yeh Kyun*. The partition of Bengal affected Ritwik the most, and he couldn't come to terms with the pain of partition throughout his life.



Poster of "My Lenin"

Produced by Sumana Films, initiated by Sushil Karan, with Dhruvajyoti Bose on camera, Ramesh Joshi as editor, Jyotirindra Maitra and Binoy Roy as music director, Ritwik Ghatak directed a documentary titled *Amar Lenin* (My Lenin) in 1970, on the birth centenary year of Lenin. Pradip Bagchi, speaking in the background, mentioned a jatra (folk theatre) called *Amar Lenin* and how it inspired illiterate, poor villagers in a Bengali village towards a class struggle. Arun Kumar acted as the main protagonist. Here, too, the narration alternates between the first and third person, and Ritwik, in his inimitable style, portrays the working-class people of the villages and suburbs.



A still from "My Lenin"

In documenting several distinct but related streams of movements in the then West Bengal, where Naxalite tendencies have come clearly in culture, communist party has been split again among CPI(M) and CPI(ML), the Film connects the Lenin embalmed in the statues and speeches of the metropolis with the Lenin whose ideas bloomed in the land of tillers, in the districts where peasants and workers lived without any cosmopolitan cultural hang over. In an interview, Ghatak reflects on the responsibility of an artist to his immediate world: "It is impossible either for

me or for any artist to make good films without maintaining relation[s] with the fast-changing social order and the extensive movements." The message is clear: where the state, the party and its workers failed, the artist must stand firm.

Amar Lenin is a film about revolutionary possibilities and solidarity among peasants and workers of the rural part of Bengal. In the final scenes of the documentary, the protagonist joins men, women, children, and even cattle as they are drawn together in the larger struggle for land. In the documentary, the peasants' symbolic gesture of cultivating land, as well as seizing and distributing agricultural surplus, carries no trace of violence. While the camera turns to Adivasi villagers as they charge with bows and spears, they do so at no one in particular. There are no clashes—not with the landlords nor with the state's machinery, which was historically called upon to suppress uprisings across Bengal. Also, notably absent from the action are members of the Communist Party, many of whom condemned the peasant uprisings and supported the expulsion and persecution of several party leaders. Ironically, the documentary was initially banned by the National Film Censorship Board for its controversial political themes. Ghatak had to seek intervention from Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. After her advisor, P.N. Haksar, brought the Film to her attention, Indira Gandhi personally reviewed and approved it in 1971, overriding the censorship board's decision and enabling its release.

In 1970, Ritwik directed a documentary titled *Puruliar Chhau* (Chhau Dance of Purulia). It showcases the making of



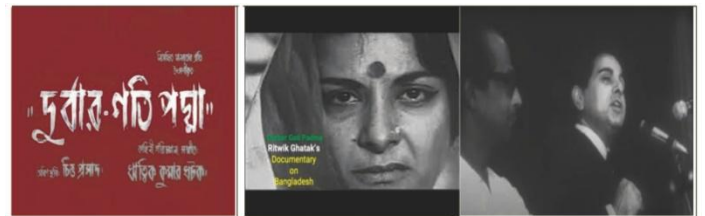
Ritwik was talking with Gambhir Singh Mura

Chhau dance masks, the construction and use of its musical instruments, the lives of Chhau artists, and various dances, including their Ganesh Vandana. The Film begins by depicting this arid, one of the poorest districts of West Bengal. It provides a fascinating account of how its people, despite facing numerous challenges, remain dedicated to the practice of this culture. Madhu Roy, Gokul Roy, Gambhir Singh, and Lal Mahato are vibrant, fun-loving people in this Film who express their love. Ritwik also used scenes from this tribal community's Film in his last feature film, *Jukti, Takko ar Gappo* (Reason, Debate and a Story). Bahadur Khan is the music director of this Film. Dhrubajyoti Basu did the camera. Ritwik Ghatak narrated the Film.

We see that Ritwik was not only making a film on the lives and culture of the tribal community that celebrates Chhau, but was also living with them in many ways. He captured even the minute details of their culture, including specific references to tribal musical instrument making, mask painting, and the inner meanings of those “paalaas” of chhau, where the representations have

become clear to us. And he had shown everything in a fast, joyous mood where we couldn't even blink our eyes for a while.

Ritwik wrote, "Chhau is significant because it expresses the depth and richness of Puruliya's life. If you visit Puruliya, the poorest district of West Bengal, and go inside its villages, you would see how deeply the villagers love. On observing how passionately they love the dance form and how attentively they create dance masks, I was completely stunned. My love for them made me crazy."



"Durbar Gati Padma", Posters and shots

In 1971, Bangladesh liberated itself from the rule of West Pakistan, becoming an independent, democratic, secular nation. India supported Bangladesh in this war. Ritwik, with a heading "dedicated to oppressed humanity," produced *Durbar Gati Padma* (The Indomitable Padma) for Films Division, through Trio Films, with the cooperation of Biswajit Chatterjee, paintings by Chittaprosad, cinematography by Ananda Gadnis, and editing by Tarun Dutta. In this Film, Biswajit plays the role of a war-returned soldier. Biswajit Chatterjee, the main protagonist of the Film, said once that "Ritwik da was born in Bangladesh. He got emotional on the radio when he heard of the 1971-72 atrocities in Bangladesh." Nargis essayed the role of a Bengali mother in the documentary, set against the backdrop of the 1971-72 Bangladesh Liberation War.



Padma-Shri Ritwik

Biswajit said, "Nargis Bhabhi had formally retired from acting. When I asked her, she declined. Then I told her about Bangladesh's tragic situation. I mentioned that Ritwik da is making the documentary." According to him, Nargis's heart melted upon hearing Ritwik da's name. She held him in high regard. She was unable to resist his call, as nobody could say no to Ritwik Ghatak. Then, Ghatak himself told the actress about the documentary and promised her that she would receive blessings from many people if she did it. Nargis eventually consented. However, she suggested that the filming take place at her house, because otherwise journalists would hamper the shoot. The shooting took place in her home's garden, as she requested.

We can see that many celebrities, actors, technicians, and others from both Bombay and Kolkata were marching to raise money to help Bangladesh's ordinary people in the streets of Kolkata. Sachin Dev Burman was singing his iconic song, "baje takdum takdum baje", and Dilip Kumar was

addressing a gathering of ordinary people. All senior actors had great respect for Ghatak, and all participated with enthusiasm, not as professional artists, but as activists. None demanded a single rupee for this Film. The Film shows how India helped the new nation of Bangladesh in this war. The last scene of this Film is in colour. The waters of the Padma turn red with the blood of the martyrs. The way it is conceived is incomparable and unprecedented.

In 1972, Ritwik worked on an unfinished project about Indira Gandhi.

(ইন্দিরা গান্ধির ওপর প্রামাণ্য ছবি করা নিয়ে) আমার স্পষ্ট করে কিছুই বলার নেই. . . ছবিটা আন্দেক হয়ে পড়ে আছে, যদি শেষ হয়— ছবি যখন বেরোবে, তখন কেন করতে চেয়েছিলাম, পরিষ্কার দিনের আলোর মতো হয়ে যাবে। এবং স্ববিরোধিতা কি না, ওটাই প্রমাণ করবে। Artist-এর কাছে এ সব প্রশ্ন করে লাভ নেই, খালি একটাই কথা যে, wait করো। See it and then condemn it. . . অভিসন্ধিমূলক কথার উত্তর দেওয়াটা ঘৃণ্য। ছবিটা আমি যদি শেষ করি, ছবিটা দেখলেই যদি বোঝা যায় যে, আমি অভিসন্ধিমূলক কাজ করছি, কী আমি compromise করছি, কী আমি স্ববিরোধিতা করছি, তখন আমাকে তুলে খিন্তি করো। তার আগে যেটা হয়নি, হবে কি না তা জানা নেই— সম্ভাবনার ওপর তো বলা যায় না!

The debate over the selection of Ritwik Ghatak as a Padma Shri nominee, the release of *Amar Lenin* after clearance from the censor board, and the selection of him as a documentary maker on the then Prime Minister of India created a sensation in the lobbies of parliamentary politics.



Ritwik with Ramkinkar

Senior historian Ramchandra Guha wrote an article in *The Telegraph* on March 18, 2006, about it.

On Republic Day, 1970, it was announced that the President of India had

conferred the Padma Shri on Ritwik Ghatak. A few days later, a group of opposition MPs tabled a starred question in the Lok Sabha demanding that the Minister of Home Affairs answer the following:

(a) Whether it is a fact that Shri Ritwik Ghatak, who slandered Mahatmaji as an “offspring of a pig from beginning to end” and abused other national leaders, has been given the award of “Padma Shri” on the Republic Day, 1970;

(b) If so, the reasons for giving this award in the Gandhi Centenary Year;

(c) Who recommended his name?

(d) Whether this honour conferred on Shri Ghatak will be taken back:

(e) If not, the reasons therefore?’



The MP’s challenge was taken up by two of India’s most clear-headed civil servants. These were the Home Secretary, L.P. Singh, and the Secretary to the Prime Minister, P.N. Haksar. They found that in March 1969, Ritwik Ghatak had indeed made some very critical remarks about Gandhi. These were published in a journal brought out by a group of (possibly Naxalite) students at Jadavpur University.

However, on 16 February 1970—two weeks after he received the Padma Shri—Ghatak issued a lengthy statement clarifying

the context of those remarks. In 1969, he said, he had been “mentally ill” and “not always in my senses”. He had been hospitalised for several months, and it was soon after he came out that he “talked irrelevantly” with the students.

I am including here a portion of the Bengali Text by Ritwik, where he clearly states that he had nothing to say regarding the incomplete work on Mrs Gandhi. He had no confusion regarding that statement of compromise. No self-dichotomy. He was eager to finish the job and liked to respond to criticism by making.

In 1975, Ritwik began directing a colour documentary on the legendary artist and sculptor of Santiniketan, Ramkinkar Baij. Ritwik was totally ill. However, he was unable to finish it. Later, with the initiative of the Ritwik Memorial Trust, his son Ritaban Ghatak painstakingly completed the work and brought it to the public. Ritwik himself is present in this Film; he interviews Ramkinkar Baij in a very humorous tone regarding the abstraction Baij made in his sculptures. The documentary is named *Ramkinkar Baij-A personality study by Ritwik Kumar Ghatak*.

Throughout his life, Ritwik Ghatak navigated the medium of cinema with immense skill. When we consider his feature films alongside his documentaries, short films, and unfinished works, we see that this artist produced a vast body of work in a lifespan of just 51 years.

Many said that Ritwik had tremendous technical knowledge several times. Dinen Gupta once noted that, although his name had been listed as cinematographer, most of the shots had actually been taken by Ritwik himself. Ramesh Joshi said that Ritwik had a

beautiful balance with the speed of the shots in his films, and he was brilliant at the editing table. Kabir Suman once said regarding Ghatak's music in *Subaranarekha* and his terrifying brilliance, even during the transition of shots.

Within 23 Years, He made eight full-length feature films and fifteen documentaries. Eight of his works remain incomplete. He wrote scripts, acted, and worked with other filmmakers, both in Bombay and Kolkata, on at least ten films. He wrote several stories, plays ('*Jwala*'-1950, '*Dalil*'-1952, '*Snako*'-1953-54) and poems. He learnt Indian classical sarod playing from Bahadur Khan, including all its rituals. He

directed Plays and acted in them, and those also were more than five in number. All plays had several shows not only in the cities but also in the villages. He has been a teacher for almost three years. What more do we demand from a filmmaker?

Each of his works is unique, independent, and extraordinary.

While there is much discussion about Ritwik Ghatak's feature films, his documentaries and unfinished works receive comparatively less attention. Therefore, on Ritwik's birth centenary, this is a small tribute from my side to this Infant Terrible of Bengali Cinema.

Citations:

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