

Tribute to Ritwik Ghatak: Lecture

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First 100 Years of Ghatak - A History of Broken Promises



C S Venkiteswaran delivered the 6th Chidananda Dasgupta Memorial Lecture on 20 Nov 2025

I consider it a great honour and privilege to be invited to deliver this year's Chidananda Dasgupt Memorial Lecture, Chidananda Dasgupta was on one of the most visionary amongst the film thinkers of India, and his writings were a great source of inspiration and guidance to my generation, a model to think as a critical insider, one who is rooted in one's own tradition, culture and more importantly history, and is at the same time deeply concerned with the global contemporary.

This year marks the Birth Centenary year of Ritwik Ghatak, and so, I thought it will be an ideal occasion to bring both of them together, or think through the works of both to share some observations about Ghatak films and about what made him unique a filmmaker. I think it is important to go back to his works not only to understand a certain period in Indian political and film history, but also to trace the lineages of the present, the promises and betrayals that led to where we are today, and also figure out the warning

signals and possible forms and sources of resistance that Ghatak proposed. I would also like to ponder upon how he differs from his illustrious contemporaries, Satyajit Ray and Mrinal Sen.

Let me begin with the motif of betrayal and separation in Ghatak films.

Let us go to the opening scene of *Subarnarekha*, where we are witness to the inauguration of a school in a refugee colony. What we see first is the character Haraprasad, the idealist, hoisting the national flag and chanting Vande Mataram. It is the inauguration of a school in the refugee children who have been uprooted by Partition and have taken refuge in the new colony. So, they are at the cusp of a new age. Something that resonates with the name they have given to their colony 'New Age Colony'. It also very much resonates with the mood of the times in a country that has just attained independence from colonial rule. Significantly, the school inauguration is

happening on Jallianwalabag day in 1948, the is, three days prior to the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi. As the scene progresses, we see two middle-aged men who are to be in charge of the school: Haraprasad who will teach Sanskrit and Bengali, and Iswar who will teach English and History. In the coming together of these two teachers and their subjects, there is a combination of the old and new, tradition and modernity, of civilisational roots and colonial ruptures. It could be seen as the perfect and ideal representation of Nehruvian national imagination or his developmental project, that attempted to combine many binaries. Of gram swaraj and industrialism, indigenism and internationalism etc.

In many ways *Subarnarekha* is about the destinies of these two streams. It is about betrayal and separation. The two idealists do not stay together to make their new age colony school a reality, and the project is betrayed from the beginning.

First comes the betrayal of Iswar who becomes a ‘deserter’ and leaves the colony, and so, betrays the school project and the collective life of the new life colony. The rational modernist that he is, Ishwar makes his choices rationally and practically, and moves to another place Chatimpur to join as an accountant in a foundry to earn income and sustain his family. Though the film follows the life of Iswar and his little sister Sita and Abhiram, we come to know what happened to his alter ego, Haraprasad, much later in the film when he appears at Iswar’s house that fatal night when he is about to hang himself. He peers through the window, and with a mischievous ironical smile, and asks Ishwar, ‘How far gone is the night?’ And answers it

himself ‘No answer comes’ These two lines actually also sum up his and their lives till then. As for the idealist-activist Haraprasad, his life is a story of frustrations and disappointments, of failed projects and systemic betrayals. And for Ishwar, the grihasta, the journey only led to that self-made noose hanging from the roof. So, in the case of both them - the activist and the family-man, both of whom started of as idealists, one a scholar of tradition, the other a modernist (he was called Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, during his college days!), what life holds for them in the new age that they inaugurated is the same dark destiny, of broken promises and systemic betrayals.

In the case of Ishwar, the English-educated, modern rationalist, there was another promise and betrayal. There is a promise he makes at the beginning of the film through the act of taking the responsibility of Abhiram, who is a dalit. Maybe, it was an impulsive act triggered by guilt, an act of recompense for his running away or reneging. But what he offers to Abhiram is a new life and family, a family that welcomes the downtrodden into its lap despite his caste. It is also the promise of the new nation, the imagination of the nation as family that is inclusive and caring, of all. What happens to that promise? We later see that he reneges on this promise too. Though he initially takes care of Abhiram and educates him, when the moment of reckoning comes when his caste is revealed before others, at that instance, he backtracks. Nor can he imagine Abhiram marrying his sister Sita, whom he wishes would rather die than marry her love.

One can also see the film as to how the three generations in it, of Haraprasad/Ishwar,

Abhiram/Sita and Binu, nurse their dreams and hopes of a new life and home, and how their dreams are destroyed, stolen or betrayed.

If we look at Ghatak's film from the point of view of broken promises, we can see that it is a leitmotif that runs through his oeuvre.

Sadly, his life itself was a great promise, that went largely and tragically unfulfilled. Many were the film projects he dreamt of and never took off, many he started, but left incomplete. Like in his films, his artistic career too was riddled with many sudden interruptions and intermittent gaps.

Two peculiarities or strategies that mark Ghatak narratives is the absence of flashbacks and the many interruptions of different kinds: digressions, songs, landscapes, tableau like shots etc. As for flashbacks, the only one we will find is the one from *Jukti Takko Aar Gappo*, where Neelkant is sitting in the public park at night with Bangabala and Nachiket, when he suddenly says, I too was youthful once, full of hope, enthusiasm and faith. And the scene cuts to him and his wife in their youthful days in a hilly landscape, full of joy and love. But that brief sojourn into the past is abruptly cut by the arrival of the police at the scene. But for this, flashback is not a device that Ghatak is fond of, he would rather have a character tell the story than re-present it all over again. It is as if he doesn't want to re-visit or re-vision the past, or the present his characters are in do not allow such luxury.

As for interruptions and digressions they constitute incursions or breaks in continuity or disruptions in the flow of the narrative, and its overwhelming logic, is one that Ghatak uses as a Brechtian alienation

device. A trope that forms an integral and inevitable part of the story itself within the narratives. They evoke parallels to the idea of how history disrupts its own promises, and a civilisation betrays its own dreams, in the process shattering the dream of the people.

This deep sense of loss and of dreams that are frustrated and unfulfilled - what do they signify?

What are the promises that are betrayed? What are the dreams that elude his characters? Obviously, these promises and dreams, frustrations and betrayals trace the post-partition history of the nation - one that haunted Ghatak throughout his life.

Maybe one can draw from his own writings. There is an instance in *Chitrabikshan*, where he talks about his vision of society: "A system of life, a diverse flow of men (sic). It does not exist anymore. It if had - I could have stood on that , I could have said something. I wouldn't then have viewed everything with such a distorted mind. The future wouldn't have held such fear - the future of the nation, of all men." (*Chitrabikshan*, in *Stories*, arguments, p 19)

Obviously, as many scholars have pointed out, in his films, Partition is a wound that never heals, that constantly festers and haunts his characters and narratives. For him, It is 'the event' that marks a rupture in time, divides history, and mutilates an ancient civilisation.

And in his films, the promise takes many forms: it could be the promise of friendship, camaraderie in action, togetherness in society, kinship in family, or bondings of love.

In most films, family constitutes the locus of this promise: family that also can take

various forms and dimensions: like the refugee colony as in *Subarnarekha*, drama troupe in *Komal Gandhar*, the family borne out of the sheer need for survival as in *Nagarik*, the joint family that falls apart in *Megha Dhaka Tara*, the rural, nuclear family of *Bari Thake Paliye*, one that Kanchan rediscovers after his escapade to the city of Calcutta, or the one that can accept everyone into its fold as in *Jukit Takko Aar Gappo*.

Komal Gandhar begins with at title card, in which the drama troupe is described as a family this is how it reads: ‘Young, theater-crazy people; they come together from all places. They form a troupe. Their family grows up with tenderness, affection, jealousy and hatred. They don’t have a real family of their own. Here is a chapter in their history.’

Maybe among the many protagonists of Ghatak, it is only Kanchan of *Bari Thake Paliye* who returns to and reaffirms the family. But he has seen too many broken homes and divided families, and so, has mentally outgrown it.

In *Nagarik*, the promise of a home, a better life, a job, a decent life - all are broken or betrayed as the Bagchi family moves from the small cramped house to the slum. That the violin string that plays the Internationale breaks also resonate with this theme.

In *Ajantrik*, the family consists of Bimal and Jagatdal, a bond that again is broken at the end.

In that unforgettable scene in *Komal Gandhar* we see Bhrigu, along with Anasuya, standing in front of Padma river and looking pensively at his homeland on the other shore, and remembers his father’s last words: ‘I started off my life smoothly. Look how it

ends!’ In the play at the beginning, the character played by Bhrigu, who migrates from his homeland besides the shores of Padma to Calcutta, he shouts, ‘Is this the heaven? Everywhere is smoke, even the sky is filled with smoke’.

Likewise the father in *Nagarik* too rues over his life before he dies, he tells his son about the early hopes and promises of his life and the betrayals and setbacks that followed.

Jukti Thakko Aar Gappo begins with the separation of a nuclear family, but the film is a long, futile search for family - a family that can contain multitudes. It is also a film about broken promises and betrayals of various kinds - familial, political, social and cultural.

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All the major artists of the post-Independence era have, in one way or another, grappled with the very same dreams and promises. In Indian cinema, itself one can see similar themes and concerns about the disenchantment and growing disillusionment with the system, the anger and outrage at decadence and corruption that system was gradually sinking into.

But the way in which Ghatak saw and experienced the malaise was different, his diagnosis and prognosis were also different. I think it drew from the radical way in which he envisioned or enworlded life, society and culture. The resources he drew from and the forms that he adopted to address and express them were different.

A brief comparison between the two other iconic filmmakers of his generation - Satyajit Ray and Mrinal Sen - may provide us

with some insights into what makes Ghatak different.

Retrospectively, these three filmmakers seemed to belong to three different schools of thought on cinema, society and politics. While Ray was a liberal, sophisticated humanist, Sen was always a champion of the downtrodden and the oppressed, whose films were animated by the spirit of the rebellious youth movements of the time. Ghatak, in contrast, stood in between: he was a filmmaker who was difficult to categorise and pigeonhole. The confluences and conflicts between tradition and modernity, the aesthetic responses and strategies that Ghatak experimented with in his narratives, storytelling modes he relied on, and the montage and *mise en scene* styles he adopted, were different. He was not the typical 'art filmmaker' who was overtly concerned about 'form'; nor did his 'content' stick to the set patterns of the period. It was difficult to find explicit European or Hollywood influences in his films: the characterisation and acting styles were different, so were the visual compositions and sound design. (In Ray's words, for Ghatak, "for him, Hollywood might not have existed at all".) Ghatak films were neither as 'universal' as Ray nor 'politically belligerent' as Sen. And unlike the other two, for Ghatak, Bengal was the centre of the world, and Partition, 'the' traumatic event that ruptured his world/life into two.

This is how Chidananda Dasgupta compares Ray and Ghatak, "indeed one can, and should, see Ray and Ghatak as two contemporary aspects of the Indian mind, one embodying the contemplative, inward principle in which the calm without and the

fire within make for an intense clarity of vision; the other representing the active principle going forward into the here and now, with all the power of passion and yet aware of the inner order. One is primarily a poet; the other a dramatist. One, to use Andre Bazin's formulation, turns reality into spectacle; the other makes spectacle seem real. One is a highly disciplined classicist, the other childlike, wayward, romantic' unquote (Cinema Marxism and the Mother Goddess).

The Idea of India

Another line of comparison could be the way in which all the three auteurs engaged with the idea of India in their films. The idea of India in their respective body of work, draw from their own notions about the nation, people and civilisation, that in many ways, were entangled with that of borders, identities and traditions/cultures. Compared to the other two, Ghatak posed, explored and explicated these concerns/questions as a quintessential 'Bengali': the ideal of 'Sonar Bangla', the trauma of partition, and the rivers and landscapes of undivided Bengal were very much an integral and essential part of his aesthetics and dramatics.

In Ray, these questions are posed and expressed differently. If one take the three trilogies of Ray: the Apu trilogy of the 1950s : *Pather Panchali* (1955), *Aparajito* (1956) and *Apur Sansar* (1959); *Calcutta Trilogy* made in the 1970s: *Pratidwandi* (1970), *Seemabaddha* (1971) and *Jana Aranya* (1975), and the last trilogy in the late 80's: *Ganashatru* (1989), *Shakha Proshakha* (1990), and *Agantuk* (1991) - it is possible to

trace the tendencies and ruptures in Ray's social imagination and political vision. The Apu trilogy made a decade after historic events like freedom struggle, Independence, Bengal Famine and Partition; the Calcutta trilogy coincides with war, both within (repression of rebellious youth in Calcutta) and without (Bangladesh), and the growing resentment regarding rising unemployment and large-scale political corruption. The last trilogy was made at another critical juncture in the nation's history – just prior to the announcement of the New Economic Policies that endorsed globalization and privatization, and the rising tide of communal politics leading to the demolition of Babri Masjid. These three trilogies of Ray, made almost two decades apart - in 1950s, 70s and 90s — also mark the beginning, middle and end of his oeuvre. These trilogies, from three periods in his life and in the history of the nation, reflect his intense and introspective engagements with the idea of India, that shift from youthful innocence and hope of the post-Independence decades, through despairing confrontations and compromises with the establishment and mores in the 70s, to a deep despair about degeneration at all levels by the 1990s. In his last trilogy, social and political issues are posed at the deepest level, as a civilizational or human crisis. According to many Ray scholars, his films map the history of modern India from the perspective of an enlightened liberal.

Mrinal Sen's perceptions and preoccupations were different, one can see in him, a restless filmmaker experimenting with different themes, narrative formats and styles all along his long career. His early films *Akash Kusum*/1965 to *Bhuvan*

Shome/1969 differ radically from his Calcutta films that deal with the turbulent events that shook the city: *Interview*/1971, *Chorus*/1974 and *Calcutta 71*/1972, *Padatik*/1973. They were followed by another set of films - *Mrigaya*/1976, *Oka Oori Katha*/1977, and *Parashuram*/1978, that dug into the histories of oppression from different locales and perspectives. The films that came after that were excavations into the middle class mindsets and worldviews: *Ek Din Pratidin*/1979, *Akaler Sandhaney*/1980, and *Ek Din Achanak*/1989. Sen was a filmmaker who relentlessly tried to wrap his art and mind around questions of oppression, unfreedom - of class, caste, gender - in all its hues and shades.

Another interesting line of comparison could be the images and representations of the city of Calcutta that appears in the films of these three filmmakers. It would present three different Calcuttas seen, felt and expressed from different viewpoints: that of the refugees, the slum dwellers, the youth protesting on the streets, or that of the imperial city of colonial masters, the great city of Tagore, the city of middlemen and aspiring middle class, etc.

Another comparison could be the figure of indigenous people and adivasis in their films: take for example Ray's *Aranyer din Raat*, Sen's *Mrigaya* and Ghatak's *Ajantrik*, *Titash Ekti Nodir Nam* and *Jukti Thakko aur Gappo*. Whether it be the presence of the modern city or the culture/life of adivasis, each filmmaker follows their own preoccupations and worldviews. If the Tagorean Renaissance ideas predominate in Ray, it is the influences of Marxist ideology, Brechtian and Godardian aesthetics that

animate Sen. In Ghatak, themes boil down to the elemental question of belonging, or the longing to belong that is posed in the larger context of Indian civilisation. Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Amrit Gangar in their compilation 'Ghatak -Arguments Stories' make the following observation: "This distinction is important in the cinema: it is objectively demonstrable that the differences between e.g. Satyajit Ray and Ritwik Ghatak may substantially be traced to the choices they made vis a vis the Bengal School of art that preceded them. While Ray has repeatedly reaffirmed his allegiance to Nandalal: witness the lessons in organicity he learned in how a tree should be drawn (in Our Films, Their Films). Ghatak was close both to Binode Bihari and his friend Ram Kinker."

So, if Ray imagined a universal, rational, secular, modern human being, for Sen, the narratives centred around the idea of class: his films were about the divisions and conflicts, decay and diffidence, between and within classes. In the case of Ghatak, his vision of humanity goes beyond class and secular rationality. It was more deeply civilisational in nature, one that had deep roots in Bengali soil, drawing from its plural traditions, diverse cultures and entangled histories. This is how Ghatak puts it: "There is an epic tradition which dominates the Indian mentality. It has seeped into the Indian subconscious. It is no surprise, therefore, that Indians are attracted to mythologies. I am a part of that tradition. I cannot think of myself without the epic tradition. I am all for it. It is

in our civilisation since time immemorial. In my films I rely mainly on the folk form. The Great Mother image in its duality exists in every aspect of our being."

So, it is not a universal humanity, or class being that Ghatak was primarily concerned with. He was concerned with 'people' in the most profound and political sense of the term, one that is always in the process or struggle of becoming; one that is always open to the world yet rooted.

In these dark, monocultural times we live in, the civilisational angst of Ghatak has become all the more relevant. It is very important to take stock of our cinema history through the Ghatak lens. For, his vision was deeply concerned with the immediate and the present, while seeking nourishment from the founts of multiple traditions and looking forward to a world of freedom and creativity.

I think the next century will belong to Ghatak, for all the themes that haunted him, are coming back to haunt us: that of refugees, exile and homelessness, of the erasure of indigenous worldviews, of the degeneration of politics and lack of idealism. Like his themes, the resources he garnered to address and express them, and the forms he experimented with - are also becoming more and more relevant in our times, where cultural and political algorithms are steamrolling our life into monolithic patterns and erasing the plurality and multitudes that we are.

Thanks to Fipresci and all friends of cinema.