

Tribute to Ritwik Ghatak: Lecture

Sunny Joseph

## Cinema of Empathy



Sunny Joseph delivered the Ritwik Ghatak Memorial Lecture on 4 Nov 2025 at SRFTI Kolkata

Respected guests, colleagues, teachers and dear students,

In this solemn occasion of remembering a doyen of Indian cinema, Ritwik Ghatak, I stand in front of you with a humble heart and mind. I am entrusted with this responsibility and with trembling heart I accepted it because I love cinema. Moreover, Ritwik Ghatak is one among my most favorite film makers and *Ajantrik* is my most favorite Indian film.

As many of you know Kolkata is my second home and I received a lot of affection from this city. In this gracious occasion, I must also remember those mentors with gratitude. Forty one years ago I came to this enigmatic city for the first time to meet Ajoy

Dey, the then Secretary of FFSI, a kind hearted human being and mentor. The construction work of Metro Railway was going on in the city and I had to walk many a place to reach the FFSI office. Among many other people I must also remember these names – Subrata Mitra, Mrinal Sen, Buddhadeb Dasgupta, Manash Roy Chaudhuri, Mother Teresa, Rubi, and G Aravindan. There are so many beautiful memories associated with Kolkata city, and I bow to the loving city and it's kind hearted daughters and sons.

I used to make a phone call to Mrinal Da ritualistically on the final day of Durga Pooja, every year. Well into the conversation, Dada will ask “Sunny, two or three?”

Sometimes I lie and say “Just two Dada”, or I will just smile to myself and continue the conversation. Inevitably our conversation always ends up in two consistent themes – love and death. Both philosophical and materialistic. All artists have tried to answer these two fundamental questions about love and death. Among those answers, I found *Ajantrik* as a shining example of a meditation on life, love and death. Every day, we witness how every aspect of human life is being dehumanized, rendering us all soulless. But in *Ajantrik*, Ghatak like a magician, humanize a machine, invest it with life and a heart. It is an ultimate expression of empathy and compassion. It seeps deep into our heart and urge us to be brave in proclaiming our shared humanness.

We all know about the dangers of dehumanization connected with current socio-economic and political systems. We also know about how it sustained the status quo of the system. When we think about the social importance of art, this one aspect is very important. Along with the cinematic qualities of a film, I also consider the humanizing ability of the film. It is in this context too, *Ajantrik* and all other Ghatak’s films becomes dear to me.

How many of you have thanked your first car when you sold it to acquire a new one. I did. Silently I stood in front of my car, prayed and thanked it for taking care of me for ten years. Was it an effect of *Ajantrik*? Who knows! But I also thank my hotel rooms also for taking care of me, when I leave them, in distant cities. Yes, our homes and our cities are the most caring of all beings. Remembrance is an act of love and it is political.

There is a saying in Malayalam, “കൊല്ലുന്നെ ആലയില് സൂചി വിൽക്കാൻ ശ്രമിക്കരുത്.” (Don’t try to sell a needle in a Blacksmith’s shop). In this august gathering of film makers, scholars and film critics I will surely not try to explain what is the great values of a Rithwik Ghatak film, that too in Kolkata. Yet I am deeply tempted to say my gratitude, in expressing the phenomena by how that offering of a great film also made me a better human being. In a similar manner *Meghe Daka Tara*, *Subarna Rekha*, *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam* and other films made me a better human being. Let me also note that instantly other images also come to my mind – the rain drops in *Pather Panchali* and the sand dunes in *Bhuvan Shome* etc.

Yet with love, I want to make an observation about Ghatak’s cinema. Ghatak was the most empowered master of *mise-en-scene* in his time, and till today there is no other film maker in India with such control of space and time - the two most important aspect of a film’s quality. Way ahead of even international film makers, Ghatak mastered the technique of deep focus, multi-grounded staging and blocking and the use of negative space in composition. Even, the sound design. *Megha Taka Tara* is a great example of such mastery. Only a few years ago I happened to see the FTII short film *Fear*. It is a story of few human beings forced in to live in an underground shelter after a nuclear threat. I was astonished at the mastery of Ghatak in depicting the space inside a cramped, claustrophobic space. That is when I revisited his other films and see Ghatak’s films anew.

Parallel to the neo-realistic traditions of Indian cinema strengthened by the great

master Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak opened up a new path in Indian cinema rooted in the local cultural and theatrical traditions, yet absorbing the internationalism based on Marxian principles. In this regard no other film makers succeeded in the use of ‘melodrama’ as a technique in Indian cinema. I am not attempting to examine the aesthetics of Ghatak’s cinema. But remembering and reiterating how a meaningful film, lives beyond its time, like Ghatak’s films, demolishing all kinds of boundaries and uniting the human hearts and minds. It addresses human pain with kindness and takes care of it with empathy. Ritwik himself says about his films: “To my mind, I am only groping. Groping to find the most proper expression for the theme at hand. Sometimes, I may have connected sometimes gone wide off the mark. I have tried to experiment with forms of story, treatment, styles of taking, images etc. Each one of my films is quite different from the others, though I fear my personality and inclinations are in all of them. From the compositional point of view, all the films have divergent balancing principles thought to be inherent in the theme. In the sound tracks, including the music. I have tried to weave different patterns. It is the nuances I am after, the elusive, fleeting nuances. They contain the life-spark.”

I was discussing the idea of ‘Cinema of Empathy’ with my dear friend K Hariharan to let me quote from our conversation, he says: “For all film institute students in India, Ritwik will always remain the powerful arc lamp which can illuminate the dark nights, to show us the pathways, till day light comes. But when the sun shines and we wake up, do we know how to see the reality around us? How

to love our landscape, our fellow citizens, our villages, our industries and the challenges ahead of us, in our journey to become filmmakers!”

We are indeed caught in very troubling times. Living within a multimedia environment using digital tools, and a highly competitive rat race, we seem to have lost touch with our fellow filmmakers and sometimes even with our own selves!

What can we learn from this great master of cinema? First of all, he taught us that, in order to feel and empathize with the feelings of our fellow beings we need to build up a huge reservoir of social knowledge, grasp the wide range of performing arts and acquire a sharp political point of view. He was equally, as much a sentimentalist, as he was an intellectual. In the last iconic scene of *Meghe Daka Tara* when we see Nita crying “O Brother I wanted to live... I wanted to live” on top of a hill, amidst the misty clouds, the audiences are in tears.

Yes, that is the key to our talk, being able to live. There is no doubt that the fundamental right of all living being is to be alive. Do our actions, our cinema today aspire to promote this ideal?

So, what is a ‘Cinema of Empathy’? What is the literal meaning of empathy? In Malayalam we will say ‘സഹാനുഭൂതി’ i.e, ability of a person to ‘understand and share the feelings of another’.

Let us go back in time to the great paintings of cave art, more than 70000 thousand years. Why it was created? Well, we can only assume the reason, but definitely it was a tool of communication. One of the fundamental aspects of our life is that we are

interconnected to each other and to nature. Yes, that is my definition of spirituality too: INTERCONNECTEDNESS.

The Malayalam word for it is ‘പാരസ്പര്യം’. We all will one day realize that our lives are interdependent with others and nature. Art/Cinema helps us to realize this faster. A cinema which is life giving, nourishing can be called as a cinema of empathy.

Let me retreat the idea that with remembrance, with memory only, you can say that you are alive. Otherwise, you will be labelled as a mad person. Now let me connect this with a principle from Sree Narayana Guru, on who can claim that he /she is alive. Narayana Guru says: Kindliness, Love, Compassion – these three in essence are one. It is life’s (guiding) star. “Only those with kindness/love are (really) living”. May these words be chanted (remembered).



In essence, it says that – ONE WHO LOVES LIVES.

One of the reasons for me to suggest the topic ‘cinema of empathy’ is the current trend of violence in Malayalam cinema and a social attempt to normalize it. That is true for world also. Look at Gaza.

After all, every artist is like a philosopher, a seeker of the truth. The inequalities and the exploitations in the

existing systems suffocates them. In my opinion, above all it is the compassion and love for the other that makes anyone a seeker of truth and an artist. In that sense, their creations become their mark and proof of love for others, like Ritwik Ghatak’s films.

More than 40 years ago, I read a statement by the French Master, Francois Truffat that “Tomorrow’s cinema will be an act, founded on love.” This was in 1979, before I joined the FTII. After 43 years in 2022, I made my first feature film *Salt of the Earth*. All these years of experience, as a film student, cinematographer and a film maker ever more compels me to believe that ‘CINEMA IS LOVE 24 TIMES PER SECOND’. I learned this truth from Ritwik Ghatak and other great master of world cinema.

I am nurtured by a variety of film makers, starting from Bergman, Eisenstein, Fellini, Bresson, Bunuel, Antonioni, Godard, Zanussi and, Charlie Chaplin...

Chaplin was a unique spokesperson for humanity and one world. There are many more in the list. Through the films of these great film makers, it is my experienced truth that ‘cinema is empathy: cinema is love’.

Andrei Tarkovsky in his seminal book on cinema says: “In the end, everything can be reduced to the one simple element which is all a person can count upon in his existence: the capacity to love. That element can grow within the soul to become the supreme factor, which determines the meaning of a person's life. My function is to make whoever sees my films aware of his need to love and to give his love, and aware that beauty is summoning him.”

Why did we forget Dosteyvsky's assurance that "Beauty will save the world."

Without doubt I can say that the four years I spent in the FTII is the richest period in my life. If you ask me the reason for such an assessment, my reply is simple. FTII made me a WORLD CITIZEN. It made me realize that there is only one humanity and one world. It was the time when I realized the deeper meaning of a one line from the greatest poet of Malayalam Kumaran Aashaan - "സ്നേഹമാണവിലസാരമുഴിയിൽ." (The true essence of this world is love).

When talking about *Stalker*, indicating the possibility of the liberation of mankind, Tarkovsky says: "In *Stalker* I make some sort of complete statement: namely that human love alone is – miraculously – proof against the blunt assertion that there is no hope for the world. This is our common and incontrovertibly positive possession. Although we no longer quite know how to love."

Why does humans engage in artistic activities? Why cinema? What a great marvel this cinema is. One of Chairman Mao's favourite poet once said, "Wine and cinema are two of the greatest inventions of humankind." How true it is. Cinema, we all agree. And wine? May be yes. Anyway, our search will lead us ultimately to the interconnectedness of life and art. My spiritual guru, Guru Nitya Chaitanaya Yathi once said: "കലയില്ലെങ്കിൽ കലഹം" (without art there will be only quarrels/conflicts). Another eminent Malayalam poet Kunjunn Mashu says: "കലയില്ലെങ്കിൽ കലി" (without art there will be only anger/destruction). He also

says that art is the most efficient way to reach God, more than the path of 'bhakti'.

Along all this discourse we must also listen to Federico Fellini: "According to me, *La Strada* seeks to realize the experience which a philosopher, Emmanuel Mounier, has rightly said is the most important and the most basic in seeking to open up any social prospect: the joint experience between man and man. I mean that in order to learn the richness and the possibilities inherent in social life, today, when so much is said about socialism, what is more important than anything is for a man to learn to be, quite simply, with another. I think this is what every society must learn, and that if we do not solve this humble but necessary problem, we may tomorrow find ourselves facing a society, externally well organized, outwardly perfect and faultless, but in which private relationships, relationship between man and man, are empty, indifferent, isolated, impenetrable. Our trouble, as modern men, is loneliness, and this begins in the very depths of our being. No public celebration or political symphony can hope to be rid of it. Only between man and man, I think, this solitude be broken, only through individual people can a kind of message be passed, making them understand – almost discover – the profound link between one person and the next".

Enabling the life in the multitude of life-forms on our Earth, it is the Sun who is the energy source for all, in the form of light – photons. Do you know how much time it takes for a photon to reach earth, from sun's core? One lakh year. The time that which we label us 'NOW' is actually carries an aspect of past. If so, how can be we sure of it does

not contain an aspect of future too? Or is it like the new science says – time is without an arrow of direction? I have always imagined that mankind actually invented cinema, for actually learning about the true nature of time. For, only in cinema all three aspects of time can co-exist in a single instance, and it seems that it is the true nature of time.

Today science says that the first actualization of creation was light. In search of the cosmic secret scientist can only look up to that. Beyond that there is only dense darkness. Many laws that we unearthed about the material world is made with light as a witness. Scientists depend on light for all space-time related research. Without our knowledge light is enveloping us totally in our existence and life.

Isn't it light itself, the food we eat? Yes, it is the carbohydrates manufactured by the

leaves through photosynthesis is the main source of energy for living beings. If you look deeply, we will realize that both cucumber and meat is a storage device to collect the energy from the photons. Is it not the same process done by the camera sensor too. Surprisingly, the food for our body and mind are processed from light. Light is the nourisher and nourishment. We may claim that “we are children of light”. Our life, science and art are intricately woven through light.

PHOTON to POTATO

PHOTON to PHOTO

Yes

LIGHT is LOVE

And

CINEMA IS LOVE

24 TIMES PER SECOND

**Sunny Joseph is a filmmaker, cinematographer, and a film educationist.**