

Tribute to Ritwik Ghatak: Article

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**Reflections on the *River Called Titas* by Ritwik Ghatak**



*A still from the film A River Called Titas. Kabori Choudhury as Rajar Jhi*

*“We both step and do not step into the same river, we both are and are not.”*  
— Heraclitus, Fr. 49a

**Leave to return**

There lived a man—sincere and passionate. He was loved and judged; he created and suffered long spells of depression, struggled with alcoholism and tuberculosis. He dreamed of changing society, quarreled with allies, and was ultimately exiled by them. He defied conventions and groups, refused to fit into any system, and, one suspects, was incapable of forcing himself to conform. Although he developed an extraordinarily effective method of teaching cinema—as evident in his theoretical writings and, even

more so, in his students and those he inspired—he directed only a small portion of what he envisioned. Not all his films reached audiences, and none achieved commercial success. He received few awards, never became widely recognized or respected, earned little money, and drove his family into crisis. He died in a psychiatric hospital of tuberculosis, at not yet fifty-one—by today’s measure, still a very young age. Such was fate. Life ended. Rest in peace.

Yet even here he did not conform, and he did not rest. The first sign that nothing had

ended with his death appeared immediately, on February 7, 1976. The funeral of the director, writer, teacher, and social activist—who had received little recognition in life and was often neglected—unexpectedly became a massive public event: thousands of people in Calcutta filled the streets to accompany the procession. This collective mourning made clear how deeply his voice had resonated to his compatriots, even when his life seemed overshadowed.

The second, almost miraculous sign was the posthumous appearance of his lost film.

“The story of salvaging *Nagarik* (*The City Dweller*), the first film made by Ritwik Ghatak, is a story of the triumph of a group of technicians dedicated to the medium. The film had never been released in Ghatak's lifetime and was given up for lost. Following the discovery (after his death) of a weather-worn ‘positive’ print, this group of technicians pieced together from it a new negative, and the film was finally released for the first time in Calcutta in August 1977”—Bhattacharya, Malini<sup>1</sup>.

Remarkably, freed from the constraints of his body, Ghatak's voice grew clearer, his messages more resonant. Much of the disapproval he faced in life concerned his lifestyle; with his death, these arrows lost their target. The conversation with the author continued.

The language in which he now speaks to us is above all the language of cinema. This is hardly surprising. His articles, interviews, and plays are undoubtedly important, but it is in film that his expression reaches fullness. With great directors, their finest works often allow them to transcend themselves—exceeding not only intellectual and creative

limits but even the physical limitations of their bodies, achieving a clarity and endurance they had not foreseen. Ritwik Ghatak was such a filmmaker. He may well have been so in the theatre as well. I would love to see his theatrical work. To my knowledge, this is not available; still, I would not be surprised—and would certainly be delighted—if recordings of his productions awaited discovery in some archive. Recent miracles of restoration have already brought lost works to light. It was thanks to such technologies that, in 2010, the world rediscovered Ghatak's penultimate film, *A River Called Titas* (*Titas Ekti Nadir Naam*). It deserves mention, if only to acknowledge those without whom this encounter would not have occurred—and to note the way the history of *Nagarik* repeated itself thirty-three years later: elliptical in time, a hyperlink in cinematic space, echoing methods and motifs Ghatak had employed in *Titas*.



*A still from the film A River Called Titas. Rosy Samad as Basanti.*

**We look at the river, but we never see the path it took.**

Why mention the 2010 screening? The film had originally been released on July 27, 1973,

and received the Best Director's Award from the Bangladesh Cine Journalists' Association. In 2007 it topped the British Film Institute's poll of the ten best Bangladeshi films, chosen by audiences and critics. Yet at the time of its release, it was shown only in select theaters in Dhaka, Narayanganj, and Chittagong, reaching Calcutta only in May 1991 because of diplomatic and bureaucratic delays. The trajectory of the film's distribution thus appears strikingly long, considering Ghatak had been invited from Calcutta to make it. For decades, the film remained essentially the cultural property of Bangladesh. Even there, despite recognition of Ghatak's mastery and the film's immediate canonization as national heritage, its reception was mixed.



*A still from the film A River Called Titas.*

“Sanjib Datta's write-up in *The Bangladesh Observer* of 10 August 1973 called this movie ‘A Raw Masterpiece’ because Ritwik's sudden illness at the last stage forced him to be absent from ‘the most important part of finally editing the film and presenting in its intrinsic worth’... On the other hand, Kabir's article in the issue of *Holiday* of 5 August 1973 is a scathing criticism of the film. Though Alamgir Kabir was harsh about *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam*, Sanjib Datta soberly hoped that with proper editing the ‘stock of raw matter . . . would

make for one of the best films done in the whole of the subcontinent.”<sup>2</sup>

One might have lamented the film's fate and felt compassion for the director, who fell seriously ill and was hospitalized before shooting ended; and who fell ill with tuberculosis during editing in 1973—after which Bashir Ahmed completed the edit (although Ghatak would later return to it). These circumstances could explain or excuse the film's flaws. Yet the director's own assessment leaves no room for excuses:

“To date, four films of mine have satisfied me most: *The Mechanical Man* (1958), *The Golden Thread* (1965), *A Soft Note on a Sharp Scale* (1961), and *A River Called Titas* (1973)—which is an essay on the lyricism of the Bengali countryside, especially its monsoons...”<sup>3</sup>

And then he adds, with characteristic sarcasm:

“I tried to make a film with such a theme in such a country which, on reflection, I consider to be an act of suicide. Only a lunatic or an ass would try to make a film like that in that country, and I was both—a lunatic and an ass.”  
— Ritwik Ghatak<sup>4</sup>

He is easy to understand once we consider the criticism of that period—though the critics themselves are equally easy to understand. Many expected Ghatak to create a masterpiece that would establish the cinematic identity of the new nation, a source of pride for the liberated country (and today we can say he did). But at the time, the film baffled nearly everyone. I would even venture that without Ghatak's name, it might have been deemed unfit for release. Yet because he was a master recognized by other masters,

criticism split: some found merit, others dwelled on flaws and their causes. In their essays Pralay Sur, Mahbub Alam, Moinuddin Khaled, Dr Mohammad Jahangir Hossain, Sajedul Awal and Ahmad Mazhar have brought out various positive aspects of the movie. On the other hand, Masihuddin Shaker has pointed to theatricalism and sentimentality and Gautam Bhadra to the fallacies in social analysis and diversion from the novel.<sup>5</sup>

Gautam Bhadra, the influential historian associated with the Subaltern Studies collective as well as with film societies like the ‘Cine Club of Calcutta’, expressed dissatisfaction with Ghatak’s adaptation of Adwaita Mallabarman’s novel *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam*, widely regarded as a classic. Bhadra writes: “In Ritwik’s *Titas*, the existence of the Malo society is apparently without its temporality, having little association with the economic structures working in the wider world.”<sup>6</sup>

For Bhadra, it is Ghatak’s middle class urban Hindu Bengali existence that exoticises the Malo life, especially when coupled with his nostalgia for the country that is lost due to the Partition of Bengal in 1947... Ghatak was far removed from the vision of Mallabarman who hailed from that impoverished community of fishermen known as the Malos. Ghatak’s Malos are no different from his middle-class characters in the films that preceded *Titas*, namely *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (The Cloud-Capped Star, 1960) and *Subarnarekha*.<sup>7</sup>

The critique suggests that in reworking the locations and characters of Adwaita Mallabarman’s novel, Ghatak ultimately created his own story—paying limited

attention to precise ethnographic detail or to the socio-economic transformations within the Malo community. In essence, his film is not about the Malo fishermen to whom Adwaita belonged, nor about their uprooting in the aftermath of Partition. Likewise, his river Titas is not the geographic Titas—a small, little-known river flowing by the district of Brahmanbaria in Bangladesh.



*A still from the film A River Called Titas.*

Unsurprisingly, the film was not welcomed by critics and historians who all too often, and quite predictably, tended to expect a screen adaptation of a literary classic to present the familiar and culturally treasured work faithfully translated into cinematic language (which is already not a poor outcome), or even merely illustrated by cinematic means. In doing so, they effectively deny cinema its autonomy as an art form. And that is the last thing one could expect from Ritwik Ghatak.

**No one can step into the same river, but some can create their own.**

Ritwik, along with his twin sister Prateeti Devi, was born in Dhaka in 1925 (the family home was in Pabna), grew up in Rajshahi, and left East Bengal in 1947. In an interview, he says that he had long wished to make a film in Bangladesh and had chosen *Titas Ekti*

*Nadir Naam* as its literary basis long before he was able to realize the project:

*“Bangladesh, as you know, is a riverine country and there are only two good Bengali novels on those rivers — Manik Bandopadhyay's Padma Nadir Majhi and Adwaita Mallabharman's Titas Ekti Nadir Naam. The crux of the matter is Manikbabu's writing, as you know, is extremely sharp and precise. There is nothing one can say about him — his writing is so restrained and he can express so much with so few words. However, he observes fishermen and their life from the perspective of a bhadrolok (middle-class gentleman). He can never really get into ... something does not just quite fit. Adwaita Mallabharman, on the other hand, is a Malo - a fisherman. He blah-blabs quite a bit — there is a lot of redundancy — but he has an insider's view because he is one of their own and his home is in that Gokarna village where I shot the film. He is the only graduate from that village — among the Malos. So his writing on the joys and sorrows, the ups and downs of their lives penetrate a different depth altogether. One had to edit it significantly and I probably managed to do it, though I am not quite sure. I was very moved when I read Titas as it was first published around the same time when Adwaita died from TB. Since then, I have been thinking about making a film out of it...”<sup>8</sup>*

He arrived in Dhaka in 1972, after the liberation of Bangladesh, at the persistent invitation of young producer Habibur Rahman Khan, to make a film based on this epic novel. The events of *A River Called Titas* take place before Partition, in the early 1930s—almost thirty years before the writing of the novel and

fifty years before the screenplay. It may seem that this brings the authors' perspectives closer: neither the novel nor the screenplay was contemporary at the moment of its creation. Yet it is crucial to remember that Adwaita wrote his novel more than a decade before Bangladesh gained independence, while Ritwik wrote his screenplay based on that novel immediately afterward. This alone already shifts the point of view in a fundamental way—especially considering that Ritwik, by his own account, arrived there during the struggle and fired his gun.

Let us set aside the question of whether a representative of a hereditary urban intelligentsia—aristocratic in origin—can ever fully share the worldview and experience of someone from a fishing community. It is enough that both were authors in the sense articulated by François Truffaut, who formulated the auteur theory only recently, in 1954. Each possessed a unique perspective; their worlds could intersect, but never coincide.

And let us recall the era in which the film was made. At that time, there was something in the very breath of history: a powerful rise of auteur consciousness, a search for cinematic language and new narrative paths, provoking an astonishing eruption of creativity and a boiling of emotions—often conflicts, including over adaptations. In 1972, Andrei Tarkovsky released *Solaris*, based on the novel by the celebrated Polish writer Stanislaw Lem—another instance of exact correspondence between the title of a novel and a film. The furious, irritated, and at times offensive reaction of the writer and his readers to the adaptation is well known.

The history of the screenplay for *Stalker* (1979), written by the beloved, cult Soviet authors Arkady and Boris Strugatsky based on their novel, became a long and difficult ordeal for all involved. Several (and excellent) screenplays were written, yet none were accepted by Tarkovsky.



*Ritwik Ghatak at the head of the line, 1965, Film and Television Institute of India, Pune.*

I mention Tarkovsky here deliberately. One of the unique qualities of his films is an astonishing freedom of movement across the boundaries of reality, dream, memory, and reverie. He commands that magic entirely—transporting the viewer back and forth, or holding them within that realm where borders dissolve. Only a few filmmakers in the history of cinema possess this gift. In *A River Called Titas*, I was struck with joy to encounter this same magic and lightness of transition, as well as the cinematic embodiment of contemplation—the state into which Ghatak leads the viewer.

Later I learned that Ritwik had been deeply moved by Tarkovsky's work—absorbing it, decoding it, rethinking it, and (one of the very few) freely applying the properties of that cinematic language. Ritwik Ghatak said: "Tarkovsky's *Ivan's Childhood*

drove me crazy. The face of the mother in the first scene — I will never be able to forget that. His use of camera made me think a lot. I have seen very few things as beautiful as his judicious use of slow motion." <sup>9</sup>

### Second appearance and reception

Although from the 1980s onward Ghatak's name would occasionally surface internationally, his work as a whole drifted into obscurity, and physical materials deteriorated. *A River Called Titas* suffered most severely: misunderstood, isolated under the label of "Bangladeshi cinema," and unseen at major international festivals either upon release or afterward. Over the decades, the image and sound quality degraded to such an extent that viewing became an ordeal even for dedicated film historians; the film stood on the brink of being lost entirely. Yet, as we now understand, this was not an ending but merely a turning point in the drama.

Thanks to the work of the Ritwik Memorial Trust (and especially the tireless efforts of Ghatak's son, Ritaban), the original but incomplete camera and sound negatives for *A River Called Titas*, held by the National Film Archive of India, plus a complete positive print provided by the Bundesarchiv-Filmarchiv in Berlin, were passed along to the World Cinema Project<sup>10</sup>, which used them to create a restored version of the film at the Cineteca di Bologna's L'Immagine Ritrovata laboratory, completed in May 2010. This digital restoration—which includes a recreation of the opening credits—produced a new 35mm internegative for preservation.<sup>11</sup>

The film was given a second life: in 2010 it was screened at the Cannes Film Festival in the Cannes Classics programme

and released on physical media. So marginalised and forgotten had *A River Called Titas* become that its reappearance effectively registered as news.

At that moment it became clear that the film's looseness in cause-and-effect articulation, its "rough" language, fragmentary and almost pointillist structure, and sharply elliptical editing were no longer disorienting. On the contrary, for 21st-century audiences these qualities signaled the relevance of a cinematic language—restless, complex, and associative—to which viewers had long since adapted, more than sixty years after the first films of Jean-Luc Godard.

This revival sparked renewed interest in Ghatak's work as a whole: new articles appeared, retrospectives were organized, and university film programmes engaged with his oeuvre—for example, the Ritwik Ghatak Retrospective UK at Dundee Contemporary Arts, curated by Sanghita Sen (St Andrews University) in 2017.

More than thirty-five years after his death, Ghatak—long viewed as an exclusively Indian filmmaker—now stood alongside his friend and rival Satyajit Ray in global discourse, and his reputation continued to grow. His cinematic language is already understood yet remains strikingly modern; his themes are urgent; his humanism and philosophy address questions that resonate today. His personality and fate exert compelling fascination.

I am certain that if a worthy screenplay about Ghatak's life were written, the resulting film could become a global blockbuster. His biography contains everything that aligns with contemporary narrative expectations. Yet beyond enormous work and genuine

talent, the creators would have to navigate between Scylla and Charybdis: avoiding both a polished, ennobled portrait and a fixation on disorder, marginality, or weakness. Instead, they would need to reveal the forces that both guided and destroyed his destiny and creativity. True authenticity, I believe, would itself ensure success.

Nevertheless, even in the context of renewed attention to Ghatak's legacy, *A River Called Titas* has not become a favorite. The traditional leaders remain *Subarnarekha* (1965), *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960), and *Komal Gandhar* (1961). Notably, this list does not coincide with the director's own list of works that satisfied him most.

Still, contemporary critics—Western critics included—demonstrate a deeper understanding than existed at the time of the film's release. Consider a few examples:

Dennis Schwartz, wrote: "It's a passionate film made with great conviction, that features a marriage ceremony with the only sounds heard being the bride's heavy breathing. The pic is filled with traditional music, tribal customs, an abduction, a murder, a suicide, an insanity and starvation. In the end, it signals the demise of a long-standing culture because of various reasons, such as the inability to change with the times, the fractured nature of the village and their inability to deal with outside forces like money-lender schemers. It's a haunting and unforgettable film about the joys, anguish and rage of a community that was unable to survive. Ghatak clearly uses the story as a tragic analogy of what happened to the Bengali people as a result of the Partition of Bengal between British India and Pakistan in 1947.<sup>1</sup>

Adrian Martin labelled the film a "pure melodrama". "He makes use of cultural archetypes familiar to the broadest Indian audience, such as the suffering mother, the wise (or crazy) old man of the village, the local gossips, the blushing, virginal bride" he writes, "and then twists narrative conventions, both subtly and provocatively. The film is, in line with Ghatak's Brechtian orientation, a broken, deliberately disjointed melodrama, arranged in two starkly distinct halves, and gives itself the freedom to hop from one character's story thread to another's—an uncommon technique in world cinema of the time... Ghatak was a poet of rupture."<sup>13</sup>

Conversely, a common view persists that the film lacks narrative coherence—fragmented, unable to sustain attention. Critics reproach it for the absence of a unified dramatic form, for randomness and conventionality in plot development, for artificial coincidences, and for "abandoning" characters and prematurely ending narrative lines. This position is clearly articulated by Mike D'Angelo of The A.V. Club, who gave the film a "C-", called it "clumsily melodramatic tale of the fallout that occurs after bandits kidnap a pregnant bride...Leaping forward in time without signposts and continually wandering off on pointless digressions, the film is somehow both overly plotted (coincidences and conveniences abound) and dramatically shapeless, with its lauded anticipation of "hyperlink" cinema—abrupt shifts in focus from one character to another—often coming across as random. What's more, Ghatak has enormous difficulty simply establishing a coherent tone; the story's most tragic moment is so broadly played that it threatens to inspire

laughter rather than anguish." Despite this, he lauded its "breathtaking black-and-white images on the banks of the titular river" and recommended *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, "his consensus masterpiece", as a better introduction to his filmography.<sup>14</sup>

I would like to note here that I watched the film in a single breath and could not look away, although this is, of course, a matter of individual perception. In my view, in the case of *A River Called Titas*, attempts to evaluate whether the melodrama is good or bad and whether the story is well-constructed—and likewise, to consider the film solely within the framework of Brecht's theory of Epic Theatre—lead us away from a holistic understanding, because they focus attention on only one of its dimensions.

Critics write about Ghatak's early use of hyperlink cinema, about the influence of Dovzhenko and Pudovkin on his visual solutions, and, of course, about the masterful application of Eisensteinian montage—its rhythm, the emotional and intellectual impact of collisions of ideas and symbols.

All of this is valid and important. Yet by focusing on techniques and concepts, are we not doing precisely what Ritwik Ghatak resisted throughout his life? Namely, are we not trying to force the film into a defined format instead of opening ourselves to perception and receiving the author's message as he left it? Why not allow ourselves to become the director's interlocutors rather than his taxonomists?

**"All rivers flow into the sea, but the sea is not full: to the place from which the rivers flow, they return, to flow again."**<sup>15</sup>

When, after twenty-five years of absence, you return to the place where you were born and raised, where for long years of separation your heart remained, you see once-familiar places again, yet also see how they have changed—and you sharply realize how you yourself have changed. Are you not overtaken by a wave of awareness of life's impermanence? Does your mind not begin to reassess and reinterpret it?

In Ghatak's case, all this was intensified by the realization that his health had been undermined, which soon manifested when illness struck him. I assume that this difficult and deeply significant inner work—inevitable in such circumstances—is what shaped the film into what we see.

For me, *A River Called Titas* is a conversation between the director and the viewer about the meaning of life and about the journey of the human soul—a kind of spiritual testament of the Master. Ghatak's penultimate film is a humanistic summation of the life he lived, of the suffering he endured, of the moments of happiness and revelation, and above all—of acceptance.

The number of religious and philosophical references and symbols woven into the film is astonishing in both scale and universal depth. The motif of Ecclesiastes resounds ever more insistently toward the finale; the close-up of the dying Kishore evokes a direct association with late-medieval depictions of the crucified Christ, and the scene of his beating—with representations of the Passion. The spinning umbrella from beneath which Basanti first appears is perceived as the wheel of Samsara, and the theme of Samsara resonates throughout the entire film, reaching its climax in the ending.

The second heroine, Rajar, from the moment she appears until her death, is filmed like a goddess. The angles, the scale of shots, the slowed movements, the poses reminiscent of sacred imagery, and the specifics of acting—particularly the facial expression (“the face of the Buddha”)—leave no doubt. But Ghatak also signals this directly: the boatman calls her Goddess Bhagavati, and her son Ananta repeats it several times in the film.

While watching, sacred Indian texts rise in memory, particularly the Ramayana (which is also emphasized directly by a reference to a man who knows the entire Ramayana by heart), as well as local deities tied to the land, folkloric legends, moral parables. Were I better acquainted with the culture from which Ritwik's roots grew, I am sure I would read much more; yet even an outside perspective allows one to perceive behind almost every realistic character a crystallized, time-honed, often archetypal figure. In this sense one might compare them to characters of Commedia dell'Arte, though the comparison is imprecise: the roots of Indian traditional theatre are far deeper and grounded initially in mystery, not entertainment.

This immense treasury of memory and heart, alchemically transformed by the artist and comprehended by the citizen, Ritwik managed to compress into a two-and-a-half-hour film. To achieve this, he chose the most fitting means and created a unique structure.

### **Features of the general structure of the film**

The film has a clearly articulated frame. It is built as a temporal loop: from the finale the viewer is hurled back to the beginning, and

then carried again to the end. Within this frame, stories and fragments of stories unfold in chronological order, all connected by the river as a shared theme, by the community's traditions (which themselves change), and, in many cases, by the characters. Yet the narration is multi-linear, and each story or fragment can stand on its own, like Bengal Patachitra.

A semantic and visual frame is a device filmmakers often rely on, yet what distinguishes this one is its dual nature. One part sets the boundaries of a story about a society; the other—of an individual human soul. At first glance they almost completely overlap, and one might wonder whether separating them is even necessary. It is—for they allow Ghatak to set two different currents of time in motion.

Formally, the time encompassed by the frame is not difficult to estimate: Basanti's life, as shown to the viewer, spans about 25 years. The same period passed between Ghatak's departure from East Bengal and his return to newly independent Bangladesh to make the film (and we may well ask whether this parallel was truly accidental).

But judging by how radically society transforms, the span must be much greater. Time in the film has the scale of civilization. Its substance, its color, its very essence change. At first it has the quality of myth, then of folk epics; later it becomes increasingly social and domestic, the voices of politics and economics enter, and by the end one can almost hear the tones of newspaper and television reports, of public events and scandals. It is an astonishing polyphony for a film that almost never leaves the riverbank.

One can also trace yet another narrative line. It largely aligns with the chronological one, yet occasionally crosses it and forms loops. To me, this seemed unexpected, considering everything I had known about Ritwik Ghatak—a lifelong communist—though perhaps there is still much more to learn. It is the line of the diminishing virtue of people and of the fading grace once bestowed upon them by the deities. The film does not clarify whether human imperfection drove the gods away, or whether the weakening of divine grace caused the erosion of human dignity—the rise of misery, suffering, and vice.

Yet this appears to be the course of things. The gods weaken, and human beings grow more feral—harsh though it may sound; very well, let us say: they lose their humanity. From her very first appearance, Rajar (the incarnate goddess Bhagavati) is fragile and vulnerable, lacking the fullness of divine strength. Her heavy breathing on her wedding night is a staggering mystery of the creation of grace—of conception, of the continuation of life. And yet she appears burdened. The goddess needs protection and cannot influence people whose souls have grown too coarse. It is no coincidence that her first encounter with her future husband takes place in the midst of a fight.

The boatman (Ritwik Ghatak) warns Kishore that he must hide his wife. But Kishore cannot restrain himself. He confesses to his friend Subal that he does not know his wife, never had time to know her, and that desire overpowers caution. Bandits abduct Rajar, and he loses his reason. It is the river that saves her. Years later, Rajar returns to Kishore's village with her son. What happens

next is astonishing: she—called the goddess Bhagavati (and we still see her as such)—has become a refugee. She works for food, starves, endures reproach. Only Basanti senses that this woman and her child give meaning to her own existence and save her from starvation. Fate draws Rajar ever closer to her deranged husband. A miracle seems almost possible. Yet a brutal crowd beats the poor madman to death. All Rajar can do is give him a sip of water so that his soul may depart, and in that final moment he recognizes her. Rajar, like Rama, merges with the river and leaves humankind forever. Blessing abandons the village. Violence grows more frequent. Livelihoods disappear; the community breaks apart; people become ever more desperate and self-serving. They swear false oaths and slander one another. Conscience stirs (a swindler takes his own life by hurling himself from a palm tree), but ever more rarely—for it becomes an unaffordable luxury in a changing society.

Ananta, the orphaned son of Rajar and Kishore, remains in the village. He might have become a son to Basanti—a widow, forbidden to remarry and condemned to childlessness. But without Rajar beside her, Basanti transforms: she grows sharp, irritable, at times even hysterical. She cannot bring herself to fight for Ananta against neighbors, relatives, or, at moments, even against her own impulses. One moment she shelters the child, the next she beats him and drives him away, until he finally flees from her, and later from the village altogether—the son of a goddess becomes a servant in a distant city. Thus the last trace of grace vanishes. Moneylenders arrive, torment the villagers,

seize what little remains, and burn the village to the ground.

The frame closes when the unifying theme—the river—is exhausted, both literally and metaphorically, and the community ceases to exist. This civilization has ended; the narrative concerning the society is complete.

But the film is not over. A brief epilogue traditionally recounts what became of the characters and where those who survived have gone. After that, we return to Basanti. She remains alone—an image of stark finality. The expressive, meticulously crafted final scene closes the second part of the frame—the individual, human one—and forms the film’s concluding message.

**What elements is the film built from? What elements does the film's content consist of?** “Filmmaking is a question of your subconscious, your feeling of reality.” — Ritwik Ghatak.<sup>16</sup>

Think of family photo albums—the kind gathered and cherished over a lifetime. As always, some photographs we study with care, some we merely glance at, and some we skip altogether (an apt analogy for the film’s internal structure). The goal is not to provide a detailed chronicle but to remember, to grasp meaning, to return half-forgotten images to life. To feel, even for an instant, the power that memory and imagination hold over merciless time—to reclaim from oblivion what is dear.

This gliding across memories is the core of the film’s form. When the viewer recognizes an image, understands what it refers to, Ghatak focuses not on recounting the plot but on something he considers more

important: a way of perceiving, an encounter with the world. He unfolds one Patachitra painting after another for people who know them all (or recognize them subconsciously), and he comments silently through editing and the gaze of the camera: Here is what I want you to notice. This is how it truly was. Here is what I have understood and wish to share. Here is what you may have overlooked—and here is another way of seeing it. And then he hurries to reveal the next thing accumulated over the ten years in which he hardly made films.

For the filmmaker Ritwik Ghatak is confined within the body of the man Ritwik Ghatak, and this body has little time left—and he knows it, and cannot help but hurry. Thus he speaks to the viewer as to an understanding companion. What astonishes is how, through cinema, he pierces the subconscious, reaching toward universal archetypes. And I, knowing extremely little and only superficially about traditional painting, theatre, and mythology, nonetheless recognize these stories and figures. And what matters to me is not what happened, but what new meaning Ritwik will unveil.

### **How the Frame Functions: From Titas to Titas**

Ritwik opens the album on its final page—the film’s opening shot: the dried-up riverbed of the Titas. Then he swiftly flips back toward the beginning. Several shots follow in reverse chronological order—images we will later encounter again. As we move deeper into the past, the frames begin to fill with water, with life: sails, monsoon grace, boats, lush foliage glistening with moisture. A long shot: the feet of a young woman, like roots drinking in the

water of life; the camera lifts but does not yet reveal her face. Then—a tree overflowing with vitality, and beneath it, a face (associative editing, a montage of symbols).

The action begins: a woman leads a child to the river; villagers walk toward the water; the camera glides across scenes of communal life in harmony with nature, as though a Bengal Patachitra scroll were being unrolled—its dull underside turning before our eyes into vibrant images full of color and breath. Slow-motion shots of stunning beauty unfold to singing and the sound of the sitar.

The narrator invites us into the story. He sings of the infinity of the world and the finiteness of life: “I fear to see the many-watered river where water meets the blue sky. I fear to see the boats upon the dried-up river.”

He sings of the blessedness and beauty of life and of the soul entering the world: “This is the water that brings life; flowers bloom by its waters and fruits ripen. The waters play and shimmer. The sacred cosmic fish lives in the river and shines in the sun. When the wind blows, the fish turns into air.”

This is the time of legends. It does not matter—nor can we know—how many years or centuries the river has flowed, sustaining the community.

With technically minimal means, Ghatak brings the viewer into the world of mythic storytelling and folk tales, immersing them in a contemplative state.

### **The frame for the story of the Titas and the community living by it opens.**

After 2 hours and 26 minutes, the first shot of the dried riverbed returns. We recognize it at once. Basanti looks at the sand

where the river used to flow. Her friend says: “You’re still the same little Basanti.” But behind them lies the burned-down village. The community has collapsed. Ananta—the son of the goddess, left as a gift to these people—has run away and become a servant in the city. “And Titas—he is gone too.”

Thus, the frame of the river and the community living by it closes. The scroll has been fully unfurled; we have returned to the album’s final page.

### **How the Frame Functions: from Dream to Vision (Basanti)**

A circle fills the frame, spinning, grains of ritual offering sliding across its surface. This is clearly not a beginning—the rotation suggests an infinite “before”—but it is the point where the director’s memory and heart have chosen to pause. Basanti, still a child, turns the handle of an umbrella: she performs a ritual bidding farewell to winter. The rotation carries her into adulthood. Her spring has arrived. With this shot, our shared journey begins.

Basanti, now in a woman’s sari, sits in a boat against the expanse of river and sky. Her friend Mogli teases her about her dreams of marriage. Uncle Ramprasad says: “Today the Titas is full, and tomorrow it may dry up; it may dry to the last drop—so may our soul. But today these sails move forward.” A long close-up of Basanti’s face—young, luminous. Her mouth slightly open, her eyes fixed on the future. She dreams. Subal or Kishore—who will become her husband? She is in love with Kishore.

The frame of the young soul’s story—the story of Basanti—opens here.

### **The Included Postscript**

Despite accusations of theatricality, Ritwik Ghatak’s film is not a stage play where the curtain simply falls at the end of the action. The dialectic of history is that the fall of a civilization has no exact date—though we know when Rome was taken, when Carthage was destroyed and sown with salt, and in the film we see when the village burns. People survive; they are no longer a society, and most are doomed, yet each clings desperately to life. This part, like the very beginning of the film, has no clear time boundaries. Its events can span hours or years. The description of this in film is a picture behind which the epic process of losing the homeland.

It takes tremendous courage—and tremendous love for men and women alike—to show what becomes of them afterward. To portray suffering without hope, wandering without purpose, powerless dying—this is far more painful than depicting even the most devastating defeat. That is why such examples in literature and cinema are rare.

Ghatak shows Basanti’s half-mad elderly mother leaving to begging, finding a grim pleasure in her own decrepitude that elicits pity; he shows a woman still young enough to earn a living (in the obvious way); and an old man who repeats like a mantra that alms will always be given—before collapsing from hunger, never to rise again.

### **Basanti's frame closes.**

Basanti remains in existential solitude. She is still relatively young and beautiful, yet every thread of her life has snapped. For her, there is no path away from the Titas and no life without its water. She embodies the riverland

itself—and how can one flee from one’s own nature? The words from the beginning return: “Today the Titas is full, tomorrow it may dry up; the soul will leave the river.” The woman sits endlessly with empty overturned vessels. The warning has come true, and Basanti—still young—must die.

The scene is, at heart, a mystery of farewell: the soul, having completed its journey, leaves the earth. The final shots—almost unbearable in their tragedy and beauty—show the exhausted woman walking along the parched riverbed, digging into the sand, drawing up a little water from the depths of the Titas. Without this water one cannot enter the world, nor leave it. She cannot drink—just as Kishore once could not—but the water flows across her lips and face, and her soul is released. Freed, she hears the sound of a flute. A boy runs across a rice field—endless, like the Titas in flood—approaches, and runs past. Is he her child, the one she dreamed of but never bore? Or is he again “neither your son nor mine,” like Ananta, whom she lost? Or perhaps there are no “your” and “my” children—only the children of humankind, the cosmic fish

descending into the rivers to shimmer in the sun. Living souls full of moisture will return and revive the barren sand. A civilization is born, flourishes, fades—and another takes its place. There is no end to the world, no death to the soul.

Basanti smiles with the serene, blissful smile of the goddess Bhagavati—peaceful and blissful for the first time—just as Rajar once smiled. The child of the river blesses the child of the rice field.

**PS:**

By the time this article is published, the 56th International Film Festival of India (20–28 November 2025) will have ended, having celebrated the centenary of Ritwik Ghatak with screenings of his classic works. I will be following the discussion that emerges from this tribute, anticipating a wave of publications reflecting how the Master’s legacy is perceived in 2025. It appears now we are coming closer to a fuller understanding.

**Translation: Rimma Pivtorypavlo**

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