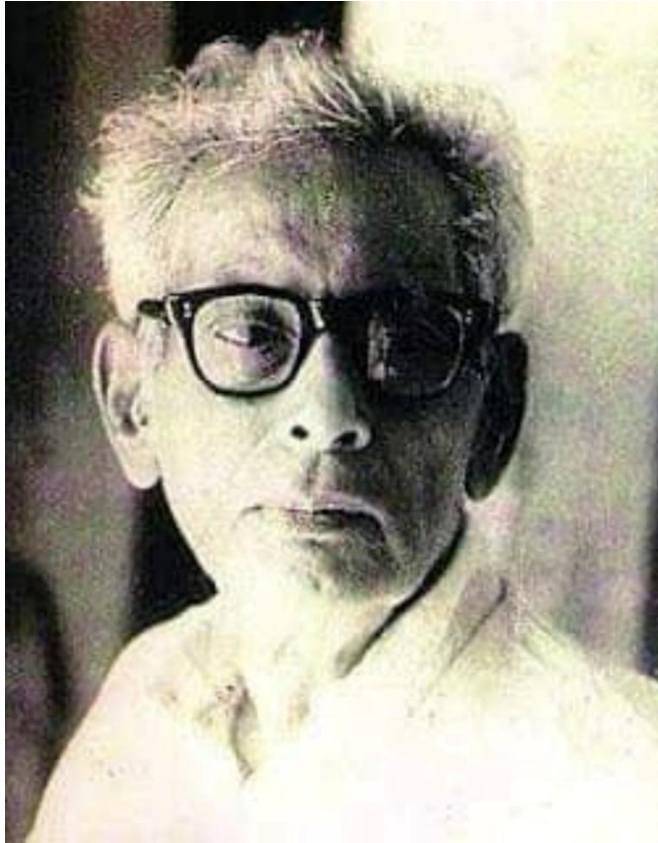


Tribute to Ritwik Ghatak: Article

Sanjay Krishna and Shilpi A Singh

Rediscovering Radhakrishna: Ghatak's Invisible Write Hand



Adivasion Ka Jiban Srot 1955

Life of the Adivasis

Hindi, Documentary
15 minutes

Production : Government of Bihar
Screenplay, direction : Ritwik Ghatak
Film Unit : Aurora Cinema Company

Bihar Ke Darshaniya Sthan 1955

Historic places in Bihar

Hindi, Documentary
16 minutes

Production : Government of Bihar
Screenplay, direction : Ritwik Ghatak
Film Unit : Aurora Cinema Company

Oraon 1957

This is a preparatory test film on the life of the Adivasis of Ranchi region and on the Oraons of Rani Khatanga village.

The voice, words, and worldview that flow through Ritwik Ghatak's first documentary, *Adivasiyon Ka Jeevan Srot*, and his other documentaries focusing on the indigenous communities of Bihar have long puzzled scholars. Many have struggled to find the *srot* (source) of that distinctive narrative tone: the unnamed, unseen, and almost entirely uncredited collaborator from Jharkhand whose imprint is unmistakable but remains undocumented. That man was Radhakrishna, a litterateur, editor, screenwriter, linguist, and one of Ghatak's most important intellectual contacts and cultural collaborators in the region. But as his son, Ranchi-based writer and custodian of his legacy, Sudhir Lal, recalls, Radhakrishna has largely been made invisible in the mainstream discourse on Ghatak's documentaries. We explore how indigenous art forms profoundly shaped Ghatak's cinematic aesthetics and worldview while focusing on his three notable documentaries scripted with the help of noted litterateur **Radhakrishna**—*Adivasiyon ka Jeevan Srot*, *Bihar ke Darshaniye Sthan* and *Oraon*. Through these six essays, we trace Ghatak's engagement with tribal rituals, folk traditions, and performative cultures, examining how these elements informed his larger body of work and differentiated his sensibility from the Western cinematic canons of his time.

1. Indigenous Art Forms, Radhakrishna, and Ghatak

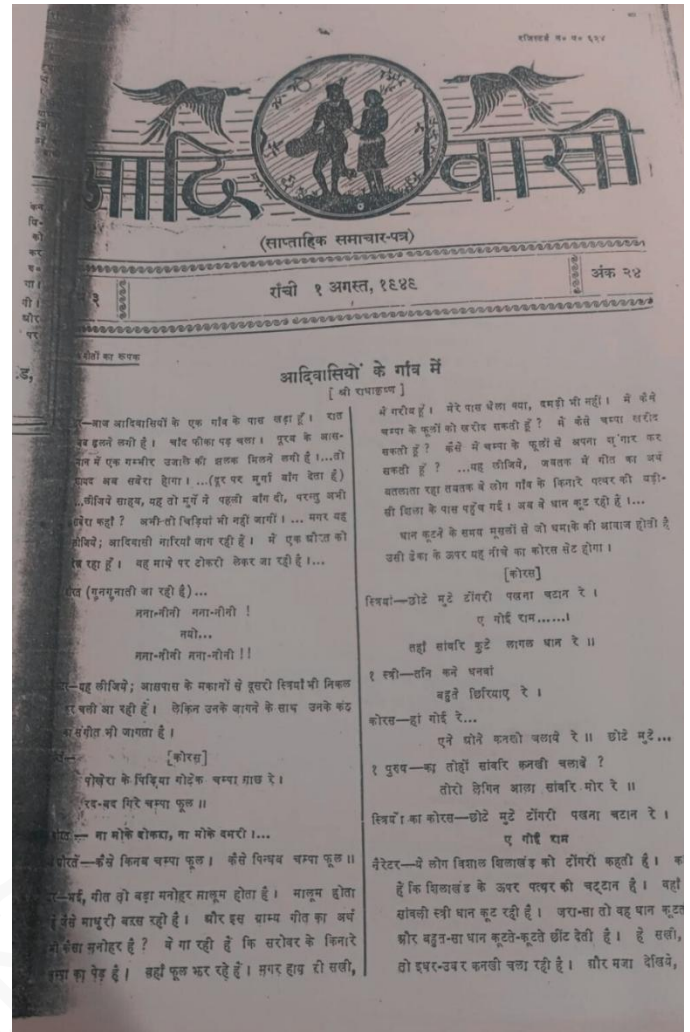
~ Sudhir Lal (Writer and Radhakrishna's son)

Early Years and Literary Self-Effacement

I was born into the world of letters through my father, Radhakrishna, born on September 18, 1910, in Ranchi. Before his name became synonymous with Jharkhand's cultural consciousness, he edited *Kahani* in Banaras (now Varanasi) and then moved to Gumla to publish *Jharkhand* in 1937. Barely four issues in, he received a call from Sagar Movietone and Prabhat Pictures in Bombay. He worked in Bombay on stories, screenplays, and notes behind the scenes, but the glamour didn't hold him. He returned to Ranchi in 1939 and lived there until his death on February 3, 1979. Part of his later invisibility lies in the many masks he wore. He wrote seriously as *Radhakrishna*, and satirically as *Ghosh-Bose-Bannerjee-Chatterjee*. Yet this self-effacing man was once hailed by Premchand himself:

"I have found a diamond in the coal mines of Chhotanagpur. If Hindi story writers were reduced to five, Radhakrishna would be one among them."

After Premchand's death, he became the de facto custodian and, in some way his literary heir, entrusted with editing *Hans*. Over the decades, he edited *Vatika* (1929), *Mahavir* (1930-31), *Sandesh* (1930-31), *Maya* (1931-34), *Swabhiman* (1934), *Hans* (1936-37), *Kahani* (1937), *Jharkhand* (1937), and *Adivasi* (1947-1970). He was a pioneer of radio drama; his first broadcast aired in 1938 from AIR Lucknow. He joined AIR Patna in 1954 and later helped establish the radio drama division at AIR Ranchi.



The Ramgarh Congress Session: First Brush with Filmmaking

In 1939, Ranchi was abuzz with preparations for the historic Ramgarh session of the Indian National Congress, scheduled for 1940. My father served on the Publicity Committee, his first meaningful entry into filmmaking. He edited the session's souvenir with Upendra Maharathi and suggested naming the main entrance Birsa Dwar. His book, *Bihar Ke Chitrit Gaurav*, and his satirical piece, *Punarmurshakobhava* on the Moderates vs. Extremists were published during this period. Gandhiji read the satire and encouraged him to continue writing. It was also around this time that he collaborated closely with A.K. Chettiar, the documentary filmmaker who is credited with

directing the first documentary on Gandhiji, *Mahatma Gandhi: Twentieth Century Prophet*. Chettiar gathered nearly 50,000 feet of footage from India, the UK, and South Africa. My father provided insights on the Ramgarh session, wrote the script, and assisted with camerawork. Started in 1937, the final film (12,000 edited feet) was released on August 23, 1940, and eventually travelled the world. Originally in Tamil, it was later released in 21 languages and screened worldwide, including in the US, where it was screened with English commentary in 1953.

आदिवासियों का जीवन - स्रोत

'आदिवासी'-सम्पादक श्री राधाकृष्ण द्वारा लिखित 'कब जो चतुस थे' नामक डाकुमेन्टरी फिल्म की विस्तृत (कमेन्ट्री) 'समृत' के पिछले पंक्त में प्रकाशित हुई थी। 'आदिवासियों का जीवन-स्रोत' नामक विचारसामक प्रिंटम की विस्तृत भी आप की ही देन है जिसे बिहार-सरकार के जन-सम्पर्क-विभाग ने हाल में ही तैयार किया है।

न जाने किस अनादि काल में यह स्रोत पृथ पड़ा था। हरहराता-परचरता, नाचता, धिरकता यह बड़-बला, सीमाबद्ध होकर भी असीम में खी जाने के लिए, विन्दु होकर भी सिन्धु में लीन हो जाने के लिए। मानव-जीवन भी तो यही है। उली प्रकार यह भी चला पड़ता है जीवन के अमरता की ओर। और भांग के अद्भूत करीब आदि-वासियों में से उनका अधिकांश समुदाय बिहार के बन-कल्लारों में, पाटियों और पर्वतों के ऊपर निवास करता है।

यह आदिवासियों का मेला है। मेला, जिसे ये जतरा-कहते हैं। उन मेलों में नृत्य और गीत की सादकता होती है, उल्लास का सात्य होता है, मिलन का महोत्सव होता है और होता है जीवन का चरम आनन्द।

आदिवासी युवक तीर श्मैनिशानेवागिधियों खेलते हैं। मेला में तीर के निशाने लगाए जा रहे हैं।

ठीक है स्रोत !

मेलों और उत्सवों में गाँव-गाँव से

आकर कंठे एकत्र होते हैं। हर गाँव का भंडा सम्मान के साथ स्थान पाता है। दूर-दूर के लोग मेलों में सम्मिलित होते हैं—आनन्द की आकांक्षा लेकर, पारस्परिक उत्कंठा लेकर। दूर-दूर का समाचार जानने के लिए, दूर-दूर तक समाचार पहुँचाने के लिए। मेला उनके साथ है, उनके सपनों के साथ है, उनकी संस्कृति से सम्बद्ध मेला उनका मिलन-महोत्सव है।

माननीय नेताओं का आगमन उत्साह भर देता है।

देखो-मर्दे, प्रगति की दीड़ में पीछे न पड़ जाना।

और आदिवासियों का जीवन-निर्भर मुस्कान की तरह खिल रहा है।

छोटानागपुर और सन्घाल प्रगना की पथरीली अंतरकका की उन्होंने उपजाऊ बनाया। वहाँ की मिट्टी से ये अपने उन की मिट्टी को लड़ाते रहे। हल से कठोर पथरी का कलेशा भी योग्य करते रहे। वर्षा आने दीजिए। यह धूलभरी पथरी भी चम्पन बन जायगी।

अमृत

जून, १९४४

served until the Congress ministries resigned in 1939 to protest India's involvement in World War II. He became the state's first Chief Minister again after independence and held the office until his death in 1961. During his tenure, the government initiated a cultural policy centred on promoting Hindi, as well as the preservation, development, and promotion of tribal languages, art forms, and literature in the Chhotanagpur-Santhal Pargana region.

The country had just gained independence, and this part of Bihar, known as Chhotanagpur, was famous for its mineral resources and tribal traditions. The tribals had a rich cultural heritage. To protect their heritage, traditions, and culture, the Bihar government decided to produce documentaries. Acharya Badrinath Verma was the minister of that department, and he entrusted my father with this task. My father took over as editor of *Adivasi*, a weekly magazine, on January 3, 1947. The publication of this magazine in the then state of Bihar was managed by the state government's Home (Political) Department, which was later renamed as the Public Relations Department at my father's suggestion.

He was an expert on the tribal culture and literature of Jharkhand. He also wrote many poignant stories about tribal life and the environment. Among them are 'Aur Zindagi Chalti Rahi', 'Mulyun', 'Dhuku', 'Kanuni Aur Illegal', and 'Dharmasankat'. He edited *Adivasi* till 1970, wrote extensively on tribal life, and nurtured multiple generations of writers in languages. Having lived in Ranchi his entire life, he was well-versed in several tribal languages.

Shri Krishna Singh, Cultural Policy, and the Making of Adivasi
Shri Krishna Singh was the first person to lead Bihar when the Indian National Congress formed a government in the state in 1937. He

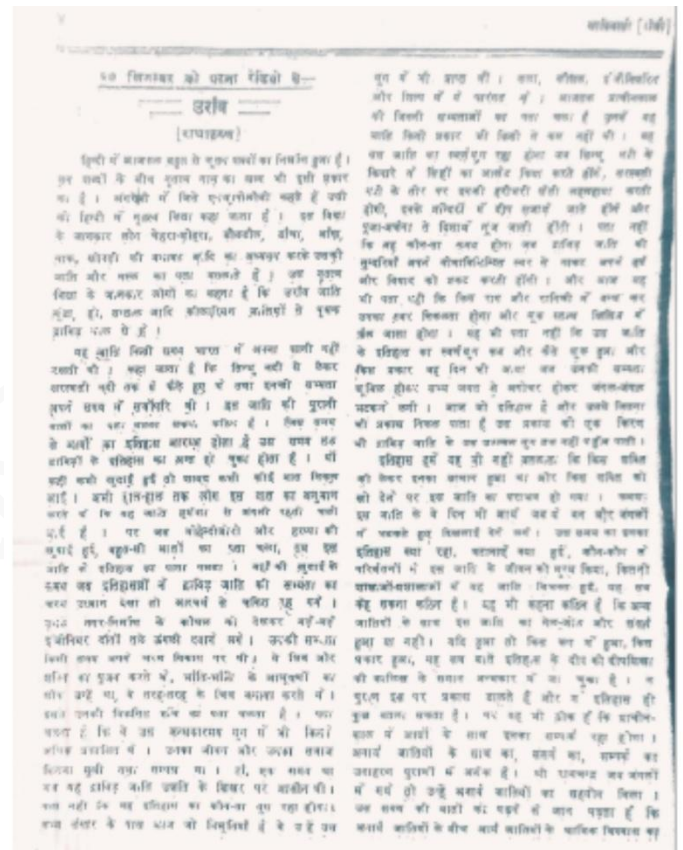
The Idea of Documentaries: From Script to State Policy

My father came up with the idea of making a documentary while editing Adivasi. He was well aware of the rich socio-cultural heritage of the tribal people of the Chotanagpur-Santhal Parganas. He wanted to raise awareness of this rich heritage through documentaries.

It was my father who proposed the idea of producing documentaries to Acharya Badrinath Verma. Badrinath Verma presented Radhakrishna's idea to the Chief Minister, then known as the Prime Minister of Bihar. Shri Krishna Singh agreed. My father received a letter from the department requesting him to submit scripts and plans for documentaries. In 1953, he submitted several scripts and plans. Acharya Badrinath Verma, the department's minister, assigned him the responsibility of producing documentaries. My father preferred film companies in Calcutta (now Kolkata) or Madras (now Chennai) over those in Bombay (now Mumbai) for logistical, linguistic and financial reasons, and eventually finalised an agreement with Aurora Film Corporation in Calcutta. An agreement was reached between Aurora Film Corporation and the Bihar government in Patna. The film company's manager arrived in Ranchi with his team and was accommodated at a hotel owned by an Englishwoman on Lalji Hirji Road. Among the team was Ritwik Ghatak, a first-time cinematographer, who was associated with the film company as a contractor. He had difficulty speaking and understanding Hindi, having only recently moved from Dhaka to Calcutta. My father provided him with all the information necessary for documentary

filmmaking, in Bengali. This unlikely collaboration—between two men separated by 15 years, different geographies, and opposing ideologies—gave Indian cinema three foundational documentaries:

- *Adivasiyon Ka Jeevan Srot* (1955)
- *Bihar Ke Darshaniye Sthan* (1955)
- *Oraon* (1957)

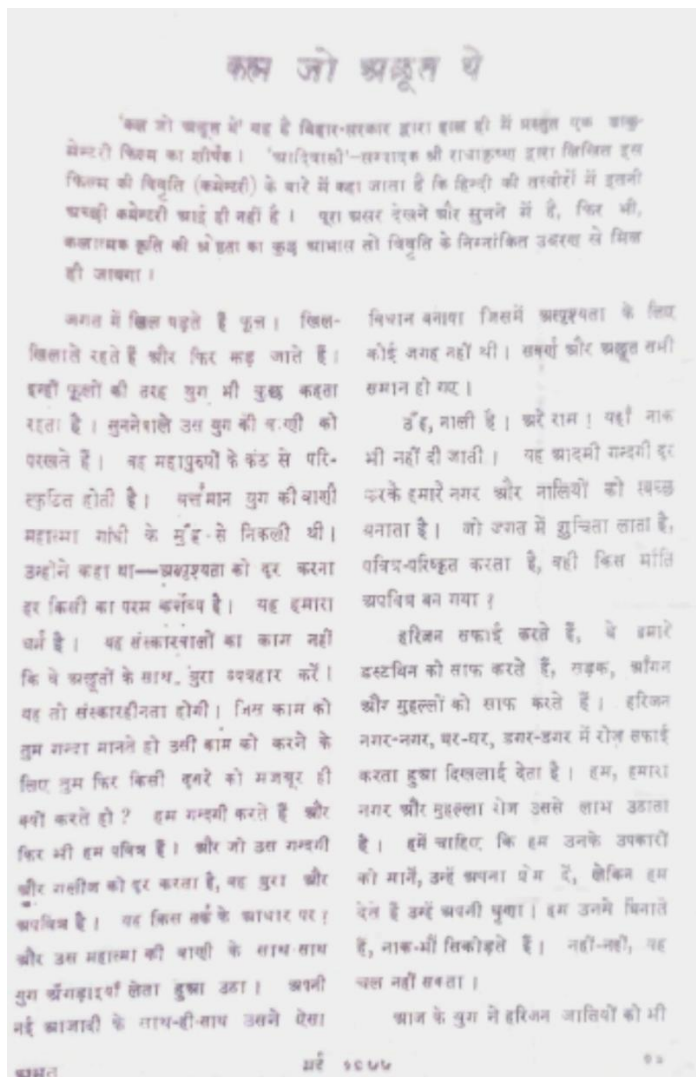


My father scripted and narrated them, while Ghatak primarily remained behind the camera, capturing images of the people, places, their lives, culture, music, and dance with an empathetic lens. The first two documentaries, *Adivasiyon Ka Jeevan Srot* on Bihar's indigenous inhabitants and *Bihar Ke Darshaniye Sthan* on the state's rich cultural history, were filmed during the First Five-Year Plan and were shown nationwide by the Films Division

of India, an organization established in 1948 that merged in January 2023 with the National Film Development Corporation (NFDC), along with the Children’s Film Society India, the National Film Archive of India, and the Directorate of Film Festivals. Together with the remaining two, *Oraon* and *Purulihar Chhau Nritya*, this documentary quartet becomes an invaluable resource for tracing Ghatak’s engagement with tribal rituals, folk traditions, and performative cultures, and how these elements informed his larger body of work in cinema, lent a unique texture to his aesthetics and sensibilities, setting them apart from the Western cinematic canons of his time.

Documenting a World: Collaboration & Collective Action

Adivasiyon Ka Jeevan Srot was shot in Rani Khatanga with Theble Oraon, Julius Tikka, Amta Oraon and Aditya Mitra Santali. His two other prominent associates were the Oraon poet Antem Oraon and Nagpuri and Hindi writer Sushil Kumar. Bijla Oraon coordinated local arrangements. The documentary *Bihar Ke Darshaniye Sthan* was shot in Nalanda, Rajgir, Vikramshila, Patna, Vaishali, Bodhgaya, and Ranchi, among many other places. These two documentaries are the first illustrated examples of Ghatak’s association with indigenous culture, and later he used the Chhotanagpur region as the backdrop for his full-length feature films, such as *Ajantrik*, *Subarnarekha*, and *Komal Gandhar*. My father was an acclaimed lyrical prose writer, and his writings shaped the texture of every script. It was my father who, for the first time, mainstreamed the richness of indigenous culture through his words. “Adivasiyon ka chalna hi nritya hai, aur bolna hi unke geet hai. (For the Adivasis, walking itself is a dance, and speaking is their song.) “Adivasiyon ka nritya hi unka jeevan hai athva kahiye ki unka jeevan hi nritya hai.” (For the Adivasis, dance is their life, or you may say that their life itself is a dance.) “Ek taraf barsaat gaati hai, doosri aur Adivasi gaate hain.” (On one side, the rain sings; on the other, the Adivasis sing.) “Karma ke samay ve daaliyon ki tarah jhoom jaate hain, papiho ki tarah gaa uthte hain.” (During the Karma festival, they sway like branches and burst into song like cuckoos.)



“Adivasiyon ke jeevan-nirjhar muskaano ki tarah khil rahe hain.”
(The lives of the Adivasis are blossoming like buds.)

“Sahyog hi to Adivasi jeevan ka aadhar hai.”
(Cooperation is the very foundation of Adivasi life.)

Many of the metaphors he coined for tribal life have now passed into cultural vocabulary, often detached from their creator. The metaphors, born in his documentary scripts, now live on in public idiom, embraced by all and belong to the collective cultural consciousness. His metaphorical expressions live on, even when their creator is forgotten.

Ghatak's Turn to the Indigenous

Ghatak may have made documentaries for a living, but the passion with which he made and felt them returns again and again in his films. In 1957, he directed ‘*Oraon*’. This is often considered *Ajantrik's* early work and is based on the Oraon tribe. It was shot in Chhotanagpur in 1955. Incidentally, some footage of the Oraon was also used in *Ajantrik*. *Ajantrik* is an evocative film that depicts the man and the machine in forests and highlights the natural rhythm of indigenous culture in cinema, possibly the first such attempt.

My father's November 1, 1951, article, *Oraon*, published in *Adivasi* and later broadcast on AIR Patna, became a major reference text. Ghatak's own English essay, also titled *Oraon*, echoes similar concerns—history, suffering, rhythm, and revival. It offers a comprehensive overview of the community from its past to its present. In that essay, Ghatak writes about the complex yet ordered dance forms of the Oraons: “The only

thing to remember is that each dance is a unique entity... The cycle of seasons is reflected in the festivals held throughout the year.”

My father, too, had recorded these rhythms—seasonal, social, communal—through prose, poetry, film, and radio.

The Documentary Legacy

The documentaries produced with my father's scripts and voiceover during 1953-55 include: *Adivasi Nritya* (16 minutes), *Adivasiyon Ke Gaon Mein* (17 minutes), *Adivasiyon Ka Jeevan Srot* (15 minutes), *Oraon* (15 minutes), *Chhotanagpur Ke Paryatan Sthal*, *Kal Jo Achhoot The*, *Gandagi Ki Samasya*, *Bihar Ke Darshaniye Sthan*, *Adhik Ann Upjao*, *Jungle Ke Pakshi*, *Mitti Ka Shringar*, etc.

These documentaries were shown in schools, theatres, and motor cinemas across villages and towns in Bihar. My father also adapted the documentary ‘*Adhik Ann Upjao*’ into a one-act play, which was published by the Bihar government's Social Welfare Board. The scripts for the documentaries were published monthly in the Harijan Sevak Sangh's magazine, ‘*Amrit*’, in its June 1955 issue, and also found a mention in Ghatak's memoir, *Cinema and I*. The philosophy of indigenous peoples is consistent worldwide. It mainly revolves around coexistence. My father did not belong to the Adivasi (meaning 'ancient dwellers') community, but he wrote about them with admiration and highlighted their rich cultural heritage.

Loss, Erasure, and the Question of Credit

In 1974, filmmaker Hemen Ganguly

expressed interest in dubbing these documentaries in English and stored the prints in his Rupashree Pictures warehouse. After his death, the company dissolved—and with it, much of Bihar–Jharkhand’s early documentary history. State control over documentary crediting contributed greatly to my father’s erasure from the Ghatak discourse. Yet his role as cultural mediator, scriptwriter, narrator, and key interlocutor who opened the world of indigenous Chhotanagpur to Ghatak remains foundational.

The philosophy of indigenous peoples everywhere centres on coexistence. Though my father was not an *Adivasi*, he wrote about their worlds with respect, admiration, and a desire to archive what colonial modernity ignored.

Today, when we trace Ritwik Ghatak’s engagement with tribal rituals, folk traditions, and performative cultures, it is necessary and indeed overdue to acknowledge the man who handed him those worlds:

Radhakrishna, author, editor, chronicler, scriptwriter, and keeper of Jharkhand’s indigenous memory, needs to be remembered, and not forgotten, especially in the cultural discourse around Ghatak.

2. Radhakrishna and Ghatak: Indigenous culture, collaboration, and collective action

~ *Sanghita Sen, Assistant Professor of Visual Communication and Digital Culture at Northumbria University, UK*

The Power of Local Collaboration

Collaboration with local experts, such as Radhakrishna, played a crucial role in ensuring the authenticity of the documentary

films, especially those of Ritwik Ghatak. Radhakrishna, who was deeply familiar with tribal communities in Jharkhand, provided filmmakers like Ghatak with critical access and cultural insights, fostering audience appreciation and understanding of an authentic depiction of tribal life. It paved the way for avoiding superficial misrepresentations by grounding the narrative in lived experience and local knowledge. Their collaborative action helped build genuine relationships with participants by emphasising the importance of making them feel comfortable in front of the camera, resulting in truthful, nuanced portrayals of smiles, shyness, and authenticity seen in documentaries, and highlighting how existing trust fostered by local collaborators is essential for authentic representation. Without such in-depth collaboration, it is really hard for an outsider to authentically capture the nuances and dignity of tribal life, inspiring respect and curiosity for the diversity among tribal groups. Beyond access and translation, local experts like Radhakrishna contributed to the authenticity of films by taking on several essential roles, including advising on the timing of rituals, identifying key community members, guiding filmmakers to significant locations, interpreting customs and body language, helping select props and costumes, acting as cultural mediators, contributing to narrative authenticity, and offering ongoing feedback during filming and editing.

Problematic Portrayals in Indian Cinema

I find most depictions of tribal people in both arthouse and mainstream cinema deeply problematic. There are filmmakers I highly

regard, but I strongly disagree with how they portrayed tribal people. An example that comes to mind is that of Satyajit Ray's depiction of tribal people in *Aranyer Din Ratri* for the use of blackface and making a Savarna actor play a tribal character. A number of Indian films end up either objectifying or exoticising the tribal people. It seems to me that this perspective emerges from an urban gaze looking at tribal people in India.

India's Tribal Diversity: Not One Community, but Thousands

It's important to remember that when we talk about tribal people, we're not referring to just one group; there are thousands of tribes in India. In his portrayal, he mentions specific tribes, such as the Oraon, Munda, and Santhal, which highlights their distinct group identities. This reminds me of how colonial discourse often generalises Africa as if it were a single entity, despite being a continent filled with diverse tribes and numerous countries. Similarly, there isn't a monolithic "tribal culture." Jharkhand is home to many tribes, and the filmmaker does acknowledge these specific groups, demonstrating an understanding of the nuanced differences among their cultures. When Ghatak refers to tribal people, his focus extends to a continuity that spans thousands of years, which is indeed true. These communities are among the original inhabitants of India, tracing back to primordial times. If you consider India's ethnic origins, you'll notice considerable diversity. For example, in the Northeast region such as Manipur, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Shillong, and

Assam, we find a concentrated population of tribal people. Other areas, such as Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand, Bihar, and parts of Uttar Pradesh, also have significant tribal communities. Although he visited parts of Northeast India, including Shillong and Assam, he only made films focusing on the tribal people in erstwhile Bihar, now Jharkhand and West Bengal.

Language as Cultural Texture

Ghatak, I think, was fascinated by the dialect of Hindi as is spoken in the Chhotanagpur plateau area. Any other language wouldn't have worked to depict the region's tribal life. In an interview, he mentioned the unique texture of Hindi, emphasising that certain expressions cannot be translated. For instance, when a mother calls out to her child, saying "lalla re," it communicates the cultural timbre specific to the region. It represents the spirit of the region that no other language can capture. He was not a native speaker of Hindi, and perhaps struggled with the language. Collaboration with Radhakrishna, who was a native speaker of Hindi and a litterateur, was therefore invaluable for the two documentaries Ghatak made in 1955.

Partition, Marxism, and Ghatak's Politics of Empathy

The trauma of the Partition and subsequent fracture on one hand and deep engagement with Marxism on the other, I think, triggered a sense of solidarity in Ghatak that enabled him to empathise with the disenfranchised and their pain. Displacement, after all, is not just geographical; it also involves cultural uprooting and profound loss. As a researcher, I understand that his empathy often

manifested in the portrayal of women. While powerful male figures populate his work, critical perspective is often communicated through female voices. Imagine belonging to a generation that wasn't overtly feminist, yet demonstrated feminist qualities in various ways. Formally, one may perhaps not label him a feminist. However, being a Marxist, he naturally aligned himself with the oppressed. His empathy toward tribal people, women, and other marginalised groups stemmed from an understanding that they were systemically oppressed. Marxists traditionally side with the vulnerable, aligning with various mass movements to protect people's rights, including the Naxalite group, who advocate for tribal rights amidst state oppression and corporate encroachments on forests.

Debating Sanskritic vs. Indigenous Culture

In his final film, *Jukti Takko Aar Gappo*, one of the themes is a debate between Sanskritic culture and indigenous culture, which also encapsulates Ghatak's nuanced understanding of Indian culture as a whole. His perspective on indigenous and tribal people is unique; he did not see them as unequal but rather as equals and fellow citizens, treating them with dignity. His portrayal of the tribal people didn't exoticise them; instead, he approached tribal communities with curiosity and respect. Like any open-minded individual meeting new people, he sought to understand their lives, worldviews, and potential for further connection. He had a deep understanding of India's diverse demographics, which enabled him to address these subjects with an open mind.

The respect he had for their lives is evident, in

his letter to Surama Ghatak. In his films, Adivasis are not merely shown dancing; they are depicted in various aspects of life—cooking, eating, fighting, navigating their justice systems, and experiencing love. This nuanced representation stands in stark contrast to many documentaries that reductively portray tribal communities as mere subjects of curiosity, dancing with flowers in their hair while being observed by urban spectators.



3. Ghatak understood the tribal philosophy of life well

~ *Biju Toppo, an anthropological and national award-winning tribal documentary filmmaker from Jharkhand*

Seeing Ghatak Beyond the Partial Lens

While talking about Ritwik Ghatak, I can't help but fall back upon the parable of the blind men and the elephant. Like those men, we often speak of our subjective experiences, which may be limited, and we can be wrong if we don't consider a broader perspective. I would rather focus on his innovative cinematic language and its influences for a better understanding of his distinctive style and the ideas that shaped it. He brought his own suffering closer to the

public, forging a deep connection with them. Ghatak is one of the few filmmakers in Indian cinema who attempted to define new aesthetics in his films, deeply inspired by his rootlessness, Marxist philosophy, and Indian cultural traditions, making his pain, suffering, and loss of identity and home a mainstay of his filmmaking process. That's why poet Sarveshwar Dayal Saxena, in his poem Sharnarh, had rightly observed:

मुझे अपने जिस्म से प्यार है
और उन हिस्सों की याद आती है
जो काट कर गिर गए और छूट गए;
अपने जिस्म का कटा हुआ हिस्सा
क्या तुम कहीं छोड़ सकते हो?

*I love my body
and I miss those parts
that were cut off and left behind;
A severed part of my body
Can you ever leave it anywhere?*

A Cinema Shaped by Pain, Rootlessness, and Marxism

Ghatak had a deep commitment, empathy, and compassion for the tribal and oppressed Dalit communities. He derived his scientific understanding and sensitivity to society, humanity, and reality from Marxism. Therefore, he was a filmmaker with deep-rooted social concerns that manifested cinematically in both his documentaries and films. He was also associated with the Communist Party of India and the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA). He was associated with both film and theatre; his first play, 'Jwala', was written and directed in 1951, and his second, 'Dalit', won the Best Play Award at the annual conference organised by IPTA, Mumbai, in 1953.

Ghatak adopted a holistic approach and attempted to see tradition in a new continuity by connecting it with contemporary experiences. His 15-minute documentary *Adivasiyon Ka Jeevan Srot*, about the Oraon tribe, is expository in nature. It beautifully depicts the importance of Jatra for the tribals. The sentiments have a highly literal touch in the voice-over. A few sentences have a colloquial touch, such as "Bara bara haro, chalo shikar khlein, dekhbe sahiya mitti kar utensil ahe thoik bajai lebe." He humanised and, to some extent, mainstreamed the use of Kurukh and Sadri words in his works. However, he refrained from using the original music in the Karam dance in the documentary, which he compensated for by beautifully filming the Jatra dance with drums, mandars, and large trumpets in *Ajantrik*. The short documentary depicts the Oraon tribe's year-round lifestyle: fairs, festivals, weddings, the Madait (a traditional Adivasi practice of community cooperation, in which help is given in exchange for food), Dhumkudia (an open social school for young tribal children), and the judicial system modelled after the Five Gods. For indigenous people, dance is their life, or rather, their life itself is a dance. I believe Ghatak understood the tribal philosophy of life, that walking is dance and speaking is music, so narration captures it well. The commentary doesn't stop, and he continues, smiling, "handi peete-peete kahin madmast na ho jaana yaroon (don't get intoxicated while drinking the pot, friends)," the narrator extolls. The scene makes a comeback in his feature-length feature film, *Ajantrik*, where Vimal

drinks alcohol, and in the background, "Jhurni Jhurni, En Ningan Modharka Kerka Rahachkan, Beman Dagabaaz. Jhurni Jhurni Ane Kriya Mokhdan, Hun Nin Aur Nigahay Kriya Mokhdan En Khaddan. (Jhurni Jhurni, I had completely forgotten you. A dishonest, treacherous, untrustworthy person. Jhurni Jhurni, I swear. Huh! I know you well enough, and also your vows)." When the Bengali couple splits, and Bimal falls in love with the woman and is then betrayed, it is beautifully portrayed in the Kurukh dialogue.

A Camera Witnessing Plight and Dignity

While this documentary was being filmed, a large-scale migration of indigenous people from Chhotanagpur to Assam, Bhutan, and the Andaman Islands was underway. Ghatak has depicted this incident very well, albeit briefly, in the film *Ajantrik*. The Kurukh hero, Luther Tigga, teasing the heroine, Jhurni Oraon, says, "Guchay to naam huun Asam Raaji kalot, jhurni kulbulāte hue kehti hai dhait neñ to ainder-ainder ba:aday. (My name is Guchay, Let's go to Assam. Jhurni, fidgeting, says, "I don't know what nonsense you keep uttering)." Furthermore, his camera work, which captured the plight of the people here in the 1950s and 60s, is evident in both his documentary and his film. It could be one of the reasons he used the dilapidated vehicle as a prop in *Ajantrik*. Ghatak has given respect and honour to the language and culture of the tribals in the film. In the film's final scene, a car is being serviced, and in the background, a woman sings a Kurukh song. Bimal and that woman complement and supplement each other's grief.

Ghatak made a few films in his time, but they left a profound and lasting impact on Indian cinema and audiences alike, inspiring admiration and respect for his artistic vision and cultural significance.



4. Collaboration, deep engagement and nuanced representation

~ *Niranjana Kujur, National Award-winning filmmaker from Jharkhand*

Indigenous Presence as Emotional and Narrative Anchor

Ritwik Ghatak's documentaries and feature films are often celebrated as models for deep engagement, research, and respectful, nuanced humanisation of tribal people. He is known for working closely with insiders (such as Radhakrishna), living among tribal communities, and resisting both exoticism and stereotypes. His work includes documentaries shot in Jharkhand and feature films, such as *Ajantrik*. Indigenous people's presence in his films is not merely decorative; it holds special significance. In *Ajantrik*, when Bimal's car, Jagaddal, refuses to continue the jungle journey, leaving Bimal devastated, the songs and music of the Oraon tribals from the forest catch his attention. He descends and observes the joyful tribal life: dancing, singing,

arguing, falling in love, all experienced silently by him. In this scene, his restless mind finds peace, and his anxious heart finds comfort. *Ajantrik* may be the first and last film to use tribal songs as a background score, revealing Ghatak's profound engagement with indigenous culture. He foregrounded Oraon tribals in both his documentaries. The distinctive voiceover depicts the tribal community as never before, highlighting that, in the 1950s, Ghatak was indeed far ahead of his time and contemporaries. Unlike many filmmakers of today, Ghatak spent years exploring and connecting with the tribes, making documentaries before filming *Ajantrik*.

A Sharp Contrast: Ray's Problematic Representation

If we look at Satyajit Ray's *Aranyer Din Ratri*, his portrayal of the Adivasis is rather negative. Simi Grewal's casting in the film as an Adivasi woman is perhaps the most talked-about criticism about the film, but if looked at more deeply, the film falters at many more levels. Ghatak, while using Adivasi songs sung in chorus as background music, maintained the completeness of a line or the meaning of it and dedicated an entire sequence of tribal celebration, but Ray's film has Tribal dance and music edited abruptly, only using it as transition shots. Further, Ghatak unpretentiously keeps his distance from the Adivasis, focusing on their aesthetics and philosophy, whereas Ray indulges in it through Duli, characterising her quite stereotypically as a drunkard and a beggar. He reinvents the sexual gaze of the Bengali Bhodrolok men on Adivasi women to criticise them. This may look very profound to the Bengali masses, but it evokes an

undignified image of the Adivasi women. The cost of Ray's profoundness is a bit too high in the film because he doesn't do any balancing act to counter-balance the damage done.

5. The biggest motif is the collective voice
~ Arin Paul, an independent filmmaker currently working on a documentary titled *The Ritwik Ghatak Experience*

Where Ghatak's Cinematic Language Truly Began

When I look at Ritwik Ghatak's Bihar-Jharkhand period, especially *Adivasiyon Ka Jeevan Srot* (the only documentary from that phase that's publicly accessible today), I feel this is where his real cinematic language began taking shape. He wasn't observing tribal life from a distance; he was absorbing their rhythm. In these communities, music, work, worship, dance, rest, everything flows into each other. That instinctive flow is the exact opposite of Western cinematic grammar, which depends on clean psychology and seamless continuity. What struck him deeply was the directness. A drumbeat isn't "background music", it pulls people in. A dance isn't a performance, it's an expression. Silence isn't emptiness; it's part of the emotional cycle. These basic truths stayed with him for life. In *Adivasiyon Ka Jeevan Srot*, you see him discovering how life itself gives you rhythm. He notices how a gathering slowly builds energy, how repetition changes mood, how a single gesture can unite a community. Western continuity wants to hide its joints. Ghatak is comfortable showing them because life itself shows them. *Ajantrik* carries a small but real echo of this. The film even credits Adivasi songs and

dances. The taxi's clatter has the same rising-and-falling pulse he heard in those villages.

Indigenous Art Freed Him

Indigenous art didn't "influence" him the way an academic would. It freed him. It told him it's okay to be raw, instinctive, and emotional, and that this, too, can be cinema. Most of what we understand about his exposure to rituals and performances comes from his first documentary film, created for the Films Division in 1955, and from his own detailed writings on the Oraons. And when you read those writings, you start seeing clear connections.

The biggest motif is the collective voice. Tribal dances aren't about individuals; they're about groups moving together. Later in his films, emotions often arise from the community rather than a single character. That is very much in line with the ritual energy he saw in Chhotanagpur. Another strong motif is repetition as emotional build-up. Tribal dances often loop and loop until they create a shared trance. Ghatak uses this style in editing — long stretches of emotional rhythm suddenly broken by sharp cuts. It's not the Western structure; it's ritual pacing. He also observed that everyday objects, such as flags, tools, and ornaments, carry meaning. This is why almost every object in his films holds emotional weight: a calendar, a harmonium, a river, a house. His sensitivity to land also comes from the tribal worldview. For them, land is culture. Land is memory. That's why Ghatak's landscapes — especially rivers — are never neutral. They speak. Even the pain he expresses about cultural erosion echoes what he wrote about the

disappearance of tribal traditions. That same anxiety shows up in his films about Partition and displacement.

Learning to Listen: Ghatak's Ear as His First Tool

Ajantrik also carries a faint link; the film uses Adivasi folk songs, and the taxi's beat feels like a mechanised echo of those rhythms. These motifs didn't come from textbooks. They came from what he lived with. The remaining documentaries survive through Ghatak's own notes, which are amazingly rich. From them, you understand immediately why his cinematic language ended up the way it did.

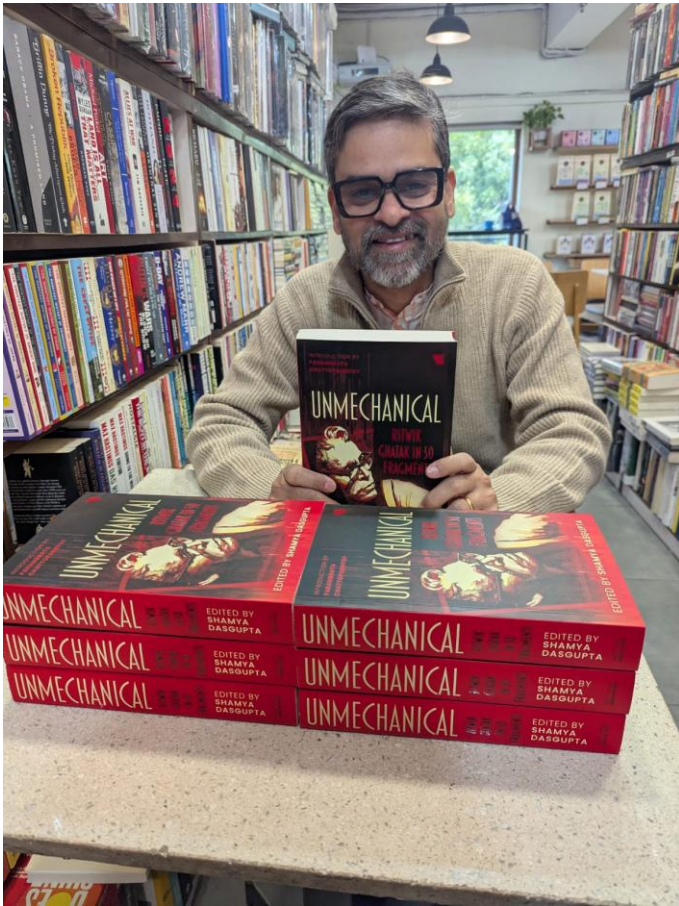
Sound, for him, is never decoration. He saw how a drum changes the mood of a whole gathering, how a song pulls a shy person into the dance, how festivals shift between silence and frenzy. These natural rhythms shaped how he used sound in cinema: abrupt cuts, sudden silences, bursts of music that feel emotional rather than ornamental. In *Adivasiyon Ka Jeevan Srot*, he is basically learning to listen to work songs, chants, footsteps, breath, and the sound of dust rising. Later, he brings the same awareness into his films. He wasn't trying to be "experimental." He was following a rhythm he had already lived.

His mise-en-scène also comes from these experiences. Tribal spaces are communal — circles, clusters, moving groups. You see this sense of collective arrangement in his frames. Emotions ripple across faces, not from a lone protagonist.

Land, too, becomes central. In tribal life, everything happens on the earth — festivals, dances, worship, and work. That's why rivers and landscapes in his films feel alive. They're

characters.

Ajantrik even makes the connection explicit: the film credits Adivasi dances and songs, and the taxi moves with a beat that feels almost like a folk rhythm. He didn't imitate tribal culture. He absorbed its pulse, and that pulse shaped his cinema, becoming its heartbeat.



6. A deft observer and interpreter of indigenous culture

~ Shamy Dasgupta, editor, *Unmechanical: Ritwik Ghatak in 50 Fragments*

An Observer, Not an Interloper

Based solely on my non-academic understanding of his films, I believe the primary thing that distinguishes Ritwik Ghatak's documentary style is that he neither aimed to challenge or change stereotypes nor tried to impose the so-called civilised world's

thoughts and ways on the Indigenous people he worked with. This is also true of his niece Mahasweta Devi's later work. When Ritwik or Mahasweta spent time with people from other cultures, especially the marginalised and oppressed, they approached with an open mind, eager to understand. This can only happen if you genuinely desire to engage. A letter Ghatak wrote to his wife, Surama, while shooting *Oraon*, reinforces this. The film was released in 1957, although it was filmed around 1955. This was before he began work on *Ajantrik*, which, incidentally, was also shot in the same part of Jharkhand (then Bihar) where *Oraon* was filmed.

Absorbing Reality, Not Exoticising It

This isn't a case of a city person exoticising a tribal or Indigenous culture. It's not because we now know and understand Ghatak more than before. He wasn't like most of us. When he went to shoot government-funded films in remote areas, he did so primarily to understand the people, not as an emissary of an all-knowing state apparatus. Once that happens, negotiations become much simpler. The ethical considerations start with the intent behind representing communities that have been largely absent from mainstream cinematic discourse. This concern isn't exclusive to Ghatak but applies to anyone engaged in this kind of work. Much of this art practice is aimed at the privileged, especially urban audiences, even if it centres on worlds they are barely familiar with. So, as a filmmaker, ask yourself: Are you trying to capture their stories to make your audience feel awe, strangeness, or exoticism? Or are you genuinely trying to reveal the truth of their existence, on their own terms?

In these documentaries, we encounter stories of the extremely marginalised, the oppressed, and citizens who are not. If your aim is to tell their story without an agenda, even with good intentions, then ethics are inherently present. You approach with empathy and a sincere appreciation for their lives and stories. In Ghatak's case, I believe his approach is more ethnographic.

Ghatak as Ethnographer, Not Voyeur

Ajantrik, made in 1957-58 in the same regions of former Bihar (now Jharkhand), features a lengthy sequence with the Oraon people. The aim, as I understand it, was to depict the film's shooting location and to introduce a clash of civilisations and cultures. It exists merely as a clash, open to interpretation, without comment. The protagonist, Bimal, the taxi driver, watches their festivities

dispassionately because he is temporarily stranded there. He belongs to that milieu to some extent. It's not unfamiliar to him. He can't suddenly become curious or join in, whether he wants to or not, because, despite some familiarity, he remains somewhat an outsider.

Interestingly, this was Ritwik's first film. He had made *Nagarik* years earlier, but it was unreleased, making this his debut. Satyajit Ray described him as "more Bengali" than himself, yet he chose to make this film outside Bengal. If that points to Ritwik's humanist, worldly outlook—despite rarely leaving India except when shooting *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam* in Bangladesh—another indicator is his use of Kurukh, the language of the Oraons. He allows the language and the people to exist naturally in their environments, as he does in many of his films across different contexts.

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