

Tribute to Ritwik Ghatak: Article

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Titash Ekti Nadir Naam: Perpetuating Partition



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

(Kabir Alamgir, “Ritwik Ghatak – A View from Bangladesh,” Celluloid, Vol. 19, Nr. 1, 1997.)

In the history of Indian cinema, the school- 'Parallel Cinema' was aesthetically engineered in the late 1940s to about 1965, with the healthy and tough challenge of mainstream commercial cinema, which kept the entertainment nerves of the Indian audience hooked and targeted for decades with a loose but long-winded, 360 degree restriction. It is in the hands of auteur filmmakers like Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak, Bimal Roy, Mrinal Sen, Tapan Sinha, Khwaja Ahmed Abbas, Buddhadeb Dasgupta, Chetan Anand, Gurudutt, V. Shantaram, Shyam Benegal, Adoor Gopalakrishnan, Girish Kasaravalli and such luminaries that the wave of Neo Realism took a majestic shape.

Bengali cinema in West Bengal was the first home of parallel cinema inspired by Italian neorealism. Phenomenal films like Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali* (1955), *Aparajito* (1956), *The World of Apu* (1959), *Ajantrik* (1958), Bimal Roy's *Do Bigha Zameen* (1953), Guru Dutt's *Pyasa* (1957), Ritwik Ghatak's *Nagarik* (1977), *Titash Ekti Nadir Naam* (1973) have enriched Indian cinema culture in unimaginable ways. Ritwik Kumar Ghatak was a professor at the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII), Pune. It was in his hands that filmmakers like Kumar Sahani and Mani Kaul, who gave a new direction to Indian cinema with their independent thinking, were curated. It is said

that Ghatak took his classes sitting under the famous Wisdom tree at the entrance of FTII.

Titash Ekti Nadir Naam is a passionate film made with great conviction, that features a marriage ceremony with the only sounds heard being the bride's heavy breathing. The picture 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 external 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. The term partition has become synonymous with Ghatak's cinema at all levels. Few filmmakers have been as deeply committed as Ghatak to exploring the concepts of rupture, abandonment, and fragmentation. Ghatak's preoccupation with these themes extends beyond just the narrative or socio-historical context; he intricately embedded rupture into the very fabric of his cinema. This is evident in his meticulously crafted frames, innovative use of music and sound, and his precise and fiercely modern editing style. Intense dramatic scenes often conclude abruptly, with the image, music, and gesture being suddenly withdrawn from the audience's contemplation.

The film, based on Adwaita Mallabarman's eponymous novel, depicts the lives of the Malo (fisherman) community

residing on the banks of a river in Bangladesh, and simultaneously an allied contributing group- another community from the same Comilla region, the Muslim farmers who share harmonious ties with the neighbouring fisherman community. The drying up of the river, Titash, has a devastating impact on the community, leading to immense hardship and struggle. The story highlights the inability of any village, regional community, or river bank to escape the oppression of the exploiting class. In Titash's narrative, the oppression and poverty inflicted by moneylenders reveal the intertwined experiences of joy and sorrow within a specific community, as they navigate the challenges of modernity and isolation. The film delves into multiple individual stories- the floating life of Kishore (Prabir Mitra); the conflicted childhood and adolescence of their son Ananta (Shafikul Islam); the unfulfilled youth of Basanti (Rosy Samad) and her tragic heartbreak, the hunger of Banamali's sister Udaytara (Sufia Rustam); the lonely life of Ramprasad (Golam Mustafa); the dark gloomy life saga of Rajar Jhi (Kabori Choudhury) and countless other stories are evoked in this film and all flow through one integral character - Titas. Titas, a river, along with Satyajit Ray's *Kanchenjunga* (1962) and Mrinal Sen's *Calcutta 71* (1971) are among the earliest examples of hyperlink cinema, featuring multiple protagonists in a smooth interconnected storyline. Titash, as a river, is a central figure in the film, reminiscent of the early examples of the genre. The film opens with a stirring folk song performed by folk artist Dhiraj Uddin Kabir (originated in Lalan Fakir), evoking the grandeur and spirit of the river through its

melody. Presented in black and white, the film stands as a timeless and poignant work of cinematic poetry, capturing the essence of Titash and its surrounding culture. While the literature of Bangladesh often references the river, its portrayal in cinema has been limited, with Ritwik Ghatak, born in undivided Bangladesh, skilfully depicting the river's decline in socio-economic importance and the encompassing culture through his sensitive artistic vision. Ritwik Ghatak's artistry adeptly presents the intricate life stories of families residing on the riverbanks, akin to the interplay of fragmented sun and shadow, showcasing the river's profound influence on their lives.

Kishore, a fisherman living on the banks of the river Titash, accidentally marries Rajar Jhi, (the Raja's daughter) on his way to a nearby village. Only a few days later, the pregnant Rajar Jhi is kidnapped during a river cruise, driving Kishore into insanity. In her attempt to escape the abductors, the young woman jumps into the river and is rescued by a group of villagers. Tragically, she remembers nothing about her husband- not even his name. All she carries within her is the name of her beloved's village.

A decade passes. She returns with her son Ananta, in search of her husband. But many in Kishore's village deny them food and shelter. Basanti, a compassionate young housewife, finally offers them refuge. It gradually emerges that Kishore and Basanti were childhood sweethearts.

In this deeply felt melodrama, Ghatak crafts scenes with an intensity that transcends conventional sentimentality. During Kishore and Rajar Jhi's marriage, only the bride's heavy breathing is heard- stripped of all

ritualistic grandeur, the moment becomes hauntingly intimate. The film pulses with traditional music, tribal customs, kidnapping, murder, suicide, madness, and an unflinching portrait of starvation. In its final movement, the narrative mourns the disintegration of a centuries-old riverine culture- undone by its inability to adapt to time, its own tragic fatalism, and the pressure of external forces such as predatory creditors. It becomes an unforgettable account of a marginalized community battling despair, rage, and extinction. Ghatak shapes the story as an allegory for the countless tragedies endured by the victims concerned.

Titash Ekti Nadir Naam stands as a singular work of cinematic power. Its images- pure, unadorned, and emotionally charged, become the very voice of the narrative. Baby Islam's cinematography captures the ebb and flow of riverine life, embracing both its nurturing tenderness and its destructive force. Ghatak refuses to romanticize the river; instead, he reveals its elemental vastness. Wide-angle shots of the immense Titas and the fragile settlements along its banks evoke an overwhelming sense of eternity, rhythm, and inevitability. Human fate appears intertwined with the pulse of nature itself- its expansiveness, its unpredictability, and its quiet authority- the result is a film of profound emotional and thematic depth, an elegy for a people, a landscape, and a way of life slipping slowly into oblivion. What was once considered as evidence of directorial naiveté or technological limitation by earlier critics is now recognized by contemporary audiences as a complex and restless cinematic language, comparable in sophistication to that of Jean-Luc Godard or Lynne Ramsay. By 1960, with

'Meghe Dhaka Tara', Ghatak had successfully combined two seemingly contradictory approaches: the mise-en-scène tradition and the montage tradition. Drawing from the montage principles of Sergei Eisenstein, his greatest artistic influence, Ghatak infused conflict into every frame and allowed every cut to further fracture the world he depicted.

Ghatak frequently sets his characters against expansive natural landscapes, underscoring their vulnerability and insignificance in the presence of larger socio-economic influences. The utilization of long, wide angle takes and silky camera movements serve to emphasize the gradual, inexorable passing of time, while the intimately focused close-up shots unveil the profound suffering and fortitude of the individuals. The film incorporates natural light and earthy scents, with folk music playing a significant role, creating a sense of realism that immerses the audience in the austere yet poetic world of the depicted community. The inherent elegance of the symbolist cinematography demonstrates that it is not merely a visual spectacle within the film, but rather a poetic and spiritual exploration of the continuity of life, as well as the despair and hope associated with the eternal journey of the river. *Titash*, a river, stands as an enduring masterpiece of

world cinema, having been showcased in the Classics section of the 2010 Cannes Film Festival. The restored version of the film was produced by the Film Foundation's World Cinema Project in collaboration with Cineteca di Bologna's laboratory L'Immagine Ritrovata and Ritwik Memorial Trust, and the National Film Archive of India under the supervision of Martin Scorsese, with the restoration being finalized in 2010. Even today, *Titas* continues to be a revered masterpiece in the academic realms of film education.

On his birth centenary, the 56th International Film Festival of India, Goa has paid a soulful tribute to this luminous visionary of Indian cinema by screening two of his landmark films - *Subarnarekha* (1965) and *Fear* (1965).

(Adwaita Mallabarman completed the novel in 1951, shortly before contracting tuberculosis, which claimed his life at the age of just 37. The manuscript remained unpublished until 1956, when it finally emerged as one of the most remarkable works in Bengali literature. In a poignant parallel, Ritwik Ghatak brought *Titash Ekti Nadir Naam* to immortality at the post period when he too was alarmed being inflicted by the same virus.)

Acknowledgment:

1. Maa Uma Padma: The Epic Cinema of Ritwik Ghatak: Mazhar Q Kamran
2. A River Called Titas: Article by Adrian Martin

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