

Article

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The Man Who Gave Indian Cinema It's Conscience



Meghe Dhaka Tara (1960)

We were taught about Ritwik Ghatak in college recently. When our professor began talking about him, it was not a new name to any of us. We already knew who he was. His legend had reached us long before the syllabus did. In every film circle, his name sits beside Satyajit Ray and Mrinal Sen as one of the three pillars of Bengali cinema, but somehow his presence feels heavier, more haunting. We had heard stories about his troubled life, his temper, his drinking, his brilliance, and the way his work shaped the foundation of parallel cinema in India. Yet,

sitting in that classroom, listening to our professor explain how he structured that movement, it struck differently. Ghatak was not just a chapter in film history. He was the reason that history took the shape it did.

As India marks the birth centenary of Ritwik Ghatak, the conversation around his work feels more urgent than nostalgic. His films were never about celebration. They were about confrontation, about forcing a nation to look at itself. To understand Ghatak is to understand the India that emerged after partition, fractured and searching for identity.

He was born in 1925 in Dhaka and came of age at a time when the world around him was breaking apart. The partition of Bengal in 1947 was not just a political event for him. It was a personal wound that was reflected greatly in his works. His family, like millions of others, was displaced, and that experience left a permanent scar on his artistic vision.

Where Ray turned the camera toward humanism and Sen toward political realism, Ghatak's cinema came from grief. His stories are built out of loss. They speak of people who have been uprooted, of cities that have forgotten their inhabitants, of women who carry the weight of broken families. Partition is not a backdrop in his films. It is an unending echo that shapes every frame. His cinema was never interested in escapism. It was a way of reclaiming memory.

Our professor explained that Ghatak's contribution to parallel cinema was not only thematic but structural. Before him, the idea of art cinema in India lacked definition. Mainstream Hindi cinema was thriving, filled with melodrama, music, and spectacle. Ghatak took those same tools and redefined them. He did not reject emotion. He restructured it. His use of music, theatre, and mythology created a form of realism that embraced pain rather than concealing it. His work suggested that sincerity in cinema did not mean silence. It could be expressive, imperfect, and still profoundly honest.

Watching *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, his most celebrated film, you understand what that meant. The story of *Nita*, a young woman supporting her refugee family, becomes the story of an entire displaced generation. Every sound, every silence, carries emotional weight. His use of exaggerated cries and

distorted audio was not stylistic indulgence. It was his way of turning suffering into sound. He once said that cinema should disturb the audience because the world itself is disturbing. *Meghe Dhaka Tara* achieves exactly that. When *Nita* cries out for life in the final scene, it feels like the collective scream of post-partition Bengal. It is among the most unforgettable moments in Indian film history.

Ghatak began his creative journey in theatre and was an active member of the *Indian People's Theatre Association*, which believed that art should serve the people. This shaped his ideology as a filmmaker. He viewed cinema as a form of social responsibility, not just artistic expression. For him, the screen was not meant to entertain the privileged. It was meant to give voice to the forgotten. That is what separated him from his contemporaries. While Ray's cinema focused on the individual and Sen's explored politics directly, Ghatak merged the two. His characters lived ordinary lives, but their struggles reflected the trauma of an entire nation. He made the personal political, and the political personal.

He often said that he was not interested in making beautiful films. He wanted to make truthful ones. That idea defines *Subarnarekha*, another of his masterpieces. The film follows a brother and sister trying to rebuild their lives after partition. On the surface, it is a family story, but underneath it captures a generation's loss of identity. The repeated imagery of trains and bridges reflects the endless search for belonging. The river, a recurring symbol in his work, becomes a reminder of separation rather than continuity. The film ends with despair, yet it feels honest, almost cleansing. Ghatak believed that truth,

no matter how harsh, was necessary for healing.



Subarnarekha (1965)

Parallel cinema did not use to be a concept I was interested in. I always wondered why his films were always tragic. I later found out that Ghatak's tragedy was not self-pity but truth. He lived through a time when optimism felt dishonest. The country had gained independence, yet millions were living without homes, food, or dignity. His realism was not aesthetic but moral. It became the foundation of the parallel cinema movement that would take shape in India through the 1950s and 1960s. Directors like Mani Kaul, Kumar Shahani, Shyam Benegal, and Govind Nihalani inherited that vision. They saw cinema not as mere storytelling but as inquiry, as a way to question society.

Sound and music were integral to his storytelling. Ghatak used them as emotional language rather than background decoration. He often employed folk music and Rabindra Sangeet to create irony, placing beauty alongside despair. It gave his films a haunting sense of cultural memory. His editing style, influenced by Soviet montage, connected emotion to imagery with deliberate intensity.

He could move from a close-up of a human face to a vast, barren landscape and make them speak to each other. Every cut carried meaning.

One of the most striking aspects of Ghatak's work is his use of mythology. His women characters often reflect the goddess archetype, not as divine ideals but as human survivors. Nita in *Meghe Dhaka Tara* and Sita in *Subarnarekha* are echoes of Durga. They are selfless figures who hold the broken world together even as they are destroyed by it. Ghatak's use of myth was not religious symbolism. It was cultural remembrance, connecting India's ancient narratives to its modern wounds.

Despite his brilliance, Ghatak's life was marked by hardship. His films rarely achieved commercial success. Many were delayed, censored, or neglected. He struggled with mental illness and alcoholism and died in 1976 at the age of fifty, largely unrecognized. Only later did scholars and filmmakers begin to grasp his influence. His students at the Film and Television Institute of India, including Mani Kaul and Kumar Shahani, carried his philosophy forward. Kaul once said that Ghatak taught them to see cinema as emotion rather than logic. His rediscovery in the 1980s and 1990s, both in India and abroad, finally gave him the respect that had eluded him during his lifetime.

That delayed recognition feels symbolic. Ghatak spent his career giving a voice to people forgotten by society, and in the end, he was forgotten too. His personal journey and his art became one continuous story of neglect and rediscovery. Yet, even in absence, his influence remains undeniable. Every Indian filmmaker who engages with

identity, memory, and displacement is working in a space that Ghatak once defined.

The parallel cinema that grew after him carried his imprint. Films like *Bhuvan Shome*, *Ankur*, *Mrigayaa*, and later *Uski Roti* all reflect his approach to realism and social consciousness. What separates Ghatak from others is his emotional depth. He did not treat social issues as theory or numbers. For him, every displaced person was a world of their own. That humanism makes his films timeless.

today, decades after partition, his cinema remains relevant. Themes of displacement, cultural loss, and alienation continue to define our world. His films confront these realities without offering comfort. They challenge the viewer to engage with pain rather than escape it. That is what makes his work revolutionary, even now.

As a film student, learning about Ghatak has changed the way I understand cinema. It showed me that filmmaking is not only about personal vision but also about accountability. Ghatak believed that an artist has a duty toward their society. Art, he said, must stand for something. A film without social commitment, he believed, is meaningless. That single thought defines his philosophy and his legacy.

After learning about his works, I sat in silence. It was not the silence of boredom. It was the silence of understanding. Even though I had heard of Ritwik Ghatak before, that day, I saw him differently. I saw how he had given Indian cinema its conscience. His films, made in the middle of chaos, continue to remind me that realism is not about simplicity. It is about honesty. It is about showing life as it is, with all its contradictions and pain.

As we celebrate the centenary of his birth, it feels important to remember not just his work but what it stood for. Ghatak believed that truth, no matter how uncomfortable, had the power to awaken people. His cinema was not an escape from reality but a confrontation with it. That spirit continues to guide filmmakers who seek meaning in a world that often prefers illusion.

Ritwik Ghatak remains one of Indian cinema's most uncompromising visionaries. His films were born out of despair but built on hope. Hope that truth could lead to awareness. Hope that art could still serve humanity. And as long as there are filmmakers who choose honesty over comfort, his legacy will live on. I hope to always be inspired by works and his journey to remind me of what one accomplishes.

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