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Of roots and rootlessness: music, partition and Ghatak

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At a time when the ‘commercial’ Bengali film directors were busy caricaturing the language and the mannerisms of the East-Bengal refugees, specifically in Calcutta, using them as nothing but mere butts of ridicule, Ritwik Ghatak’s films portrayed these ‘refugees’, who formed the lower middle class of the society, as essentially torn between a nostalgia for an utopian motherland and the traumatic present of the post-partition world of an apocalyptic stupor. Ghatak himself was a victim of the Partition of India in 1947. He had to leave his homeland for a life in Calcutta where for the rest of his life he could not rip off the label of being a ‘refugee’, which the natives of the ‘West’ Bengal had labelled upon the homeless East Bengal masses. The melancholic longing for the estranged homeland forms the basis of most of Ghatak’s films, especially the trilogy: *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960), *Komol Gondhar* (1960) and *Subarnarekha* (1961). Ghatak’s running obsession with the post-partition trauma acts as one of the predominant themes in the plots of his films. To bring out the tragedy of the situation more vividly, he deploys music and melodrama as essential tropes. Ghatak brilliantly juxtaposes different genres of music, from Indian Classical Music and Rabindra Sangeet to folk songs, to carve out the trauma of a soul striving for recognition in a new land while, at the same time, trying hard to cope with the loss of its ‘motherland’. This article will show how Ghatak, in *Komol Gandhar*, uses music and songs to portray the dilemma that goes on in the mind of his protagonists and other important characters estranged from their motherland, which could have otherwise become very difficult to portray using the traditional methods of art-film making. It also shows how the different genres of music not only contribute to the portrayal of the cultural differences of ‘East’ and ‘West’ Bengal but also enforce and validate the diasporic identities of the refugees while in the process paradoxically pointing out the unity and oneness of both the ‘countries’ as well. It will also elaborate on Ghatak’s own complex notion regarding the nation-state which reiterates itself in all his films. Finally, in discussing *Komol Gondhar*, the paper will also contain an elaboration on the IPTA (Indian People’s Theatre Association) around which the plot of the film revolves.

Introduction

‘At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom.’ This famous “midnight speech” by Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru seems to present before us an expectancy of a utopian world of freedom and peace as if with the termination of the British rule all the centuries old hardships and slavery would come to an end. But the real picture was a stark contrast to this promise. With ‘freedom’ came the harsh reality of Partition: Pakistan was born. India and Pakistan were segregated along communal lines - the Muslims dominated new-born Pakistan whereas India became the abode of the Hindus and the minority Sikhs. However, it was the people of Bengal and Punjab who had to bear the brunt of Partition the most.

Communal riots became more familiar to them than anything else. The trains to Pakistan and India were crowded more with dead bodies than with people. The Indian Government at last came to the rescue and sanctioned exchange of property between the Hindus and the Muslims in Punjab. But Bengal was neglected. This negligence on the part of the Government resulted in a massive abundance of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) refugees in Bengal.

These refugees or *Bangals*¹, as they were commonly referred to, began to be treated as the “other” by the *Ghotis*² of Calcutta. The cultural difference between East Bengal and West Bengal was nothing new but it intensified after the partition. Even the Bengali mainstream films started caricaturing the language and mannerisms of the East Bengali ‘refugees’ by typecasting them as buffoons or country bumpkins in a thoroughly urban setting of Calcutta. Those episodes became so popular with the audience in West Bengal that gifted *Bangal* comedians like Bhanu Bandopadhyay started using their native accent and mannerisms to project an image of a quick-witted buffoon determined to make a living in the estranged city of Calcutta. However, there remain very few documents projecting the pathos of these refugees stranded off in a new land. [One such important early film is *Chhinnamool* by Nema Ghosh].

It was Ritwik Ghatak who, almost in all his films, directly or indirectly, projected the dilemma of these refugees essentially torn between nostalgia for a utopian motherland and the traumatic present of the post-partition world of an apocalyptic stupor. Alternative cinema in the third world country has consistently battled to represent imperialism, hunger and the slavery involved therein:

¹ The people from East Bengal

² The people from “West” Bengal

The Indian experience of cultural politics suggests that the third cinema, as it has come to be called, is all about...the articulation of the colonized individual...in the history of the community, nation and the world at large which the post-colonial inherits. (Kapur, 251)

Ghatak himself was a victim of the Partition of India in 1947. Although he was able to carve out a niche for himself in this alien land, he still could not rip off the label of being a ‘refugee’ from his own mind. The melancholic longing for the estranged homeland forms the underlining theme in most of Ghatak’s films but it was in *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960), *Komol Gondhar* (1960) and *Subarnarekha* (1961), commonly known as the ‘Partition Trilogy’ - that the theme was dealt with openly. All these films have East-Bengali refugees as protagonists: cut off from their mother-land, their *bhite-mati*³, Ghatak portrayed how difficult it was for them to not only settle in a land of bullying strangers but also to accept the land as their own. The uprooted mass would not only be rebuked time and again for “polluting” the land but looked down upon as an uneducated bunch of villagers by the sophisticated and ‘educated’ *babus*⁴. The refugees would have to settle in dingy colonies in the suburbs of Calcutta and other such big towns with the educated youths toiling day and night for a square meal. This scenario

has been portrayed brilliantly not only by Ghatak in his films but also by Satyajit Ray in *Jana Aranya* (1971). To bring out the tragedy of the situation more vividly, he employs music and melodrama as essential cinematic tropes. In his films, Ghatak brilliantly juxtaposes different genres of music, from the dignified Indian Classical Music and the urban *Rabindra Sangeet*⁵ to the rural folk songs, to carve out the trauma of a soul striving for recognition in a new land while, at the same time, trying hard to cope with the loss of its ‘motherland’. Although all the three films proved to be milestones in Ghatak’s career (though he was, in his lifetime, more criticized than appreciated for his films) and are instances of great cinematic brilliance, my paper would focus mainly on *Komol Gandhar*, albeit with continuous references to the other films in the Trilogy and try to show how Ghatak uses music and songs to portray the dilemma that goes on in the mind of his protagonists and other important characters estranged from their motherland, which could have otherwise become very difficult to portray using the traditional methods of art-film making. It would also elaborate on Ghatak’s own complex notion regarding the classless society and how, by portraying the women as goddesses, the Marxists defy their own notion of a classless society.

³ Ancestral land and home

⁴ Bengali intelligentsia

⁵ Songs written and composed by Rabindra Nath Tagore

Travelling Performers, IPTA and Ghatak

If Satyajit Ray was drawn to the world of cinema by an utmost passion and love for films, Ritwik Ghatak was drawn towards them for a specific propaganda to reach out to as many people as possible to serve his Marxist political purposes:

We (IPTA) used to give open-air performances where we could rouse and inspire an audience of four or five thousand. But, when I thought of cinema, I thought of the million minds that I could reach at the same time. This is how I came into films, not because I wanted to make films. Tomorrow, if I find a better medium, I'll abandon films... (Ghatak, 56)

Ghatak, as discussed earlier, was deeply shaken by the Partition of India in 1947 and it was precisely this incident, along with the great Bengal famine of 1943 that slowly drew him closer towards Marxism and politics. He became “not (just) a card-holder but an active member, a close sympathizer, a fellow traveller.” (Ghatak, 49).

The IPTA as the cultural wing of the Communist Party of India aimed at raising voice against the political atrocities of the contemporary political powers of the country. Their aim was not only to raise a voice but to bring about radical changes in the society by spreading the awareness far and wide among the rural and urban masses alike. IPTA was more like a cultural movement of those days than a mere association of rebels and was

backed by eminent personalities like Ravi Shankar, Debabrata Biswas, Shambhu Mitra, Utpal Dutt, Salil Chowdhury, Prithviraj Kapoor, Balraj Sahani (both of them being stalwarts in the western wing of the association) and Ritwik Ghatak himself among many. “Songs, ballets and plays were all directed towards this goal and every artist of any significance became part of IPTA.” writes the veteran actor and performer Zohra Sehgal. However, Ghatak’s association with IPTA was not only as a director but as a playwright, actor and a cultural theorist as well. But soon a rift in ideologies demanded a ‘partition’ in the group. His political ideologies, unique in his own terms, led him to be labeled as a “Trotskyite” and ultimately he had to leave the group.

We wanted not to discuss things, but to get things done. Our aim is to create that atmosphere where creation can be organizationally achieved. (Ghatak, 95)

It was his experience as a travelling performer in the IPTA that was documented in *Komol Gandhar*. The metaphor of the itinerant performers with nothing to fix them to the safety of bourgeois ideals of home and property mimics the plight of the migrant refugees who travels all over Bengal in search of a home. The journey of the theatre group mirrors the quest of the refugees to fashion new ideals of shelter and identity. Ghatak uses music as a trope that is intimately linked to the interplay between stasis and mobility in the

film, as it continuously comments on the shifts of spatiality and ushers in the wonders and joys that travelling reveals to the characters. At the same time, it also harnesses the age-old archetype of the travelling performers and musicians whose travels and songs bring them close to people and to the ideal of union. The material and the spiritual are uncannily evoked in the process to create as it were a performative ethics of the union of the political revolutionary ideal and the affective dimensions of an organic linkage to one's homeland.

Komol Gandhar has been accredited by many a critic as a partial autobiography of Ghatak.

The autobiographical form becomes also a means of articulating certain universals. The artist, in portraying an external event, invests in his character something of the unexplained, his own feelings and biases. (Rajadhyakshya, 83)

However, he did not let his ideologies, biases and perplexities rule his films without any sound social grounding: "...a Marxian to the core, he does not bring out tragedies and happy moments without making socially relevant statements and connecting the audience with stark ground realities" (Roy, 12). "The IPTA activists used several models ranging from the realist to the Brechtian to Bengal's living folk and popular form" (Kapur, 250) to bring into the fore-front the issues they wanted to deal with. With a loud-speaker

announcing the end of the first act of a play about partition and refugee, the film opens up directly to the theme of 'partition' and homelessness, and the first 'stage' dialogue by one of the characters resonate Ghatak's own dilemma: "Why should I move away from home, my beautiful home, my bountiful river Padma?" The film, about a segregated theatre group forming an alliance once again for a grand performance and its eventual failure, forms a microcosm of the partitioned Bengal. Once the barrier has arisen, there can never be solidarity and peace; even the question of working together for mutual benefit goes out of question. However, this inability to work together was not due to lack of resources or rehearsals but due to the callous attitude of some of the main members: personal grudges and self-satisfaction had now become much more important than a successful performance to a performer.

Anasuya and Bhriгу, the protagonists, played by Supriya Chowdhury and Abinash Bannerjee respectively, represent the Bengali youth of the time who had the zeal and courage to do something rebellious guided by their passion for their homeland and Nation. Both of them can be seen as parts of Ghatak himself. Anasuya sees in Bhriгу a revolutionary which her mother had searched for in the youth of Bengal: a person who could change the fate of Bengal. Both of them suffer from an agony of never again being able to return to their roots,

their home. In one of the scenes, Ghatak takes us to the India-East Pakistan border: a utopic nowhere between *epar padma*, *opar padma*. In one such sequence we find Anasuya and Bhriгу entwined in their nostalgia for their lost home: "...my ancestral home lies just on the other side of this river...so close yet I will never be able to return. That's a foreign land." (Translation mine). The nostalgic agony etched in these simple lines is unparalleled to any emotional outburst in any contemporary films. The word *foreign* is of utmost significance here for it at once makes something familiar and own, stark unknown and forever distant. The scene is very important for it brings to the forefront the diasporic nature in Ghatak. The famous tracking shot of a train coming to a halt in the bank of *Padma* subtly but brilliantly portrays the permanent halt that the cultural space of Bengal has suffered due to the political turmoil and the eventual partition. The scene along with the *Bhatiyali*⁶ song *epar padma*, *opar padma* presents before us not only a deep longing for the long lost homeland in the characters but also prepares the audience for a film steeped in epic melodrama, presenting the effects of partition not only at a socio-cultural level but also in a deep, personal level.

East Pakistan, has been portrayed in Ghatak's films as an idyllic place breeding pre-

lapsarian innocence and purity. On the other hand, Calcutta has been time and again portrayed as a dumping ground of debris. Calcutta, to Ghatak, is a place which he loved to hate and hated to love. If East Pakistan is a portrayed in the shadow of the Emile Bronte's Yorkshire moors, vibrant and innocent, then Calcutta resembles Dickens' London, a dark world of apocalyptic stupor. A hint of this we get in one of the first dialogues of *Komol Gandhar*, where Bhriгу identifies Calcutta as a dingy, claustrophobic place: "The sky is so smoky here....where do I look at? Everything seems smoky and vague." (Translation mine).

The Music of Exile and Homelessness

Being in Calcutta was nothing short of an exile to Ghatak. Calcutta, though his 'home' for most of his life, has always been a step-mother to him, at least from his point of view. To portray this detachment, Ghatak has used music and melodrama as essential cinematic tropes in his films. Art house cinema, till then, had restrained itself from the use of much music, let alone songs. But Ghatak, a stalwart in the Indian New Wave Cinema, on the contrary, not only has used music quite liberally in his films, but also made *Komol Gandhar* into a musical of sorts:

The friends of mine who are into making parallel films almost despise the use of songs in films and do not really put songs in their films. But I do, and I will continue

⁶ Folk song generally sung by the rural boatmen

doing so if they help the story to succeed.
(Sengupta, 89) (Translation mine)

Ghatak uses music, and their lyrics, to tell his tales with a strong element of melodrama, quite boldly, inviting the criticism of contemporary film lovers. Melodrama as a genre of the masses is unmade by the hermeneutics of a political revolution and class struggle in his films, thereby affecting the role of music which was often used to accentuate melodramatic elements. Music is one of the principal dialectical elements of his films. It at once interrupts and strengthens the audience's relation with the film in a strange and paradoxical feat that goes beyond the modernist strategy of self-reflexivity in so far as it reflects the historical disjunctions and political incommensurability of a divided land. In the semeiotics of film-language, the camera acts as the sign-maker while the actors are mere participants in the signification: the camera controls the external space while the internal space of emotions is controlled by the actors. In fact, the Stanislavsky School believes in the total dissolution of the actor into the character. It is perhaps to bridge this gap between the audience and the characters that Ghatak extensively uses songs in his films. He uses songs to relive his characters rather than to create sound-effects in his films. It is precisely with this intention that Ghatak uses both Classical *Sangeet* and Rabindra *Sangeet* together in his films, while, with the use of folk

songs, he is able to bind his points of view within a definite spatio-temporal order.

Ghatak's films cannot be classified as musicals for the simple reason that they do not deal with music in general. As it has been pointed out, music and songs are put in by him to help the narratives. But it would not be too wrong to classify *Komol Gandhar* as a musical since he uses "conceptual parallels of music in his narrative" (Roy, 8) All the songs in the film not only portray the innate trauma of the protagonists or other characters or give vent to the thoughts of the characters, but in the larger arena, remind us constantly of the theme of homelessness and exile.

While watching the film, a question may arise in the viewer's mind regarding the unique title of the film which does not act as a direct and easy metaphor to the narrative. In fact all the other films in the trilogy bear a title which not only can be easily translated into other languages but which even non-Bengali people can understand and relate to: *Meghe Dhaka Tara* which is translated as "The Cloud-capped Star" and *Subarnarekha* which when translated becomes "The Golden Line". Many non-Bengali viewers might point the latter having a complex title, but once the notion of it being the name of a river gets clear, the reason behind its usage becomes quite simple too. But things don't work quite right when *Komol Gandhar* is the case. Literally translated, it becomes "E-flat minor" which becomes quite a

task for a non-music person to deal with.

However, when liberally translated, it becomes “Melancholic soft note on a high scale”. The film’s association of the drudgery of the human pathos with music becomes at once clear with a sneak-peak into the meaning of title of the film. But the association does not end here. A song with this *raga* is quite common in *Hindustani* Classical music but Ghatak never believed in it being a cliché. Instead, he, along with his musician-friend Hemanga Biswas, attuned this form of music to earthy folk songs. The song *Epar Padma Opar Padma* is a case in point.

It’s easy for Ustad Bahadur Khan to use classical songs having “komol gandhar” in the raga but it’s not at all easy to insert “komol gandhar” in folk songs. There is a kind of fishermen folk song prevalent in the border areas of Tripura and Sylhet where the low tones in music touch upon “komol gandhar”, thereby creating amazing music. (Biswas, 144) (translation mine)

The song *Epar Padma Opar Padma* is one of the most important songs in the film. This song was penned down by Ghatak himself while it was sung by Hemanga Biswas, who also gave music to this piece. This song focuses our attention on a diasporic person’s vision of his or her own motherland: Instead of stabilizing the identity over one land, he or she constantly affirms his/her longing for the lost land while staying put in the ‘foreign land’. Here Ghatak takes us to a utopic land, *Jagna’r chawr* (the beach of Jagna), an absolute

nowhere between East and West Bengal, a place which Ghatak or rather every contemporary *Bangal* would relate to. It forms the undivided, unclaimed terrain of pre-partitioned Bangladesh where everybody would live together as one. It constantly reminds them that the ‘home’ they are craving for is actually a foreign land now. All of four lines, this song is crucial in understanding the nostalgia that builds up a strong melancholic note in the minds and hearts of the protagonists.

Ghatak restrains himself from using similar kind of songs to depict the same situation. He uses numerous folk songs in this film to depict the same situation of homelessness and exile but in myriad ways. The song *Aam'er tolay jhumur* can be the perfect example. It is an East-Bengali marriage folk song where the tone is not one of joy, but of separation: the separation of the bride from mother and her new journey into the unknown. Interestingly, Ghatak uses this song while showing the title-card: it acts as a prologue to *Komol Gandhar*. Against the black and white background suggestive of a conflagration, this melancholic song, sung in an East-Bengal dialect, prepares the attentive audience for a film enclosed in the world of refugees who try hard to cope in a divided world of absurdity. In fact all the folk songs that have been used in film work on a psychological level: they work together as a cluster to portray the inner trauma

of the refugees in a new land, their utter helplessness and nostalgia, entwined in melodrama, when they come across something of their homeland. In sharp contrast, however, are the *adhunik*⁷ songs which have been used by Ghatak as symbols of defiance towards the partition of Bengal and the adherence to the system of divide and rule propounded decades ago by the British.

As said earlier, *Komol Gandhar* presents before us a microcosm of the partitioned India. Since his days as a student of University of Calcutta, Ghatak became a member of the communist party of India and worked against the atrocities of the then Government. A reflection of this is found in all his major works. Songs like “heiiyo ho” and “Esho mukto koro” (Come and Open up) express the director’s ardent appeal to the people to rise against the ill workings of the political system. Ghatak uses “heiiyo ho” thrice in the narrative, though under differing circumstances. Unlike other directors who would change the tone of the song from a “happy” one to a “sad song” to suit his/her purpose, Ghatak prefers to keep the melody and tone alike in all the circumstances. The revolutionary songs instill a deep positive energy to work against all odds in the characters. Against the background of the *Padma*⁸, when Bhriгу’s nostalgic cries of his native land becoming politically alien seems to

overpower the viewers’ senses, this energetic song cuts us away from the melodramatic ‘reality’ and revitalizes us with a positive energy and enthusiasm. It is also put in the sequence where the two groups converge to produce a play together. Ghatak believed that in order to bring radical changes in the society, people must come and work together as a unit. This newfound unity in the film is something that is celebrated through this song. The way Jaya elevates herself in a chair and sings the song with energetic passion almost becomes a replica of Ghatak screaming out his propaganda to the viewers. Although ‘unity against odds’ seems to be the main agenda behind the usage of this song, the way Ghatak has used it to portray different circumstances in the narrative is really commendable.

Ghatak was sternly against the theory of “Arts for Arts Sake”. For him, every mode of art must have a specific purpose behind it. Ghatak’s was a melancholic mind which never really could cope with the Partition. This nostalgia for the lost mother land turned into an obsession with him. It is this obsession which can be sensed in the song “Come and Liberate” (*Esho Mukto Koro*). A translation of this song would come handy in discussing the song:

*Come and open up,
open up this door of the Dark
Come artist, Come creator
Come the fallen traitor
Liberate, liberate yourself
from the abyss of the past
(translation mine)*

⁷ Modern

⁸ A river in East-Pakistan, now Bangladesh

The vigor and enthusiasm in the lyrics can be even traced in the expressions of the characters who want to just free themselves from the shackles of a divided existence and find freedom. Somewhere deep down perhaps he believed that things could really be transformed, if not by bourgeoisie and politicians, then by the artists. In fact, Ghatak in his real life too followed the same policy, and it was for this reason that he had joined the IPTA and later taken up films as a career choice. In fact, he gave up his job as the principal of FTII, Pune for the sole reason that it was not suiting his purpose of spreading the ‘awareness’ far and wide.

This was the world that was shattered by the War, the Famine, and when Congress and the Muslim League brought disaster to the country and tore it into two to snatch for it a fragmented independence. Communal riots engulfed the country... What I have found most urgent is to present to the public eye the crumbling appearance of a divided Bengal to awaken the Bengalis to an awareness of their state and a concern for their past and future. (Ghatak, 34)

To Ghatak, a sense of solidarity was still present in Bengal which no partition or any other similar artificial calamity could sever thereby bringing a positive insight into both the personal and national dimensions of homelessness: “Exile and homelessness can teach us the joy of living internally as well as externally without boundaries and without borders.” (Ghatak, 37). In fact, Ghatak has the

rare fluidity of being able to slip through all boundaries and partitions, made lucid with every sequence, dialogue and music in the films. It is specifically for this reason perhaps that he introduces *Rabindra Sangeet* in his films. Tagore, to the Bengalis, embodies the unity and solidarity of Bengal. In this film too *Rabindra Sangeet* helps a great deal in understanding Ghatak’s complex mind. The first song used in this context is *Akashbhora* (*Skyfull*) sung in the peaceful hilly terrain of Kurseong. The natural landscape is of much significance, for this area too acts as a “natural” boundary between India and East-Pakistan. Acting as a stark contrast to the claustrophobic closeted rooms of Calcutta, Kurseong represents the freedom of the soul: liberty from the daily drudgery of cacophonous city-life and hence, from the clutches of the materialistic political affairs of the bourgeoisie. It is in fact the only song which is sung with passion, sans the revolutionary zeal or melancholic tone. The way Rishi smiles, jumps, spreads out his hands, as if trying to embrace the mountains, makes us, for the time being, forget about the melancholic “e-flat” that the film is all about. For a moment, all the boundaries and partitions get dissolved and disillusioned; freedom of the soul takes the centre stage here:

*I've stepped on the grass
To the woods while I went
My mind enchanted by the flowers' scent
A joyful melody is spread* (Roy, 13)

This song in accordance with the performance and natural landscape conveys to us the “rhythm of Bengal” (Rishi says to Bhrigu) which no artificial boundary can erase.

Akashbhora is also remembered by Anasuya as her revolutionary mother’s favourite song. This information is co-ordinated with the next sequence of a claustrophobic room in an urban setting. The vertical pan-shot of the whole dingy urban set-up highlights binaries of entrapment and freedom more vividly. In fact, the setting of the whole film vacillates constantly between the idealized rural and monstrous urban areas, thereby highlighting the need to escape and be free. It is to portray this that the claustrophobic stage at the New Empire Theatre where the actors are unable to give a unified performance is pitted against the make-shift stage at a village where the actors give one of their best performances.

This gap between the urban and rural lives, however, is bridged in this film through the union of Bhrigu and Anasuya. In *Anasuya*, the binaries of both the rural and urban lives get dissolved. She has been a victim of partition, but at the same time, she is very pragmatic and modern. Perhaps Ghatak used her as a symbol of Bengal which was indeed very common an artistic trope in those days, both within the nationalistic discourse and beyond it. Ghatak has even explained it in his own terms as:

The idea of this Great Mother image...with both its benevolent and terrible aspects has been in our civilization since antiquity...The Great Mother image in its duality exists in every fibre of our being. (Ghatak, 72).

The duality which Ghatak talks about has been present in *Anasuya* too. In the sequence at Khoai, Anasuya tells Bhrigu that she is called by the name “Miranda” by her fiancé. And, like any innocent and conventional lady she aspires to leave India and settle with her “Ferdinand” in France. However, the duality of her being gets highlighted almost at the next moment when the face of *Kali*, the symbol of power and meta-time *Kaal*, is pitted against hers. Bhrigu, on the other hand, has been referred by many critics as being a shadow of Ghatak himself; like Ghatak, Bhrigu toils hard to accept Partition, but is never quite able to do so, and like Ghatak, believes that it is only through art and culture that the tradition of Bengal can be preserved. With the union of Bhrigu and Anasuya, Ghatak perhaps reaches for the best possible ending to the film. Their union unites the two segregated theatre groups; and it shouts out loud the primary wish of Ghatak- the reunion of two parts of Bengal. The prime melody behind all the songs in this film is that of union - a union of two souls, of two segregated theatre groups, of two Bengals: “In order for the prosperity of the people, the two Bengals must meet. This is the only

statement that I had tried to make through *Komol Gondhar*.” (Ghatak, 76)

Marxism, Mother Goddess and After

All the films that Ghatak made in his lifetime have been looked upon as forming a continuum of which *Jukti, takko ar Goppo* (1977) is the apotheosis. It is a film where all the ideologies, cultural dilemmas and socio-political beliefs which perplexed Ghatak during his evolution as an educated Bengali *bhadralok* get pitted against each other and totally inverted.

As mentioned previously, Ghatak’s use of music and melodrama was essentially a trope to highlight his theme of partition and homelessness. Unlike other main-stream film-songs, his songs do not break the narrative to provide relief and entertainment. Rather, his music and songs speak continuously, at a meta-narrative level, of all the tensions, inner-conflicts and turmoil that disrupt the lives of the characters. It also keeps commenting on the socio-political standing of contemporary Bengal. Issues related to the complex notions of the nation-state, the working premise of the Bengali intelligentsia, the complex trope of *Kali*, all of which had been previously problematized in his films through music, melodrama and peculiar camera-angles, get peculiarly juxtaposed and synthesized in his penultimate film. He showed that the unification of two Bengals is nothing but a

dream on his part and that the political leaders would do nothing to bring the two segregated parts together. Hence, it is only through a steady and cordial cultural relationship that the rift can be bridged to some extent. For this, he believed, the youth must be the flag bearers.

In his films, Ghatak unleashes certain modes of questionings and expectations that defy a comfortable answer. A glimpse of this can be seen in *Komol Gandhar* too. From the focus on the romantic ideals of the young aspiring workers of *Komal Gandhar*, his last film charts a shift to the marginalized domain of the *Santhals*⁹, the subalterns whose culture and specific historicity has bypassed the politico-cultural ethics of the self-conscious *bhadralok*¹⁰ middle class Bengalis of whom Neelkantha is an epitome. Bhriku and Anasuya come from educated families, both are well aware of the contemporary socio-political situation of the country and both are striving to work for the socio-cultural development of Bengal. In other words, they form a part of the so-called Bengali intelligentsia. What Ritwik wanted us to focus our attention on is the fact how this particular group of people, in striving for a classless society, formed a class of their own. The attempts are put forward through his use of songs and background music. The numerous folk songs crisscrossing the narrative continuously, breaking the flow of

⁹ Tribals

¹⁰ Educated Bengali middle class intelligentsia

‘harmonious’ dialogues, and the continuous tin-drums of the factory chores breaking through the ‘solemn’ rehearsals of the theatre group highlight the urge of the director to transgress the enigma of the Bengali intelligentsia. The juxtaposition of the sophisticated and the rustic, continuously through scenes, dialogues and music go a long way to establish this motive of the director. However, these remained but only attempts on his part, for, in the end- we see- through the union of Bhriгу and Anasuya, the class maintaining its superior hold over others. Also, although there are about fourteen songs in the film, the only two songs which are sung by the individual characters are Rabindra Sangeet- the preference of educated Bengalis. Hence, we have got a Ghatak who is consistently being tortured within his self to find an answer to all the prevalent questions related to politics, communism, its function in the society and so forth. But never for once is he able to portray this dilemma within till his last film *Jukti, Takko ar Goppo*. In this autobiographical film, Ghatak not only portrays but delves deep into his own psyche through the protagonist Neelkantha (played by Ghatak himself), a failed Bengali intelligentsia. In the famous low-angle panoramic shot of the *Oraon*¹¹ dancers, he seeks to explore those aboriginal aspects of society which the educated people

shy away from, and in doing so, for the first time, he is able to establish the way educated communist leaders form a class of their own.

The idea of a nation-state has been problematized by Ghatak in all his films, especially in the partition trilogy. The narrative in his films works implicitly on the visual level of iconisation and on the archetypal overtures of feminine characterizations as ‘cultural spaces’. A face signifying motherland has been prevalent in the nationalist discourse since ages but Ghatak makes it increasingly complex by linking it to the politico-historical dimensions of an avowed Marxist claims to subjectivity. The cult of Mother-Goddess is an intrinsic part of popular religion of Bengal which, over the years, has turned into a secular cultural symbol. This image of the “Mother-Goddess” was highly romanticized during the days of anti-colonial nationalism when it came to symbolize the Motherland, race, language, nation, etc: hence, the idea of *Bharat-Mata*. However, Ghatak’s use of the discourse deviates radically from the nationalist use: the images invest the narratives with an allegorical charge where the story of the Mother becomes the story of the Land.

In the partition trilogy, the female characters are often rooted within a quotidian struggle, never heroic in the usual sense, but rather an embodiment of the Mother as a domestic, loved entity, having more of a matriarchal and devotional warmth than the

¹¹ A specific tribe of Eastern India

emphatic patriarchal, Brahminical grandeur. Looked at from this point of view, Ghatak's 'heroines' do belong to the traditional space relegated to them by the authoritarian Bengali middle class intelligentsia. Born on *Jagadhatri Puja*, Nita is compared to Goddess *Uma* in the film *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, a goddess who stands for the "exemplary daughter" in Bengali culture. She is indeed the pillar of the family, toiling and laboring hard for all the whims and fancies of her kin. The opening shot presents the invocation of the Mother through Shankar's recitation of Raga Hangsheshwari, a recital sung in praise of the benevolent Mother. However, the traumatic cries of Nita screaming out loud to the claustrophobic hills "Brother, I want to live" (*Dada ami baachte chai*) at once brings her back to being a simple woman, wanting to live and breathe totally subverting the analogy of being a Goddess. Similarly, although Anasuya in *Komol Gandhar* has been portrayed as an educated, self-made woman, rather a rebel, she too in the end 'succumbs' to the cliché of marriage. What Ghatak wants to portray is that no matter how much the women, and hence the "common men", claims to be free and equal to the educated middle class intelligentsia, a barrier is always present which will force them to stay in the periphery. Thus, the trope of Mother Goddess focuses the attention of the viewers on reification of the feminine by the educated Bengali intelligentsia, thereby inverting the whole

political-historical dimensions of an avowed Marxist claim to subjectivity. However, the heterogeneous fusion of Mother Goddess and Marxism in *Jukti Takko ar Gappo*, thus, unleashes a heat that buckles the narrative conventions of his earlier films.

Although Ghatak joined the Communist Party of India at a very young age, due to the above stated reasons, he grew more and more dissatisfied with himself as a party-worker, as an activist and an artist. He felt the party was more infested with selfish needs than with the welfare of the society as a whole. His beliefs and his present dissatisfaction regarding the society has been articulated by him in his thesis *On Cultural Front*, where in the very first chapter, quoting Lenin and Engels, he puts forth his ideal party working-line: "The basic subjective attitude, considered in its ideal condition, is the determination of all communists to establish, through different revolutionary levels, a stage of classless society on earth where classes and their state machines and their parties will wither away." (Ghatak, 26). Ghatak strived to attain this subjectivity, which, in spite of being the major criterion of Marxist communism, was still a distant dream.

Conclusion

Ritwik Ghatak started making films because the medium had the capacity to reach out to a maximum number of people at a given time

His mission was to portray his own vision of a reunited classless Bengal in his films, and it is to etch out his thoughts more clearly that music and their lyrics have been used in his films in profusion.

Bangladesh remains to him a utopian land which could just be dreamt of, but never achieved. In romanticizing about the long lost motherland, he makes a villain out of Calcutta or other urban settings. Is Calcutta only about the dark, smoky clouds and hollow, claustrophobic interiors? Are there no hopes and aspirations associated with Calcutta or is Bangladesh only about pre-lapsarian innocence and freedom? These are a few questions which re-iterate in the mind of the viewers while watching any Ghatak film. These questions in turn give rise to another set of even more perplexing questions regarding Ghatak's complex vision of the nation-state and the Marxism. However, there seems to be a refusal

to give in to pessimism even in the midst of abject failure, as Neelkantha, the protagonist of *Jukti, Takko ar Goppo* sees in the young revolutionary youth a harbinger of a deferred revolution. "Everything is burning. The universe is burning; and I am burning", final words of Neelkantha, Ghatak's alter ego in *Jukti*, is not a grand gesture but something that turns on itself as a sign of the times that is undergoing painful regeneration. Here the contradiction of longing for a freedom of the people in a repressive state also surfaces in a poignant way. This paper was an attempt to show how the music and their lyrics in Ghatak's films, especially in *Komol Gandhar*, problematizes the concept of nation-state, Mother land and the Marxist avowals to subjectivity, while, at the same time, shouting out loud Ghatak's propagandist theme of unification of the two Bengals, thus establishing a harmonious "rhythm of Bengal" (Roy, 13). 🇮🇳

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