



cinema Ghatak, Ray, Tagore: An Exchange between Shampa Banerjee and Jacob Levich

While the films of Satyajit Ray are enjoying renewed attention throughout the world, Ritwik Ghatak (1925-1976) - Ray's contemporary, fellow Bengali, and principal rival - is all but forgotten outside Indian academic circles.

Ray's greatness is an article of faith among cultural gatekeepers everywhere. For all but a passionate few, Ghatak has always been harder to swallow. His overt Marxism, stylistic daring, and thoroughgoing contempt for bourgeois taste and morality have rendered his work unpalatable to international distributors - and hence invisible to Western audiences, particularly in the U.S.

Last year, Americans who had known Ghatak only as a footnote to the standard surveys of world cinema had a rare opportunity to encounter his films firsthand. In a special sidebar to the New York Film Festival, all eight of Ghatak's remarkable features were screened together, for what may have been the first time outside India. The reception was distinctly mixed, but one thing was clear: twenty years after his death, the filmmaker's singular ability to shock, inspire, and provoke has not faded. The often heated debates that could be heard outside Manhattan's Walter Reade Theater last fall

Subject: Ghatak
Date: Monday, 14 Oct 96
From: "Jacob Levich"
To: "shampa"

I've just now seen all eight Ghatak features - an overwhelming experience. In particular, and to my surprise, I was blown away by A River Named Titash.

I'm relatively ignorant about Bengal - I know something about its history, but nothing about the language and very little about the culture, except insofar as the Bengali influence is felt throughout the "all-India" cultural scene. I'm guessing this is one of those films that reward knowledge of the specific cultural milieu. Even so, I thought it was a masterpiece, really one of the greatest films I've seen. At any rate, it must be the most visually gorgeous movie I have ever had the pleasure of viewing.

Pardon the gushing. I'm curious about the film's reputation in India/Bangladesh. It gets little attention in your books, possibly because it was "lost" or unavailable for screening at the time you wrote. Does it have a following among Indian cinephiles? I'm told Kumar Shahani wrote an illuminating essay about it, and I'm going to try to dig that up.

Subject: Re: Ghatak
Date: Mon, 14 Oct 96
From: shampa
To: "Jacob Levich"

My book has little about Titash because I had only seen an uncut fragment of the film. I never managed to see all of it as far as I remember, and there was all this controversy about the version being shown. Apparently, the Bangladeshis had re-edited and shortened the film considerably before release and the original footage was much, much longer. And now we have two versions as a result.

I'm not so sure that your feelings about the need to know Bengali culture are entirely valid. We always miss out on those exquisite, internalized cultural points of reference whenever we see a great foreign film or read a translation of a great foreign novel. But we don't find it difficult to recognize greatness despite our obvious disadvantage with a strange culture.

With Ghatak, there is a genuine problem. I remembered him when I saw a whole series of Pasolini. High-pitched, maudlin, erratic, rebellious, and on many occasions, absolutely overwhelming. Ghatak always leaves me feeling uncomfortable. Was he really a genius, or did we imagine him that way?

Meghe Dhaka Tara, for example, seems to me a perfect example of transforming crass melodrama with the crudest of coincidences thrown in, into great cinema. My favorite is Subarnarekha, and yes, there may be cultural nuances there you are missing. But it is still mindblowing in its starkness, beauty, and relentless cynicism. But Ghatak is extremely erratic, and indulges himself often by going on and on with a favorite conceit in all his other films, his first film [Nagarik] being his most unbearable.

Kumar Shahani has been a Ritwik fan all his life, and, I'm sure, has written many abstruse treatises. I think Kumar is a gentle, kind, wonderful person and an unusual filmmaker and theorist. But I do not understand his writings. There should be some equally tough ones by Mani Kaul around somewhere too. If you can track them and make sense of them, please send me simple English translations. I would be really, quite genuinely interested.

Subject: Re: Ghatak
Date: Tuesday, 15 Oct 96
From: "Jake"
To: "shampa"

I'm beginning to think the world could be divided into Ray people and Ghatak people. (A world composed of fans of Bengali art cinema - now that's an intriguing notion!) Not that one can't love both - I do - but in general they seem to represent polar approaches to

art: on the one hand, well-wrought, tasteful, "psychological" and "universal" (in much the same sense as 19th-century novels), politically and aesthetically centrist; on the other, epic, shapeless, ragged, intensely personal, politically and aesthetically radical. It's a little like Godard vs. Truffaut.

I'm actually drawn to the features of Ghatak's cinema that trouble a lot of his critics. I love the feeling of work-in-progress as opposed to perfectly wrought art object, the sense of passionate engagement with a lively and eccentric mind, the atmosphere of inquiry and experimentation. I'm not in the least troubled by the melodramatic aspect of Subarnarekha and parts of his other films - historically, I think, melodrama is the original and most persistently viable art form; "well-made" psychological dramas are a relatively recent (post-capitalist?) innovation. One of the things I most appreciate about Ghatak is the cleverness with which he roots Brechtian aesthetic notions in the most ancient (and Indian) traditions - as in Komal Gandhar, where the alienation effects in Shakuntala mesh perfectly with the Brechtian aspirations of the IPTA troupe.

It's interesting that Pasolini reminded you of Ghatak. I can see the similarities, but Pasolini has always turned me right off. I suppose it's his obsession with the grossest aspects of corporeality and his desire to shock for its own sake. Ghatak, by contrast, was almost prudish about overt sexuality - I've read some of his condemnations of the "pornographic" tendencies of Indian and Hollywood commercial cinema. Perhaps as a result, there is a submerged but extremely powerful eroticism in his films. Especially Titash - e.g., the wedding-night sequence, whose brute, earthy sensuality can be contrasted with the poignant wedding night in The World of Apu.

I don't want to overstress my feelings of ignorance about Things Bengali - actually, I know enough about both partitions (and about the various sell-outs and compromises between Congress and the Muslim League that so infuriated Ghatak) to comprehend a lot of what's going on in, say, Subarnarekha. It's more that I feel a bit left out of moments like the Rabindrasangeet sequence in Meghe Dhaka Tara. The audience at the NYFF screening was full of Bengalis, and you could sense the special communal feeling that the moment inspired. I sometimes get the feeling that Tagore is the implicit foundation of every 20th-century Bengali art work (Ghatak said he couldn't speak without Tagore) and that there are all sorts of things involving Tagore that the filmmaker can leave unstated because he knows the Bengali viewer will automatically feel them.

Subject: ghatak again
Date: Tue, 15 Oct 96
From: shampa
To: "Jacob Levich"

The world, at least in Calcutta, was divided into Ray people and Ghatak people when I was young. Even my family was divided that way. I have a rebellious uncle who belonged to the Ghatak faction, even though he was half in love with my mother, who has always been a Ray person.

I think the reasons why Pasolini turns you off are exactly the reasons why Ghatak is found unpalatable by some critics. Sex may have been Pasolini's obsession; in its place Ghatak has an immense store of sensuality, despite his opinions on pornography. Consider Subarnarekha and how much of a moral cliff-hanger it is, when you take a close look at the relationship between the older brother and the young and beautiful sister. It isn't only submerged eroticism, but forbidden and outrageously crude desires that he is experimenting with here. And that's one of the things he has in common with Pasolini, a positive lust for shock, a craving for the dangerous and the unimaginable.

I'm glad that the Bengalis who were watching Meghe Dhaka Tara responded

the way they did to that song. I know the one you mean, "Je rate mor duarguli bhango jhare." When I saw the film after growing up a bit, I remember being completely shattered by that song. (I knew the song very well, but had never felt its impact the same way.) When I was a child, after the first Communist government in the state of Kerala fell, they kept playing this song on the radio, and everyone laughed and said the then Congress government of West Bengal was doing it deliberately, mocking the Communists.

After a gap of some years, I encountered it again in the film, and for days kept going around in a daze, singing the lines and crying. (That was forgivable, because I had just been dragged away from Calcutta against my wishes to Bombay where my father had a new job, and I was nineteen, and friendless. But all that is beside the point.)

And yes, Tagore. For a Bengali, at least until my generation, Tagore is the guiding light. We grew up breathing Tagore, and his genius has dominated the Bengali psyche. We all learned Rabindrasangeet, whether we could sing or no. And at least some of us felt overwhelmed by the fact that he seemed to have verbalized, in a way none of us could ever hope to match, all feelings and emotions that a human being could possibly experience. It could be pretty oppressive: to remember a line of a song by him every time an emotion hit you!

Subject: Re: ghatak again
Date: Wednesday, 16 Oct 96
From: "Jacob Levich"
To: "shampa"

About Tagore - In Ghatak's case, I guess I detect a little Anxiety of Influence - a real ambivalence on the younger artist's part toward the elder, like that between father and son in a Freudian scheme. It's certainly reflected in Ghatak's writings and interviews, especially the famous one in which he speaks of Tagore as the "performing monkey" of subcontinental literature. There's love and resentment in equal measure. (I'm reminded of a point in Ajjaz Ahmad's book In Theory, where he points out that it's all very well to introduce Tagore into the curriculum of the Western University as a counter-hegemonic measure, but it has to be kept in mind that, in an Indian context, Tagore is hegemonic.)

In Ray's case, on the other hand, I don't detect any tension where Tagore's influence is concerned. Ray seems comfortably to embrace Tagore as the birthright of a Bengali Brahmin intellectual, to be used as and where he sees fit.

I'm curious about Ray's politics - or seeming lack thereof. In his essays, he quite frankly puts himself "above" political partisanship. His movies seem uneasy with the idea of political commitment - it's something to be dealt with from a distance (ideally of a century or so), and to be explained as a matter of individual psychology rather than social or economic circumstances.

I'm also curious what Ghatak did to get booted out of the Party. An issue of artistic freedom? It can't have been for lack of commitment - I'd argue for Ghatak's work as the most effective reconciliation of individual brilliance with Marxist worldview that I've ever encountered. Even in something as obscure and dreamlike as Titash the economic underpinnings of the story are always clear - which is, if anything, the glue that holds an otherwise rickety narrative framework together.

Subject: Brahman
Date: Thu, 17 Oct 96
From: shampa
To: "Jacob Levich"

Tagore, in life and in death, was and is so overpowering a presence in Bengali lives, that Ghatak's response is not a surprise. He was a born iconoclast and his comments on Tagore are really the finest tribute he could pay. I suppose it was a most reluctant surrender, but sur-

render it was.

Ray had no problems with Tagore because he belonged to the same milieu. Ghatak himself came from a sprawling, eccentric, and talented Hindu household in East Bengal, where everybody felt everything passionately, and went their different erratic ways (it's quite a family, really). Tagore, on the other hand, was real upper-class. They were of a high caste, but Tagore's father, Devendranath, who did not inherit his progenitor's business sense, founded the Brahma Samaj as a reaction against Hindu orthodoxy. Ray's grandfather and father were active members of the Brahma Samaj. They were, as you know, extremely talented themselves, and they passed on to Ray not only the talent, but also the BRAHMO heritage of a strict code of behavior, and perhaps a lack of passion as well.

Tagore, despite his occasional flashes of anger with British rule, was essentially a non-violent moderate. He had an obvious loathing for terrorism as a means of ridding the country of the British, even though many of his stories made his sympathy for the nationalist movement quite clear. It was as if he could only view the current political conundrum as an artist and philosopher, not as a political being.

The standpoint suited Ray, who had somehow managed to keep himself aloof from the political radicalism of his contemporaries and even some of his friends. In an ideal State, he would have been the pure artist. As the world around him was far from ideal, his involvement with much of the changing reality remained at best shaky. He knew very little of the Naxalite movement, for example, even though he tried his hand at it with Pratidwandi. In fact that is what I find disappointing in the later Ray. He was perfect with a previous time. Even in his last film, his main argument against "civilization" does not have much meat. It only establishes his anger.

Ghatak, on the other hand, was totally a political being, and deeply hurt by the changing face of left politics. He couldn't ever extricate himself from the refugee, the underdog, the exploited, and went maudlin about them on occasions.

Your comment about Titash's plot was interesting, since it was based on a long novel written by Adwaita Malla Barman, a very accomplished and much admired writer. I suspect it was what Ghatak left of the plot that you saw. But then any comparison between the novel and the film would be quite irrelevant anyway.

Subject: Re: Brahman
Date: Monday, 19 Oct 96
From: "Jacob Levich"
To: "shampa"

You're of course absolutely right that the novel's narrative approach and Ghatak's rendering of it need have no connection. The meandering quality of the film is deliberate, I'm sure. (I believe the word "meandering" comes from a twisty Greek river, and the river is of course the overarching metaphor and principle of the entire film.)

The narrative attack is a real departure for Ghatak. Earlier, he'd used an epic structure that he found it easy to harmonize with both Brecht and melodrama - for instance, the way the intentions and nature of characters are "announced" in classical epics through epithet, in melodrama through portentous music and similar effects, in Brecht through didactic songs and other kinds of estrangement effects, in Ghatak through variations on each of these conventions. In Titash, all conventions informing the audience that characters or events are significant are deliberately dispensed with. As in life, when you encounter someone in Titash you have no notion whether they're to be important later on or whether they're just part of the scene.

Not that Titash in any way represents a reversion to "well-made" narrative. It's closer to anti-narrative, and it's really quite unique. And I'd have to see the film a few more times to really

discern what's going on. Some of the things Ghatak was up to toward the end of his career were so extraordinary that you really get furious at him for drinking himself to death so early.

Thinking about Ray vs. Ghatak, I remembered a scene in The Runaway. Superficially, it's the most Ray-like of Ghatak's films; I needn't summarize the similarities to the Apu trilogy. But there's a moment that throws the whole film, and Ray's films, into a radically new perspective. The boy is seen walking by the river with his new friend, a poor refugee. It's "picturesque" and "exotic" as all hell, of course. Then a tall man in a suit enters the frame at right. He's only seen from behind, but you can tell from the position of his arms that he's filming the scene with a portable camera. You hear his Very American voice exclaiming, "Quite a study, honey!"

This floored me. I was made to think, all of a sudden, about the commodification of Indian "exoticism" for international audiences. About my own complicity in this process as a consumer of Oriental images. About the Indian art-house filmmaker's uncomfortable position vis-à-vis the international audience - how he's expected to package a culture and a nation and a history in a form attractive to European and American cultural gatekeepers.

Perhaps what I most admire about Ghatak is this ongoing self-criticism, his insistence on seeing himself not as a "pure artist" but as a participant in the worldwide making and marketing of culture and, as such, as a key (and necessarily responsible) mediator between Third and First Worlds.

You'd never have a moment like this in a Ray film. Mostly, it's because his kind of art has to be seamless if it's to be anything at all. But it's also because Ray became the packager of Indian life, culture, and politics for the world (at a time when "the world" still gave a damn about art cinema.) And I can't imagine him ever really looking at himself in this role.

Subject: Ray and Ghatak
Date: Wed, 13 Nov 96
From: shampa
To: "Jacob Levich"

Meander: appellative use of a winding river in Phrygia.

I have a sneaking suspicion that Ghatak's "anti-narrative," as you call it, is just some more self-indulgence on his part. He really was a selfish old sod, or he wouldn't have drunk himself to death. Destroying the narrative was his way of telling everybody to go to hell and that he couldn't care less for the conventions of story telling. It did not necessarily end up in great art always, and it did, in fact, often suggest a childish defiance against the established gods of art and culture. I do believe that a lot of the stuff you or others write about Ghatak is interpretative, and not always what Ghatak intended. But he would get a great kick out of it all if he were here.

I'm not saying that the erratic in Ghatak is inartistic, because it did turn out to be great art off and on. It was certainly deliberate, but not carefully orchestrated as it would be with Ray. And I cannot relate to it myself at all times. In fact, I find it annoying in a film like Jukti. The only film where Ghatak had attempted some real story-telling, was Ajantrik. And I think he was very successful, maybe because it had that pathetic form which suited his artistic vision.

You are absolutely right about Ray, of course. One of his greatest drawbacks was that he was totally incapable of self-criticism, and at the same time unable to accept criticism from others. He would certainly not want a participatory model for his films, because like Ibsen's Enemy of the People (not Ganashatru), he was all for the "minority," and not comfortable with the "majority" anyway. And yet, being a filmmaker ironically put him in the traditional position of creating for ev-

everybody, not just for the "artistic". And he was aware of that.

Subject: Re: Ray and Ghatak
Date: Wed, 13 Nov 96
From: "Jacob Levich"
To: "shampa"

We have tremendously different taste in films, don't we? Which amuses me, since a typical movie fan would automatically think that any two lovers of Indian art cinema would have the same tastes and worldview.

One question: Has your view of Ghatak soured since you did your highly useful book? Or did you choose to swallow your objections to his approach because, after all, what would be the point of saying unpleasant things about an important filmmaker who, regardless of flaws, deserves a larger and more appreciative audience?

Subject: Different taste!
Date: Thu, 14 Nov 96
From: shampa
To: "Jacob Levich"

Let me put it this way: I admire deeply all that I find admirable in Ghatak's works, but at the same time (and I don't mean you) have given him (or Ray for that matter). I am not an iconoclast, but I've never been overawed by greatness. Possibly because I've been genuinely fortunate to have grown up in an intellectually stimulating environment that included many extremely talented people: artists, writers, actors, directors. I saw them and even knew some of them well, but primarily at a personal level, when I was still a child and until my early youth. When I left Calcutta, I still retained many of the links, but inevitably grew up enough to distance myself from their work and be critical at times. Ghatak I had only seen around. My parents knew him well, and he spent some of his last coherent days while making Titash with my parents, who were then in Bangladesh.

As for Ray, it is not easy to be directly associated with something so shattering as Ray's emergence and spend the rest of one's life in the shadows. But all this is personal. Of his films, I like some tremendously, feel good about a few others, and detest some as well. I remember a conversation with Adoor Gopalakrishnan, who was making excuses for Ray's Ganashatru (an incredibly bad film) because Ray was ill when he made it. For me that was no excuse at all; I had seen Tarkovsky's Sacrifice not too long before that.

So if I am openly harsh about some aspects of Ray or Ghatak, it does not indicate sweeping likes or dislikes at all. In their personal lives too, my comments are not meant in blacks in whites. Ray was surrounded by sycophants, and I hated that, but I do remember some marvelously funny and human encounters with him outside his usual scene. Ghatak was a very exciting and stimulating person to know as all his disciples will tell you, and I believe it. But he was also a drunk, maudlin and pathetic, more so because he had all that talent within him.

I am not so sure we have such different worldviews, but then I can hardly claim to know you. Different taste in films? Well, we win some and we lose some. But in general we seem to travel in the same direction.

Ritwik Ghatak: A Selected Filmography 1953: Nagarik (The Citizen) 1958: Ajantrik (Pathetic Fallacy) 1959: Bari Theke Paliye (The Runaway) 1960: Meghe Dhaka Tara (The Cloud-Capped Star) 1961: Komal Gandhar (E-Flat) 1965: Subarnarekha 1973: Titash Ekti Nadir Naam (A River Named Titash) 1974: Jukti Takko ar Gappo (Reason, Argument, and Story)

An abbreviated version of this piece originally appeared in SAMAR magazine.