

# **Exploring Regional Cinema in Contemporary India**

**Submitted by**  
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A dissertation submitted for the partial fulfilment of  
BS-MS Dual Degree in Science

Under the guidance of  
**Dr. V. Rajesh**



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## **Certificate of Examination**

This is to certify that the dissertation titled “**Exploring Regional Cinema in Contemporary India**”, submitted by **Soumitra Chatterjee**, for the partial fulfilment of BS-MS dual degree programme of the Institute, has been examined by the thesis committee duly appointed by the Institute. The committee finds the work done by the candidate satisfactory and re commends that the reports be accepted.

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## DECLARARTION

The work presented in this dissertation, titled “**Exploring Regional Cinema in Contemporary India**”, has been carried out by me under **Dr. V. Rajesh** at **Indian Institute of Science Education and Research, Mohali** for the partial fulfillment of BS-MS dual degree programme of the Institute. This work has not been submitted in part or in full for a degree, a diploma, or a fellowship to any other university or institute. Whenever contributions of others are involved, every effort is made to indicate this clearly, with due acknowledgment of collaborative research and discussions. This thesis is a bonafide record of original work done by me and all sources listed within have been detailed in the bibliography.

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In my capacity as the supervisor of the candidate’s project work, I certify that the above statements by the candidate are true to the best of my knowledge.

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# ABSTRACT

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In this work, an attempt has been made to understand the role of select regional cinema in India from the states of Tamil Nadu, the erstwhile undivided Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal. By examining the life of South Indian film stars M. G. Ramachandran and N. T. Rama Rao, I tried to understand how the medium of film helped them to achieve electoral success in Tamil Nadu and the erstwhile undivided Andhra Pradesh respectively. Focusing on the works of Ritwik Ghatak, the Bengali filmmaker, I tried to study how a film maker writes the history of the tragic events. The work on Ghatak also tried to explore how he used cinema as a political tool and how in his cinema he questioned the identity of the post-colonial Bengal society. In short, the research attempts to see the trajectories of cinema beyond Bollywood.

‘Ramkinkar is lying on his cot.. and water is dripping from the roof.

He tries to protect himself from the dripping water.

So he picks up one of his valuable paintings and puts it below the roof.

Then he looks at the camera with a smiling face and says:

It is tough to be an artist.

What is more difficult is to understand an artist.’

**Fade to Black.**

- An excerpt from ‘Ramkinkar Baij: A Personality Study’, which was an unfinished documentary of Ritwik Ghatak. The documentary was based on the life and works of a famous sculpture artist and painter, Ramkinkar Baij.



**To My Parents and all those film-makers  
who made me realise that the stories I think  
can be made into films too.**



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## Abbreviations

**MGR:** M.G. Ramachandran

**DMK:** Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam

**AIADMK:** All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam

**NTR:** N. T. Rama Rao

**TDP:** Telugu Desam Party

**INC:** Indian National Congress

**CPI:** Communist Party of India

**CPI(M):** Communist Party of India (Marxist)

**IPTA:** Indian Peoples' Theatre Association

**FTII:** Film and Television Institute of India



# Chapter 1

## Introduction

The history of films goes back to the nineteenth century and by the twentieth-century films emerged out as the new form of cultural agents among the masses. The primary developments of films happened in Europe and America and since the inception of the medium politics and cinema had interconnections with each other. This new medium of art proved to be helpful for political interests like reaching out to the people and creating a mass consent or making them accept a common enemy against which everyone should unite.<sup>1</sup> The earliest propaganda films to be known were a few shorts films made in 1898 while the Spanish- American war was going on. These films were made by the Vitagraph studio.

‘Independenta Romaniei (1912)’, a Romanian drama about the Romanian involvement into a Balkan conflict was the first fictional film which was propagandist in nature.

After the communists captured the state power in Russia, propaganda films started to evolve. The government led by Lenin invested hugely into making propaganda films. The role of those films was to uphold the values of the state. The propagandist films made by Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov were the most famous ones. The Battleship Potemkin (1925) is considered to be one of the most memorable films ever made.<sup>2</sup> Critics ranging from both the ends of political wings praise this film as something which helped to evolve the art of film making.

Alongside the Russian filmmakers, the Nazi filmmakers also produced numerous propaganda films. They made highly emotional films depicting the sufferings of the Germans in Poland

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<sup>1</sup>Stern, Frank. ‘Screening Politics: Cinema and Intervention’. *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*. ??

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

and Czechoslovakia. These films played an instrumental role in obtaining support from the masses while occupying Sudetenland and attacking Poland. The Nazis also made films to propagate their political ideology of establishing pure Aryan race and how great a leader Hitler was.<sup>3</sup>

The United States of America also started to produce some propaganda films by 1940s.<sup>4</sup> Why We Fight, Thirty Seconds over Tokyo and Casablanca being the most famous of them. Charlie Chaplin also collaborated with the USA film industry to create The Great Dictator, a political satire on Hitler.

Since then propaganda films have become a well-exploited tool by the state powers. India after gaining its independence understood the need of agencies to make political propaganda films. Various agencies like Film Finance Corporation (Now National Film Development Corporation of India), National School of Drama, Film Institute of India (Now Film and Television Institute of India) were set up. Film Finance Corporation was found with the objective that the state will fund those films which will uphold the values of independent India.<sup>5</sup> The other two institutions were established to train and groom new filmmakers, actors, writers, theatre artists from all over the country.<sup>6</sup>

When the state from the very beginning took part in producing films and plays to support their political agenda, then the role of theatre and film in a multi-party democracy like India cannot be underestimated. Most of the film scholars in India have tried studying the terrain of Bollywood, the Hindi language film industry set in Mumbai. A minimal amount of work has been done to explore the various regional industries that exist in India. Like the state power, regional political parties and cultural groups were also making political plays and film to propagate their political ideologies. Regional political parties like DMK, AIDMK, TDP and cultural organisations like IPTA were some of them. In recent times when films again are becoming a political tool, we need to study the nature of the work done in the past. That will give us a perspective to understand the intent of the political propaganda films of today.

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Thompson, Kristin and David Bordwell. *Film History: An Introduction*. Mc-Graw-Hill, 2013.

<sup>5</sup>NFDC: Filming in India, Shooting in India, Indian Movies, Indian Films & Cinema, Bollywood. Retrieved from [nfdcindia.com](http://nfdcindia.com)

<sup>6</sup>[ftiindia.ac.in](http://ftiindia.ac.in) & [nsd.gov.in](http://nsd.gov.in)

# Chapter 2

## Making of a Star Politician- M. G. Ramachandran

### 2.1 Introduction:

M. G. Ramachandran (hereafter MGR) was a charismatic figure in Tamil cinema and Tamil politics. Around his time a perfect blend in aesthetics and politics had happened in Tamil Nadu. He was the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu for ten years from 30th June 1977 to 24th December 1987 for three consecutive terms. According to critical commentators on Dravidian Movement, MGR's rule was full of oppression of the subaltern class of Tamil Nadu. Yet, a significant section of the subaltern population supported him. The support and bonding went up to such an extent that after his demise in 1987, 31 of his followers, unable to contain their grief, committed suicide.

Moreover, all of this happened because of the amalgamation of the reel and real MGR that he was worshipped person all-over Tamil Nadu. This chapter depicts how MGR was so successful in creating the stereotypical cinematic persona and the implications of it for Tamil Nadu. It also assembles the cultural elements and references that were used to constitute the on-screen MGR and the popular biographies that present the cinematic MGR as the real MGR. It also tries to give an insight into the contemporary Tamil politics and the role cinema played for it.

When the Self-Respect movement in Tamil Nadu was waning, MGR marked his debut in the Tamil film industry and got associated with the DMK founded in late 1940s. The DMK was using the medium of cinema to propagate the party's political ideology. In this process, MGR became a trump-card for the party, whose image was used by the party for their political benefits. The image of him that was created later on helped him when he created AIADMK and daunted the DMK.

According to M.S.S. Pandian, one of the leading scholars on the Dravidian Movement, MGR's regime was one of the most oppressive regimes for the economically poor section of

the society; the growth of unemployment was 86% in Tamil Nadu when compared to 17% of the entire nation. The amount of direct tax was only 2%, compared to that of 15% in the 1960s.<sup>7</sup> An under trial was ending up dead in every ten days in Tamil Nadu in the period of 1977-81.<sup>8</sup> By 1982, using the Goondas Act, the government was detaining nearly 50 persons every month!<sup>9</sup> Despite these facts, MGR continued to get his support from the subaltern class, which resulted in him being the longest serving CM of Tamil Nadu. That is a support base AIADMK still exploits for their electoral politics. This chapter tries to deconstruct the image of MGR in cinematic world and how he was able to get such wide support from Tamil population.

## **2.2 How DMK and AIADMK Used Film As a Political Tool:**

For MGR and DMK, there was a symbiotic relationship between films and politics. Pre-independence films exploited the image and the popularity of Gandhi, where the Gandhian politics and his symbolism were popular in usage in Tamil films.<sup>10</sup> Later on, almost a similar principle was used to propagate the values of DMK. Primarily it was done in 3 ways.

1. They made direct political propaganda films that catered to the public. These films revolved around themes like atheism, Tamil nationalism, and anti-Brahminism.
2. They used symbols, flags, party colours and names of the leaders. All of these were intelligently put into either the dialogues or the songs.
3. Sometimes they used documentary footage of real meetings in the films.

DMK were using these "archetypes", but they needed an actor banking on whom they could propagate these ideas. Why an actor? Because seeing one actor playing a stereotyped role would have invoked one idea in the audience's mind, that of the actor himself being someone like the character he is playing, someone with high moral values. That is what happened in the case of MGR. By playing the same stereotyped character, again and again, MGR became the character.

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<sup>7</sup>*India Today*, 31 March, 1989, *Indian Express*, 3 February, 1989

<sup>8</sup>*India Today*, 30 September, 1982

<sup>9</sup>*India Today*, 1 January, 1988

<sup>10</sup>Baskaran, S. Theodore. (1981) *The Message Bearers: The Nationalist Politics and the Entertainment Media in South India*.

## 2.3 Creating the Image of the Mass Leader:



Fig (01) - MGR during a fight sequence.

The one character MGR played repeatedly was that of an oppressed class and of having a conflict with the oppressor. The social universe used to have two spectrums in these films. One of the elite, educated, male upper caste oppressor and on the other spectrum was uneducated, subaltern, lower caste oppressed men and women.<sup>11</sup> The central theme of these films was the resolution between the oppressor and the oppressed. MGR in these films tries to break the power structure that's associated with the oppressor. He does this in again three ways:

1. The authority to dispense justice is a right that resides widely within the privileged class. MGR tries to break this power structure and dispenses justice via violence against the oppressor whenever he feels the need to do so. So when his fans see him fighting with ten people they dwell between the impossible religious myth and possible history, this helps MGR reach a cultic figure. So the message MGR tries to give is that he is one of them, but he chose to defiance. More importantly, MGR proves that although he belongs to their class, he is residing above others.

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<sup>11</sup>Sivathamby, Karthigesu. (1981). *The Tamil Film as a Medium of Political Communication*.

2. The second elitist thing that MGR took was literacy. Education is shown as the weapon of struggle against oppression, as often the educated elites oppress the uneducated subalterns. MGR delinked education from authority and knowledge from power.
3. MGR breaks the barrier of caste and the rapacious culture of Tamil Nadu. He fights villains and wins over the upper class/caste girl. This was a sense of victory for the "emasculated" subalterns who were not capable of "protecting" their wives. This also gave a sense of liberation to women who got the chance to marry whom they wanted to marry, and this gives the subaltern men vitality, they wanted to become like MGR to get their desired ones.

Several other power structures that MGR broke were like dressing, bodily gesture, and language. This all was shown as a disregard to the authority. Very cleverly MGR's rebellious nature was incorporated in people's minds.

## **2.4 Using the Notion of Relatability:**

There is a prevalent notion in art using which several of the pieces of art become popular. That is the notion of relatability. When the audience is habituated to see something, they can relate to it better. In art, it is achieved in two ways, either by making the same kind of art again and again. For example, in the 1970s the angry young man became an archetype in the Hindi film industry. So whenever the audience watched a film of this kind they could relate it to the other films of the same kind they saw earlier and the process would become enjoyable for them. The second way is by the new art fitting into a different kind of art. MGR's films used both the ways to get the relatability. His movies used to fit into the pre-existing cultural arena of the Tamil subaltern class. There exist countless ballads primarily about the oppressed subalterns and their act of honour and defying the existing elite norms. This narrative coincides with the narrative of MGR's film. MGR uses the existing ballads as a notion of relatability and succeeds to become a cult figure like the heroes of the ballads. The ballad heroes and MGR both were popular because they broke the power structure and turned the notion upside down.

## **2.5 Limitations of This Portrayal:**

However, the writers of these films were consciously writing them for gaining some little advantage in electoral politics. Hence this did not allow them to adhere to the ideology of the ballads; instead, the movies used the ballads in a much more devalued sense. MGR's films wanted to deliver justice within the system. The representation in these films probably didn't ignite any opposition towards the oppressor; instead, the oppressor also was treated with sympathy, and he/she was hoped to transform into a better person! The oppressor is many a time seen to be a renouncer of wealth and caste, and the act of renouncement is glorified.

However, to sacrifice one needs to possess at first. Moreover, one who doesn't possess (subalterns) how he/she can renounce? Additionally, if only the renouncer is glorified how can the subaltern get their place? In short, instead of defiance, it is deference to the elite values that MGR propagated in his films while retaining a superficial attachment to the subaltern protest.

## **2.6 Reasons Behind Reaching to People Despite Being Ideologically Devalued:**

The ballads were geographically localised for not having an elite medium for displaying, unlike cinema. Also, the elites propagated only those ballads that talked generously about them. As MGR's films were already ideologically devalued, they had no problem supporting them.

In Tamil Nadu films were a pretty different medium than other art forms both socially and as regarding entertainment. In the case of the folk arts, there were divisions in the seating arena, which was demarcated concerning caste. Sometimes the timings were also different. Whereas in case of cinema all it mattered whether one could buy a ticket or not. So in a sense cinema liberated the subalterns to some extent.<sup>12</sup> Cinema as a form of entertainment became so popular that other folk festivals started getting hampered for it. Watching cinema became a

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

ritual for many. The number of theatres also increased, so a ticket became affordable for many. So cinema became a popular medium and with that MGR also became a cult figure.

## 2.7 Gaining Support from Women in a Male Dominated Society:

MGR's cinema was in the public sphere, and the public sphere was dominated by the men, and women were confined to homes. However, MGR managed to get substantial female support. How?

There are primarily three reasons that attributed to the female support that MGR enjoyed.

1. In MGR's films, women could marry anyone they wanted. It was not controlled by the parents or the societal norms. This gave women audience a sense of liberty.
2. The villains in MGR's films were a sadist and a product of the rapacious culture. Whereas the character of MGR was always high on morality, who dispensed justice to people and never treated any woman with disrespect.
3. MGR's films addressed the repressed female sexuality; they broke the conventional notions of understanding of female sexuality.

What do these mean for females and males? Moreover, what the medium cinema gave to them?

1. **The act of voyeurism:** Act of voyeurism amongst the women in Tamil Nadu is a rare phenomenon. The dark theatre enabled the women to enjoy the physical attributes of the fair, muscular, handsome MGR.
2. **Attributing desires of women:** Showcasing women having sexual desires and MGR not having those breaks the patriarchal structure and gives a sense of empowerment to the females.
3. **Idealistic person:** As the females craved for a man like MGR, MGR became a role model for all the men who wanted to win over girls' hearts.

Also, the portrayal of the mother character played a significant role. MGR was always seen to give a pivotal role to the mother character in his films and seen to be taking care of the mother in cinema. This was aided with the stories of how he cared about his mother in real life. The old ladies of Tamil Nadu treated him as their real child.



## **2.8 Limitations of the Sense of Liberations Given to the Women:**

However, like the previous instances, the liberation of women also was done within the system aka the patriarchal system. The societal "values" are imposed on females time and again in MGR's films, which happen in 2 ways.

1. The hero tames off the non-conforming woman who is a male desire. Women not in male control are seen to be a threat.
2. In these films chastity, monogamy is celebrated with high regards and is projected as women virtues.

In many films, MGR is seen to be transforming the "modern" women who wore short skirts and had an independent thinking process, who like the typical Tamil women does not think her husband is the one who should protect her and her place is in the feet of her husband. This domination creates an urban-rural division as only the urban girls were in a situation to modernise themselves, and MGR's support was mainly from the rural Tamil Nadu. Another notion that MGR sets is that the women's only purpose in life is to get married. Moreover, she has to wait for that until her lover finishes off all the other important duties in his own life and family. The marriages of females are also shown to be a shackle, a burden with which many responsibilities are associated.

MGR's films treat chastity with high regards. Women losing their virginity before marriage and being widows were something unimaginable as one's life will not have any reason for existence.

Also directly the kinds of liberation MGRs films are giving to women are flawed. Less sexual violence on women and inter-caste marriages does not empower them. Instead these were credits for the males, and females were just mere spectators. On top of that, the female sexual desires were always shown in dream sequences implying them being something not real. MGR's film on the name liberating women affirmed to the existing patriarchal values only.

## 2.9 Creating and Preserving a Sustainable Image of MGR:

MGR understood the importance of creating and preserving a sustainable image of himself that is why he used the medium of cinema and often intervened in the process to churn out the best results. However, how people were unable to differentiate between the reel MGR and real MGR? With great care MGR, the reel was assimilated with MGR the real and was projected as the same person.

At first, they created the image of MGR, the renouncer. The popular biographies were an essential part in creating this image of MGR.<sup>13</sup> These were small books written by subalterns, which were sold at local fares and shops. His poverty-stricken childhood and his personal life were subjected to publicity in these books. These books and the newspapers were generously writing about all the charities that he was doing. Even his decision to quit acting to become the Chief Minister was hailed and was seen as an act of renouncement for the Tamil people. Many a time during interacting with the distressed people it was seen as if MGR is not only doing charity instead he is giving them the status of MGR that they will bear for the rest of their lives. Schemes like Chief Ministers Nutritious Meal Programme was seen to be an incentive taken by MGR, not the government as MGR being a poor kid knew what it feels to be hungry. The publicity and writings in the subsequent years were able to establish this fact in the minds of subaltern Tamil people.

The next attribute of MGR that was created was his valour, invincibility, and virility. The popular biographies stressed on MGR's decision of staying back at Madras during the world war two when the city was being bombed. Another thing they write in great details about is MGR's admiration towards Subhas Bose. These qualities attribute to MGR's valour.

MGR was portrayed to be invincible, as he had defied death so many times that it was widely spread that MGR has denied Yama itself for the sake of Tamil people. Also as youthfulness, virility is an integral part of Tamil culture, MGR managed to take care of his body using wigs and heavy makeup; he also used to cast young women alongside him to look younger and garner support from the young generation of Tamil people. To hide his age his real birthday

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<sup>13</sup>Pandian, M. S. S. (1992). *The Image Trap: M. G. Ramachandran in Films and Politics*. Sage Publications.

was never celebrated. Instead the days when he defied death were celebrated as his birthdays. The popular biographies strengthen all these narratives about MGR.

These popular biographies even handled the controversy of MGR's third marriage and were successful to explain his action. When MGR married Janki, his second wife was still alive; moreover, Janki herself was a married woman whose husband was alive. So clearly MGR did not follow the values he was advocating in films. However, still, he managed to escape. How?

The popular biographies came into rescue MGR. Most of them avoided this topic deliberately. Few of them said that its MGR's personal life and his own life do not affect his politics. However, they did not maintain the same stand when they were propagating MGR's youth in their books! Some other biographies claimed that MGR found similarity between Janki and his expired first wife and by doing so they tried to gain the sympathy of people towards MGR. Some books wrote that as MGR had the consent from his second wife, it was okay for him to marry, as it is only their business at the end of the day and people should not now bother about what their leader is doing. Until the death of MGR, Janki's past life was never brought out for questioning; instead, she was portrayed as a dedicated wife. Only after MGR's death her past life was brought out, and she was shown to be given a new life by MGR despite being unchaste, and again this narrative strengthens the image of MGR the renouncer!<sup>14</sup>

Thanks to the popular biographies, news reporting and cinema itself, the difference between MGR the real and MGR the reel was destroyed. People were immersed so deeply in the narrative played by these mediums that they cited the examples of MGR's films to showcase how good a man he was. The belief system ran so deep that sometimes the any actor attacking MGR in a film was questioned by people. In between all of this post-1972 it became a nightmare for DMK. They tried many ways to break the narrative they consciously created for their electoral benefit, but it was all too late for them to drag down the image of the cult hero MGR.

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<sup>14</sup>Pandian M. S. S & V. Geetha (18 March 1989). *Jayalalitha: Sworn Heir*. Economic and Political Weekly.

## 2.10 Tactics Taken to Silence Out Opposition and all Kinds of Criticism:



Fig (02)- MGR addressing in a political rally

Despite the cult figure that MGR became, he had to struggle in two things. One was in showcasing his political rivals to be unequal to him; the other was to counter the rampant corruption during his regime. The first problem was addressed with carnivalesque processions where MGR was presented as a crowned king, shaming the rival party leaders like Karunanidhi. His family past and his life were also brought out to showcase how great a person he was. MGR was projected as an ordinary man, but with these small qualities, he was portrayed that how much different he was at the same time. MGR was the compensation that the subalterns got for all the misery that they faced in their lives. His death resulted in the looting and blundering of the elites and elite places by the subalterns. This happened as the subalterns thought that with MGR's death all their hope to claim their rights were gone<sup>15</sup>.

To address the corruption during his regime, he simply used his popular image to shrug off all the responsibilities of it and blamed the officials, ministers, and local leaders.<sup>16</sup> As his supporters were unable to perceive beyond their immediate time and space, they believed him. He often blamed judiciary and officials for putting stay orders in the initiatives he was taking. His supporters thought that just like CMNMP, MGR was trying to take good measures for the people, but the other corrupt people around him halted him. The subalterns were so

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<sup>15</sup>*India Today*, 15 January, 1988

<sup>16</sup>*India Today*, 31 July 1987.

ignorant that a confession of donating 80lakh rupees of black money went unnoticed by them and it added up to the image of MGR the renouncer.<sup>17</sup>

## 2.11 Proving MGR as an Idea:



Fig(03)- Milk Abhishekam being performed on the statue of MGR.

To prove MGR as an idea, an inspection of how much people adhered to him would give a clear picture of it. The supporters of MGR were so blind in following him that they associated him with divinity and magical powers. From defying death himself to curing a paralysed child, everything was a propaganda material for his fans. Several of his fans pierced their bodies for MGR; this is a ritual of subaltern class that they perform towards the god they are devoted to! MGR in his lifetime only reached the status of a Godly person. The gap between human and divine is very narrow in Tamil Nadu, and MGR was able to bridge that gap. After his death, hundreds of shrines were built in his memory where people prayed.<sup>18</sup> This confirms the theory that MGR was successful in creating an image so strong that it still plays a vital role in Tamil politics.

## 2.12 Conclusion:

This success of MGR concludes to one thing, and that is the failure of the people and the failure of the Dravidian movement's anti-religion propaganda. Though MGR enjoyed

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<sup>17</sup>*The Statesman*, 25 December, 1987

<sup>18</sup>Pandian, M. S. S. (1992). *The Image Trap: M. G. Ramachandran in Films and Politics*. Sage Publications.

unquestioningly and incredible support, it cannot be concluded that his hegemonic sweep was total. On the contrary, there was always a strong sense of opposition and discussion in his period from the other political parties like the DMK, Congress (I), Janata party and the left. Moreover, even among the committed supporters of MGR political sensitivity is not dead. The resistance towards the system exists among them in a muted and dormant form. Several scholars had hoped that probably with time the opposition would have more breath of air after the demise of MGR. They had also expected that there was a possibility of constituting something other than the MGR style politics and of creating a new progressive common sense. However, that did not happen. Most of the times, AIADMK ended up winning the elections very easily. The rampant corruption did not end neither did the culture of film-stars becoming politicians ended. Jayalalitha utilised the path that DMK and MGR showed in later years for AIADMK. The same practice has continued even 30 years after MGR's Death. The kind of ideological devaluation that happened this was inevitable. With both Jayalalitha and Karunanidhi dying in the last few years and another two superstars Rajnikanth and Kamal Hassan showing interest in politics, we cannot rule out the possibilities of more political leaders emerging from the field of cinema. However, it is for sure we can say that the methods DMK and MGR took for benefits in electoral politics are still relevant in case of Tamil Nadu, and probably the state won't ever be able to come out of the culture of the amalgamation of direct politics and aesthetics, which at the end is harming the state in an unimaginable way.

# Chapter 3

## Making Politics a Cinematic Performance- N.T. Rama Rao

### 3.1 Introduction:

In the present times, we have witnessed the powerful combination of the personality cult and mediatisation of the person resulting in sealing the fate of many political events which are both electoral and popular. India, particularly Southern India has a long history of this formulation which sometimes resulted in huge success. Cinema gave Tamil Nadu and undivided Andhra Pradesh five chief ministers till date, and we cannot rule out the possibility of more film stars becoming major politicians. In this chapter I have studied about the cinematic rise of one of them, N. T. Rama Rao, hence after NTR. NTR was the founder of the Telugu Desam Party and went on to become a three-term chief minister of Andhra Pradesh. During this period he was not only an important politician at the regional level but also at the national level.

The chapter deals with a substantial examination of some of the critical moments of NTR's reel and real life. It tries to explain about the interface where aesthetics and politics have worked. Here I tried to show that in Andhra Pradesh cinema represented politics and vice versa. The chapter also talks about the moments where NTR could not distinguish between the cinematic performance and giving electoral speeches and which resulted him being termed as “Drama Rao”.

### 3.2 Previous Nationalistic Pride Which Played a Significant Role in NTR's Success:

Despite not having a cadre-based party or having a reputation of doing any significant work for the Telugu land, NTR named his party as the Telugu Desam Party (which means the party of the Telugu nation). For a person who had lived most of his life in the then Madras (now Chennai), claiming that he can be the representative of the Telugu nation is a shocker. However, NTR's electoral success owed a significant amount of the credits to the embodiment of Teluguness in the society. For almost four-five decades there was a constant

process of consolidation of the public, political and the popular sphere which dominated the state and the Telugu cinema.<sup>19</sup> This consolidation can be credited to the non-Brahmin mobilities in the Madras presidency which started during pre-independence. It was not only the dominated zamindar class who exercised power over the film production market but also the peasants of the Coastal Andhra who were having a surplus capital which they wanted to invest somewhere else other than agriculture. The films of this time also portrayed Gandhianism in the social films they made. So from this period, only politics was getting a fair bit of representation in Telugu cinema.

### **3.3 How Cinema Started to Being Used as a Political Tool:**

Post-independence this representation increased many folds due to the demands of formation of a separate Telugu speaking state. This very demand was reflected in the theme of the cinemas also. Moreover, interestingly even cinema was a reason for the demand. As the Telugu cinemas were produced in Madras, they lacked the aesthetic beauty of the Andhra village. The movies often became chaotic as they neither represented true Telugu nor Tamil culture.<sup>20</sup> There was a demand which advocated that a separate Telugu state would benefit the film production. So in turn cinema took the active role of propagating Telugu culture and re-imagination of Telugu nation. So we see that when Andhra Pradesh was carved out from Madras Presidency, there was a significant rise in the Telugu film production, which was supported by the state government with subsidies and loans. Moreover, slowly in the newly formed state, cinema went on to become the most powerful medium in the public sphere.

NTR's entering into politics and consecutive success found its moment in time. We have seen that this moment was in building for four-five decades. Alongside that, the time had seen the Nehruvian era, the naxalbari movement and the emergency period. The time was perfect for a political party to hold up a regional flag, much like what NTR's friend MGR did in Tamil Nadu a few years ago. Unlike MGR, NTR did not have a cadre-based party nor was he associated with any political activities. However, he had the long history of linguistic nationalism which he used as a tool for electoral favours. Also, he had the benefit of the class-caste constellation, a group of people who were particularly disturbed with state

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<sup>19</sup>Gray, Hugh. (1971). *The Demand For a Separate Telangana State in India*. Asian Survey. Vol. 14. No.4.

<sup>20</sup>Srinivas, S. V. (2013). *Politics as Performance: A social history of the Telugu Cinema*. Permanent Black.



machinery, who were waiting for someone who had the courage to dispense justice and give them freedom from what they had perceived as corruption. Moreover, NTR was someone who was doing that for very long time on screen. He carried along that image of him and several other factors to end up being victorious against the then powerful Congress government.

### **3.4 NTR's Cinematic Universe and It's Role in His Electoral Success:**

The films of 1950s-1980s of NTR gives us an understanding of the representation of a protagonist. All of these films majorly had NTR as someone who hailed from feudal or aristocratic class but overlapped with the peasant class and advocated for their rights. These feudal characters were portrayed as suitable for playing the role of a mobiliser or the leader of the oppressed class! Apart from a few Naxalite films and later on in a few 'red films' this notion was never challenged. Via these films, NTR obtained the image that he could lead the masses and had the capability to dispense justice. Since the 1970s, the films produced in Telugu started becoming star-driven, and this culture has stayed with Telugu cinema, as they do not produce many story-driven films even now. NTR was one such star who played a variety of characters and starred in various genres. The genres included social, drama, mythology etc. Interestingly NTR played only very few mythological characters in this period, but these turned out to become the most significant films for his electoral success. These mythological films led to a fan- spectator- devotee relationship which persists in the arena of the Telugu cinema.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid.



Fig(04)- NTR acting in an mythological film.

In the mythological films, NTR was often playing the character of the Gods, which were overtly respected all over. The Indian audience has always been unable to differentiate the character from the actor and fiction from the reality. This was much more prominent in case of mythological movies and TV serials. There have been instances where people left their shoes before entering a movie theatre.<sup>22</sup> Also when Ramayana was screened in Television from 1986 to 1988, people used to sit with a Puja Thali (a plate for prayer) and used to pray before the Television set before the show used to get started. So in case of Andhra Pradesh, film viewing became a ritual devotional act for people. It became something like visiting a temple for prayer. The sole aim of these films was to transform the spectator as a devotee. Like the way religious texts affect people to come to temples for their rituals, these films were affecting people in the same way and were successfully dragging them to the movie theatre. With almost one-third of the entire population visiting theatres once in a week, the mythological films got their space to expand and compelled people to come to theatres. Moreover, often the gullible audience in the name of engaging with the Godly figure that was being portrayed in the screen was getting engaged with the actor who was playing the character. Moreover, as NTR himself was associated with so many mythological characters,

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

he was the one who benefitted a great deal from this in his cinematic career and also in his political career.

The mythologies not only helped NTR get a devotee fan base, but it also gave NTR something that he was lacking. NTR lacked any kind of significant contribution that he did for the betterment of the Telugu society. So he then used the linguistic nationalism. The dialogues he spoke in these films were in classical Telugu language. People tend to associate art and culture to their nationalistic pride. This usage of classical Telegu while delivering his dialogues was the one trait of teluguness which was associated with NTR.

Another way NTR was benefitted from his films was the way he used the heroic figures of the Telugu nation in his films. Many times numerous freedom fighters and social reformers were either used as a point of reference, or NTR himself had played those characters. These social films advocated for mainly two things:

1. Pride for the Telugu nation, language.
2. Pride of the heroic figures of the nation.

Sometimes both coincided with each other which resulted in the benefit of NTR as he was conceived to be the character in his real life that he was portraying on screen.

Alongside all of these a few overtly political films of this period also helped him to get an image that played a huge part in his electoral success.

### 3.5 Creating the Fan- Spectator:



Fig (05, 06)-NTR during an electoral speech, which in my opinion was no less than a cinematic performance.

In the press coverage in the early 1980s it was never mentioned that NTR was planning to enter into politics. Although when the speculation of that had started NTR's films started to

become much more crowd-puller. Also, NTR's willingness to do betterment of the Telugu state and his commitment to teluguness was also never reported. However, the roles NTR played on screen produced a degree of commonness among people. In NTR's case, it created conditions where the fan-spectator reached up-to the level of a cultural insider.

Moreover, these fan-spectators were the ones who were considered or rather misrecognised as the member of the Telugu nation when there was a political valence in this period. NTR took the mode of speech of a mythological act and crossed it with the electoral speeches. This in a sense became a performance, which his fan-spectators were coming to see. However, what were they paying to enjoy a performance of their beloved star? The audience was now gathering for a political purpose in exchange for his speeches. Moreover, when was the political purpose served? When in 1983, NTR ended up being victorious against the all-powerful Congress, that was when the true price of these performances was paid by these fan spectators who were misrecognised as members of the Telugu nation.

### **3.6 Role of Press in NTR's Electoral Success:**

On top of all these, another machinery that immensely helped NTR to win the election was the newspaper agencies and advertisement. Audio cassettes were made comprising NTR's ethical speeches from the movies, and they were being played all over the state. These cassettes were also on sale. These cassettes during the campaign brought the fan in the domain of politics and made some money for the party. The movie theatres were also screening NTR's old films, which gave him a reach to a much larger audience through his films during the campaigning time. There were several newspapers which covered NTR's life and campaign in great detail as they understood that they could cash in the situation. However, out of all these one particular newspaper played the pivotal role towards NTR's success that was of his friend Ch. Ramoji Rao's Eenadu. Eenadu was almost like a partisan of TDP. Eenadu helped in many ways like<sup>23</sup>:

1. Eenadu's news network was used to know about the area specific problems on which NTR emphasised while delivering his speeches.
2. Eenadu also suggested favourable candidates and checked on the background.

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

3. There were other rumours like Eenadu themselves vetting for candidates and writing speeches for them.

Eenadu also propagated an urgent need to salvage the Telugu pride that was allegedly being destroyed by the Congress party and their leader Indira Gandhi. Instances like chief ministers getting sacked repeatedly by the high command, them getting insulted; sending non-Telugu leaders to overlook the electoral affairs etc. affirmed their theory. To be in the competitive media other news agencies also started propagating the theory of Telugu pride being under danger. This theory implied that the Telugu nation was suffering from such indignities that only a new local political party can solve these problems. This strengthened the nationalistic political line that NTR was following to win the election. Eenadu also constantly compared the mother figure of Indira Gandhi with the brother figure of NTR and made explicit indications of declaring NTR as the winner through various methods. On the Election Day Eenadu almost directly asked the Telegu people to cast their vote for TDP. This was their method of interpellating the Telegu nation.

In case of NTR the things he learnt while acting (delivering dramatic dialogues) helped him immensely in his electoral campaign. The audiences coming to watch his electoral speech were cinema lovers too. NTR cashed in that fan-spectator-devotee relationship and gained electoral benefits from that. The winning in the elections of NTR can be said as something like 'he came, he saw and he conquered'. And to win against the all powerful Congress was not an easy task. NTR was able to do that without even having a cadre based party. We can safely conclude that NTR's cinematic career played a pivotal role in his electoral success.

## Chapter 4

### A Short Biography of Ritwik Ghatak



Fig(07)- Ritwik Ghatak

“There was a wound in the heart of my father, a raw wound. Many physicians were consulted – to no effect; consequently, the wound did not heal. He carried this wound with him until the eve of his death. Toward the end of his life, he used to sit quietly. He saw Ritwik’s Meghe Dhaka Tara ten times, Subarnarekha eight times . . . [After a brief visit in 1972 to his janmobhita (“ancestral birthplace”) in Meherpur] Father had no further opportunities to go to Bangladesh. This sorrow of not being able to return ate into him for the rest of his life. Father intentionally built his house close to the border [between West Bengal and Bangladesh]. He used to say that if I inhaled [the air] here, I would be able to smell the earth of Satkhira, Bagura and Jessore. And just to be able to smell this earth, Father would repeatedly watch Meghe Dhaka Tara, Subarnarekha and Komal Gandhar.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>Loken Ray, *Madhyakhane bera* (“A Fence in Between”), *Pratidin* (28 September 1997), 4

Ritwik Ghatak is considered to be one of the most influential film-makers of the history of film-making. He was born on 4th November 1925 in Dhaka in Bangladesh.<sup>25</sup> He was born to Suresh Chandra Ghatak, a lawyer and a play-writer and Indubala Devi, a housewife. He had nine siblings. He had his primary and secondary education in Bangladesh. He then came to Calcutta to pursue higher studies and graduated in English.

After the partition of Bengal, Ghatak's entire family became refugees, and they shifted to India. The event of Partition left an immense mark on the life of Ghatak. He was unable to perceive the fact that both the Bengals (East and West) could not rejoin. He was also feeling uprooted like countless of other refugees. In his life as a filmmaker, he frequently revisited the problems and emotions related to the partition of Bengal.

For these reasons, Ghatak started to do theatres from 1948 onwards.<sup>26</sup> In 1948 he wrote his first play titled *Kalo Sayer* (The Dark Lane). Alongside writing, he also started to act in plays. The first play that he acted in was in *Nabanna*, written and directed by Bijan Bhattacharjee, who later on became one of the long-time associates of Ghatak after Ghatak started to make films.

Ghatak was a political person from the beginning, and he treated the medium of art as a political medium only. He was a member of the Communist Party of India (CPI) till 1955 until CPI had expelled him. Because of this political nature, Ghatak joined the Indian Peoples Theatre Association (IPTA) in 1951. IPTA is the cultural wing of the Communist Party of India. With IPTA, Ghatak performed in numerous stage and street plays. However, later on, he understood that with the medium of theatre he could only reach to a certain number of people at one time. He says "Even on the best day I could at maximum reach to 800 people".<sup>27</sup> However, at that time he discovered the medium of filmmaking. He thought with films he could reach more people. Ghatak argued that the art that he was creating through the medium of film could be preserved for decades and he could continue to influence people long after his death. He also argued that his attachment with the film is not something

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<sup>25</sup>The primary sources of information on Ghatak's early life are: in Bengali, the two books, *Ritwik* and *Ritwik: Padma theke Titas* by his wife, Surama Ghatak; a book by his twin sister – Protiti Devi, *Ritwikke ses bhalobasa* ("Dedicated to Ritwik"). ( Sahityo Prakash, 1997); two articles by Ghatak's niece, Mahasweta Devi, published in Mahasweta Devi and Tusar Talukadar, *Ritwik: Are se ek maha iye* ("Ritwik: Oh, he was a terrible soand so"). (Ajkal Publishing Limited, 1998)

<sup>26</sup>Ghatak, Surama, *Ritwik* (1977). Asha Prakashani.

<sup>27</sup>Ghatak, Ritwik. *Cinema and I* (Ritwik Memorial Trust, 1987)



permanent; the day he finds some more powerful medium of art he would not hesitate to move towards that.<sup>28</sup> However, the Communist Party of India could not bear up with the radical and independent thought process of Ghatak, and that resulted in the expulsion of Ghatak from the party.

Ritwik Ghatak entered into filmmaking in the year of 1950. In 1950 he assisted Nema Ghosh in *Chinnamul* (The Uprooted). In this film, Ghatak also played the role of a minor character. *Chinnamul* was the first Indian film to be made on the topic of the partition of India. After *Chinnamul*, Ghatak started directing his own films. In 1952 he made his first feature film titled *Nagorik* (The Citizen). The film is considered to be the first art-house cinema made in Bengal. *Nagorik* preceded Satyajit Ray's legendary film *Pather Panchali* (Song of the roads) by three years. However, unfortunately, the film was not released during Ghatak's lifetime and was finally released in 1977.

His second film and the first released film *Ajantrik* (The Unmechanical) was released in 1958. *Ajantrik* was a critical film in the history of film-making for being the first film to portray an inanimate object. In *Ajantrik*, a Chevrolet jalopy became a character. This, Ghatak did ten years before Walt Disney started portraying inanimate characters, with the character of Herbie, a Volkswagen Beetle.

In 1958, Ghatak had his second commercial release. The film is titled *Bari Theke Paliye* (The Runaway). *Bari Theke Paliye* had remarkable similarities with Francois Truffaut's *The 400 Blows* (1959). *The 400 Blows* went on to become one of the most influential films in the French New Wave film movement while *Bari Theke Paliye* remained unseen by most. Unfortunately, the print of this film was not preserved and is lost now.

From 1960 to 1962, in these three years, Ghatak made his most critically acclaimed and commercially disastrous films. In 1960 he directed *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (Cloud Clapped Star), in 1961 he directed *Komal Gandhar* (E-Flat), and in 1962 he directed *Subarnarekha* (The Golden Lining). These three films are also known as the "Partition Trilogy" in popular terms. All the three films dealt in great details about the state of refugees in Kolkata, their problems and the struggles of the middle class educated section of the refugees to adapt to the new

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<sup>28</sup>Ibid.

scenario. These films were not well received by the audience and the critics at that point of their release and were rejected by most of the section of the society. This outcome led to a situation where Ghatak was not getting any producer to fund his next ventures. As a result, he could not complete a feature film till 1973. Till 1973 he tried making two feature films titled *Bagalar Banga Darshan* (The Bengal Tour of Bagala) and *Ronger Golam* (The Servant of Colours) but was unable to complete both of them due to lack of funds.

In 1970 Ghatak was funded by a Bangladeshi producer to make *Titash Ekti Nodir Naam* (A River Called Titash). This was an Indo-Bangladesh collaboration. This film of Ghatak is one of the earliest examples of the hyperlink cinema. *Titash Ekti Nodir Naam* preceded Robert Altman's *Nashville* (1975) which is considered to be the film which made the concept of Hyperlink storytelling in films popular.

After *Titash Ekti Nodir Naam* Ghatak made his last feature film titled *Jukti Takko Aar Goppo* (Reason, Debate and a Story) in 1974, this was an autobiographical film where he played the lead character of Neelkantha who was an alcoholic intellectual who was once admitted in a mental asylum to get rid of alcoholism. Ghatak is often applauded for making a film critiquing his own life and decisions. This film proved how much personal the medium of film-making was to Ghatak.

Because of his untimely death in 1976, Ghatak could not make any more films. Despite his short filmography where he made only eight films, he has emerged as one of the most influential film-makers of all time. He alongside Satyajit Ray and Mrinal Sen started the Parallel Cinema movement in West Bengal which grew up to become the most important film movement in Indian subcontinent. While he was at the Film and Television Institute of India, Pune (FTII, Pune) as a professor he groomed numerous student film-makers. Some of his most successful students who made critically acclaimed films are Mani Kaul, Saeed Akhtar Mirza, Kumar Sahani, John Abraham and Adoor Gopalakrishnan. Alongside being one of the most prominent filmmakers of all time, Ghatak was also a theorist and a story-writer. His scholarly articles were regularly published in national and international film magazines. In his articles, he dealt with issues ranging from dialectics in arts to the technicalities of the craft of film-making to the history of films.

Ghatak's body of work continues to inspire generations of film-makers, and for sure he will forever be known as a figure who made a significant contribution to the language of film-making. For Ghatak cinema was never anything other than a political tool and he always

advocated for the social responsibilities of an artist. Any artist willing to use art as a method of protest, Ghatak will be one of the most important influencers for him/her.



# Chapter 5

## Rehearsing Memory and History

### 5.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, we briefly talked about how the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) played a crucial role in influencing the filmic sensibility of Ritwik Ghatak. In Ghatak's fourth feature film, *Komal Gandhar* (E-Flat) IPTA becomes a central theme. Ghatak brings all his previous experiences with IPTA in this film's plot. In this chapter, I will mostly talk about how Ghatak represented his perspective about the method, the ideological standpoint and the artists of IPTA and how Ghatak establishes the cultural importance IPTA had and what kind of Cultural Revolution they could have brought had they resolved the rift between themselves. Ghatak in this film also rehearses and reconstructs the history of partition from his memory. This film also dealt with elements like recognising the history and remembering the motherland. This film is one of the films which established Ghatak as an exilic filmmaker (I will talk about what an exilic filmmaker is in the next chapter in detail). This film I have studied to see how Ghatak writes the history of tragic events as a film-maker. Analysing the sequences of *Komal Gandhar* will provide a clear understanding of how Ghatak writes the history of this rich cultural diversity of Bengal. It will also help us to understand how his characters of the fictional theatre group helped him to reconstruct the history of the tragic event of the partition of Bengal of 1947. The principle question that I tried to answer here is how a film-maker writes the history of tragic events? Moreover, how is it constructed and in which sense a filmic representation differs from a well-documented research book and article?

### 5.2 A Note on Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA)

IPTA was established in the year of 1943. It is the oldest theatre association existing in India and was the first organised National level theatre movement. IPTA is the cultural wing of the Communist Party of India (CPI). In the first conference of IPTA in 1943, Prof. Hiren Mukherjee who was the chairman of the working committee of IPTA declared that the motto

of the group to be “the workers are the salt of the earth and to be part of their destiny is the greatest adventure of our time.”<sup>29</sup>

The first staged plays of IPTA were “Roar China” and “Four Comrades”. In order to connect with the masses, IPTA used the pre-existing notions of art also. They often used different kinds of folk art forms like Jatra, Ballads, Panchali. They tried to use these traditional forms to express their feelings about various contemporary issues like colonialism, war, hunger, the struggle of the working class and state oppression. The most famous play that IPTA produced was Nabanna (Harvest) in 1944. It is a play written by Bijon Bhattacharjee who co-directed it with another member of IPTA, Sambhu Mitra. The play is themed around the famine of Bengal in 1943 where more than 2 million people died of starvation. The narrative revolves around the starvation of the farmer protagonist’s family. The play became a major success and had collected lakhs of rupees for the famine relief.

### **5.3 Ghatak’s relationship with IPTA**

By 1948 Ghatak had completely moved to Kolkata and became closely associated with the IPTA and CPI. He termed himself to be a “close sympathiser” of the leftist ideology in the beginning, which prompted him to join IPTA and take part in the socialist plays that IPTA was writing and producing.

Geeta Kapur has commented on Ghatak in the context where both IPTA and India are emerging:

“Ghatak arrives on the scene in the wake of a movement charged with a radical popular consciousness which, through the 1940s – a period when the communist movement posed a real alternative in political and cultural terms – provides the ground for a great many innovations in theatre, cinema, literature and to a lesser extent, the plastic arts. I am referring to IPTA (Indian People’s Theatre Movement), which breaks away from the innate conservatism of a civilizational discourse; breaks with the Brahmanical/Sanskritized resources privileged as the Indian tradition, and thereby gives the emerging, struggling tradition of the modern in India the possibility at least of not being trapped in the citadel of high art. It is from the time of the IPTA

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<sup>29</sup>Pradhan Sudhi, ed., *Marxist Cultural Documents in India: Chronicles and Documents*,

that ‘the people’ are invoked in the discourse and practice of art through their very forms – especially in theatre – and through their participation as an alert audience.”<sup>30</sup>

It is this very potential of IPTA which led Ghatak to believe that theatre is a much vital medium to communicate with people than literature. Ghatak while writing “Rows and Rows of Fences” referred to the success of Jabanbandi and Nabanna and wrote:

“They showed me that in terms of immediate and spontaneous communication, theatre is much more effective than literature. So I eventually gave up writing stories and turned to write plays and organizing theatre groups”.<sup>31</sup>

From the beginning of IPTA, there were several fractions which were emerging. The two prominent ones were one group who wanted to use theatre just as political propaganda material to support the political narratives and policies of the party and other one was the group who wished to create drama which will represent the political and social concern alongside being artistically rich.<sup>32</sup> The rigid loyalty towards the party directives often made IPTA sacrifice with the artistic richness that they wanted to incorporate in their dramas. Often the discussions amongst the theatre artists turned out to be without any resolution. This is the same thing we observe in the fictional two groups in Ghatak’s film Komal Gandhar.

After the Indian Government banned CPI in 1948, performing openly became problematic for IPTA.<sup>33</sup> Ghatak then joined briefly to the offshoots of IPTA like “Gananatya Sangha” (“People’s Theater Association,”), “Bohurupee” and “Little Theatre Group” that were functioning at Kolkata. He also formed his group “Theatre Group” in 1954.<sup>34</sup> After the ban was lifted in 1950, IPTA tried to rejoin as a theatre group. Still, the difference between the identity of a “theatre artist” and a “political activist” existed amongst IPTA. This became prominent by the reaction from CPI after Ghatak submitted his thesis titled “On the Cultural Front” in 1954. He was vehemently criticised for the radical views he expressed in this thesis.

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<sup>30</sup>Kapur, Geeta, “When Was Modernism in Indian Art,” *Journal of Arts & Ideas*

<sup>31</sup>Ghatak, Ritwik. *Rows and Rows of Fences*. Seagull Books (2000)

<sup>32</sup>Pradhan, Sudhi, ed., *Marxist Cultural Movement in India*

<sup>33</sup>From the inception of the party, the CPI was periodically banned and its members jailed under British rule because the party actively supported strikes, openly criticized government policies, read and distributed communist literature.

<sup>34</sup>Ghatak, Ritwik. *Rows and Rows of Fences*. Seagull Books (2000)

The thesis was written when the CPI asked Ghatak to develop a framework for the cultural lines of the IPTA. The radical views of Ghatak stirred CPI and which led to ultimately his expulsion from CPI in 1954. Other charges that were pressed against Ghatak were of financial corruption, bad behaviour and chronic alcoholism. Post his expulsion from the party Ghatak disassociated himself from IPTA also.<sup>35</sup> For the next few years, he was associated with some other theatre groups alongside his own formed one. However, by this time Ghatak was getting associated with the medium of film-making as Ghatak began to understand:

“But I found this [i.e., theater] was also an inadequate medium. I realized that to say your say today, the film is the only medium. It can reach millions of people at one go, which no other medium is capable of. Then I came into films. My coming to films has nothing to do with making money. Rather, it is out of a need to express my pangs and agonies about my suffering people. That is why I have come to the cinema. I believe in thinking deeply of the universe, the world at large, the international situation, my country and my people. I make films for them. I may be a failure. That is for the people to judge.”<sup>36</sup>

## 5.4 Komal Gandhar (E-Flat)

### 5.4.1 The Opening Sequence: Establishing the main theme

Komal Gandher (E-Flat) was the fourth feature-length film of Ritwik Ghatak which was released in 1961. This is often treated as the second part of the partition trilogy of Ghatak which consisted of *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (Cloud Capped Star, 1960) and *Subarnarekha* (1962) as the other two films. Although Ghatak denied the fact that he actually tried to make any partition trilogy. Hence I have not treated these three films as partition trilogy despite the films dealt with the aftermath of partition as the central theme.

In the opening sequence of *Komal Gandher*, we hear film opening with the sound of a sarod and violin which are followed by a sweet melody of a flute. All the instruments play in the tone of E-flat, therefore justifying the title of the film. The next soundtrack that is used is of ululating women and after that Ghatak introduces the main theme song of the film which is a

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<sup>35</sup>Bhattacharya and Dasgupta, eds., *Ritwik Ghatak: Face to Face, Conversations with the Master*. CineCentral (2003)

<sup>36</sup>Ghatak, Ritwik. “My Coming into Films,” *Rows and Rows of Fence*. Seagull Books (2000)



folk song talking about Sita, preparing for marriage. Sita is the archetypal chaste women in Hindu mythology. Ghatak often in his films uses the reference of mythological stories, I have discussed the motive and the nature of that in more details in Chapter 7. Using this musical storytelling Ghatak foreshadows the ultimate union of the two protagonists of the film.

After the credits conclude the screen opens to a paragraph written in Bengali which translates to:

“Theatre crazy young people come together from all places. They form a group. Their family grows up with tenderness, affection, jealousy and hatred. They do not have a real family of their own. The troupe is their real family. Here is a chapter in their history.....”

Using this paragraph Ghatak tells the audience what they are going to witness in the remaining time of the film. The paragraph explains the main theme of the film that how much important theatre is as an art form and how theatre groups form a family. It talks about the loss of real family and also the construction of history. Ghatak through this film tried to explain his perspectives of the IPTA movement.

Just after the paragraph comes into the screen, we hear a mournful cry, and a character says “Why? Why? Why should I leave my beautiful country, my river Padma?” The character of Bhriku (the protagonist male) is seen here addressing the audience in a theatre performance. Therefore he addresses directly to the audience of the film and breaks the fourth wall, which is an imaginary wall between the actors and the audience. After the cry, Ghatak cuts to show us the ensemble cast on the stage which is of a set of a platform. This is the first instance where the audience of the film understands that they are watching a play. The play is being performed at a meeting in the All India Theatre Conference. This gives a direct reference to the IPTA. The character of Bhriku here shows his disgust upon being called a refugee; he questions the term and therefore makes the audience also question the definition.<sup>37</sup>

Ghatak then cuts back more to show the entire stage where we see countless of refugees passing by showing the situation during the partition. Then Ghatak cuts back more to show the audience sitting, this he does to remind the audience of the film that they are watching a

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<sup>37</sup>In an interview Ghatak stated: “I detest this word ‘homeless’. ‘Refugees’ and ‘homeless’ are nauseating words.” See Bhattacharya and Dasgupta, eds., *Ritwik Ghatak: Face to Face, Conversations with the Master*. CineCentral (2003).

theatre performance in a film. As one character in the film shares his grief about leaving his motherland, Ghatak cuts to show us the rival group “Dakshinapat” (The Right Path) watching and criticising this play performed by “Niriksha” (Examination). These are the two groups of IPTA that Ghatak hints towards.

In the concluding part of the opening sequence, we see Anusuya on stage, who is a member of Dakshinapath but was asked at the end moment to play a small role in the play produced by Niriksha. Anusua and Bhriгу (leader of the Niriksha group) meet at the stage, and the folk song about Sita begins to be played at the background which foreshadows the union of these two characters. At this point, this couple is a kind of representation of Ghatak and his wife Surama, who was a comrade of Ghatak from his IPTA days. Komal Gandhar has some other sense of autobiographical elements of some other members of IPTA like Bijan Bhattacharjee, Salil Chowdhury, Hemango Biswas.

The opening sequence of the film then ends with Bhriгу ranting about the entire earth is full of smoke and polluted. This scene symbolises two things. At one level it talks about how Kolkata was polluted for the refugees who were coming from the clean environment of villages of Bengal. On another level, it also talks about the confused state of mind of the refugees which is symbolised via the cloudy, foggy sky.

On the opening act itself, Ghatak takes the audience to the scenario of theatre practice of IPTA during the 1940s and 1950s. The principle theme of the film that is of the union and separation is established via the relationship between the two protagonists, the conflict between the two theatre groups and the sociopolitical position of the Bengali refugees post the partition of Bengal of 1947.

### **5.4.2 Recognising Memory With the Rehearsal of Shakuntala**

Ghatak himself wrote the story of Komal Gandhar. The film’s narrative mainly moves around the staging of three plays. The first play is about the refugees in Kolkata, the second play is about performing Shakuntala, and the third one is an IPTA-like performance.

After some time in the film, the two theatre groups “Niriksha” and “Dakshinapath” are united by the efforts of Anusuya, the female protagonist. The newly formed group then decides to perform “Shakuntala” written by Kalidasa. The choice of Kalidasa acts as a compromise between Niriksha’s radical views and Dakshinapath’s commercial outlook towards theatre. The play also brings the two protagonists, Bhriгу and Anusuya closer as Anusuya plays the

character of Shakuntala, the wife of Bhriгу's character King Dushmanta. Ghatak deliberately chose this play as the play is also themed around memory, forgetting the memory and recognising. As the emotions related to partition are often revolved around memorising the past and trying to accept the present. This play fitted the meta-level of the storytelling.

The rehearsal of the play takes place mostly in two places in rural Bengal. The first place was at Lalgola which is nearby to the East Bengal and river Padma. The second place was Darjeeling. In both the places, the characters are seen singing a variety of songs ranging from Rabindra Sangeet to Bhatiyali Songs (Songs sung by the boatmen in rural East Bengal). This refers to the rich cultural diversity of Bengal and using these notions Ghatak establishes his claims of the cultural unification of the two Bengals. Ghatak had told that he knew that the political unification of both the Bengals was impossible, but he was hopeful about the cultural unification and through this film, he emphasises on this possibility.<sup>38</sup> In a way, the characters here were "rehearsing" the various existing cultural elements of Bengal.

The Lalgola sequence in the film is masterfully crafted which tells us about Ghatak's political aspiration about the partition of Bengal. The two protagonists walk on the banks of the Padma river and talk about their past. They stand in front of a deserted railroad and talk about the "other side" which once was their motherland as both the characters were living in East Bengal earlier. The railroad once symbolised as the point of unity for both the Bengal as the travellers from each side used to get down on the railway platform. Now the same railroad has become the sign of the separation of the two Bengals. The railroads are the place alongside which the countries were spilt. The usage of railroads also memorises the gruesome role it played during the time of partition when trains after trains were carrying dead bodies of those who were trying to get into their newly assigned homeland.

The Lalgola sequence ends dramatically. He suddenly starts to track down to the railroads from the previous scene where he had zoomed into the "other side" while Bhriгу and Anusuya were talking. While tracking down we see that the railroads are now empty, Bhriгу and Anusuya were gone. Suddenly the camera moves towards the railway tie barrier, and we hear a women's chorus cry "Dohai Ali(Mercy o Lord)". This memorises the audience of the tragic and horrific events that happened along the line of religion during the partition. The

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<sup>38</sup>Bhattacharya and Dasgupta, eds., *Ritwik Ghatak: Face to Face, Conversations with the Master*. CineCentral (2003)

camera moves faster now, and the sound of the chorus also becomes louder until the camera crashes to the divider signifying the division between the two Bengals are now broken. This was Ghatak's way of talking about the cultural unification of both the Bengals, which he achieved by breaking the barrier using a camera. On another level, it also points towards his wish of the political unification of both the Bengals and for which he believed that art could play a pivotal role. This one little sequence at Komal Gandhar successfully makes us understand how Ghatak saw cinema as a medium he could use to give his political statements and how he used cinema as a political tool.



Fig(08)- The Lalgola Setup.

### 5.4.3 Staging Shakuntala

The performance of Shakuntala was different from the first play about the East Bengal refugees. Shankutala was much more commercial and professional. The play starts at the pivotal point of the story where Shankuntala leaves her house and ends at the point where she is reunited with King Dushmanta, her husband. However, the performance of Shankutala is

hampered due to planned sabotage by the Dakshinapath group. During the performance, often their members did not come to the stage on time, forgot dialogues deliberately and acted poorly. By the end of the play, the dream of the joint theatre turned out to be a failure because of the commercial aspirations of Dakshinapath.

Shakuntala is a pivotal point in the narrative of the film which ignites many plot points and symbolises towards many political commentaries which Ghatak was trying make. It talks about the multiple layers of failure in recognising, the fear of Anusuya that Bhriku will not be able to recognise her love for him, Dakshinapath failing to recognise the ideological values of theatre and constraining themselves only to the commercial aspects and the play itself was beyond recognition as it was deliberately sabotaged, much like Ghatak's Bengal was non-recognisable after the deliberate sabotage in the form partition in 1947.

#### **5.4.4 Claiming the History, Memorising IPTA about the possibilities and the responsibilities:**

The last play which is an IPTA like play comes towards the end of the film. This sequence of the film establishes the synthesis from ideology and mass-communication. This synthesis was something theatre groups like IPTA desperately wanted.

The play was being performed at rural Bengal. It revolved around a group of East Bengali peasants who were looking to avenge the death of one of their sons who died in the stampede for food. The play is mainly performed mostly by the artists of Niriksha, only Anusuya from the Dakshinapath remained with Niriksha. The character of Anusya asks the actors whether their blood boils or not for the death of that person? How can they remain idle? Answering to this Bhriku's character says that they will die but for a good cause. Hearing this audience erupts into clapping. After the performance gets over an old woman comes to Bhriku and says how her son had also died from a stampede during the famine of 1943 while he was looking for food. She then hands Bhriku a medal that her son won from a singing competition and asks him to stage the play all over the country to let the entire country about his lost son. She requests her not to forget what she asked him to do. Shocked to hear Bhriku tells her about how he lost his mother due to the lack of food after partition. He then tries to seek her blessings by touching her feet to which she gets embarrassed, and Bhriku leaves the place. The camera stays on the women, and after sometime she walks up to the camera while wiping her eyes with her sari and says "Tomrai to amader Mukundo Das (You guys are my Mukundo

Das)". Mukundo Das was a 20th Century writer who lived from 1878 to 1934. He had written several patriotic jattras(a form of folk theatre) which were very much popular in rural Bengal. The inspiring songs and dialogues he wrote played a pivotal role in the freedom movement in Bengal.

This small yet significant sequence establishes the kind of cultural importance theatre bears. Moreover, this sequence is Ghatak's way of memorising the IPTA about the power of the theatre as an art form. He also makes them try to understand what they could synthesis if there is a proper amalgamation between ideology and mass-communication. He also tries to memorise the IPTA about the responsibilities and the motto of the IPTA and in some way asks them to resolve all the rifts so that they can achieve what they had set to do. Alongside this element in the final sequence, we understand how Komal Gandhar as a film cinematically illustrates how a traumatised society and culture should be moving forward.

## Chapter 6

# Quest for Identity of Self and the Society

### 6.1 Introduction:

In this chapter, I have focused on two films of Ritwik Ghatak. The two films are “Nagarik” (The Citizen) and “Jukti Takko ar Goppo” (Argument, Debate and a story). Nagarik was the first feature-length film that Ghatak made, and Jukti Takko ar Goppo was the last feature-length film of his. Nagarik was made in 1953 but released in 1977 after his death alongside Jukti Takko ar Goppo which he made in 1974. Both of the first and the last film of a director releasing at the same time is a remarkable phenomenon. It makes us understand two things of Ghatak.

On the one hand, this phenomenon lets us understand how as a filmmaker he had changed in the 25 years of his filmmaking journey, how his perception about the medium had changed if had changed any much. On the other hand, it makes us understand the kind of struggle he had to go through to release his films due to several reasons. He could not release Nagarik mainly due to monetary reason; after he completed the film, he had no money left to distribute the film. Another reason was as the film’s narrative was inclined towards the leftist ideology it faced problems with censorship. Jukti Takko ar Goppo released three years after its completion due to monetary reasons only. Another reason could be because of the emergency rule was applied in India at that time which included media censorship. As Jukti Takko ar Goppo directly talked about the liberation war of Bangladesh and Naxalbari movement, this overtly political film faced censorship problems.<sup>39</sup> Only after Ghatak’s death in 1976 people started to know more about Ghatak’s filmography. Since then Ghatak has emerged as one of the most influential figures in the field of film studies.

In this chapter, I tried to understand the possible exilic filmmaker and accented filmmaker in Ghatak (Definition of which I have explained in more details later on). Also, Nagarik and

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<sup>39</sup>The Naxalite movement was named after the region called Naxalbari located in the northern West Bengal near Darjeeling. This movement, Marxist Leninist and/or Maoist in philosophy, called for land reform for the peasants, by the peasants through violent guerilla warfare. It was mainly active from 1967-1972.

Jukti Takko ar Goppo both the film's main theme was to find the identity of the characters and society. Both the films were written by Ghatak himself.

Nagarik is a story about a family who have been forced to leave their home due to partition and is living in a temporary home and looking for work. Jukti Takko ar Goppo is a story about a few displaced individuals who are affected by personal, political and financial reasons. Jukti Takko ar Goppo is often seen as an autobiographical film of Ghatak, who played the character of a drunken intellectual.

Both the films centres around the individuals forgetting who/what they were and accepts who/what they have become. That is why the common theme of the film is about the quest for the identity, and I have tried to understand how Ghatak with this film tries to understand this problem that the refugees went through for decades.

## **6.2 Understanding the Exilic Filmmaker and Accented Filmmaker in Ghatak:**

In Nagarik and Jukti Tokko ar Goppo we see the changing perceptions and the reality and emotional and narrative components of the home, region, nation and territory which let us understand the traumatic events that Bengal suffered since the partition in 1947. These elements in Ghatak's these two films let us understand the exilic filmmaker and the accented filmmaker that he was.

It was the film scholar Hamid Naficy who first gave the theory of an "accented filmmaker" and "exilic filmmaker". Hamid defined accented filmmaker as someone who is situated in a particular region but whose films are universal in the subject matters that they are dealing with.<sup>40</sup> Ghatak in his films often dealt with topics are universal and he often tagged the problems with the larger political discourse. Hamid also says that:

"Accented films are interstitial because they are created astride and in the interstices of social formations moreover, cinematic practices."<sup>41</sup>

In case of Ghatak, his films are interstitial because his films were often produced out of the prescribed studio method and studios of Tollywood (Bengal's film industry) and Bollywood

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<sup>40</sup>Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Cinema* (Princeton University Press, 2001)

<sup>41</sup>Ibid.



(Mumbai's film industry which produces films in Hindi). In his lifetime Ghatak always had the struggle to fund his projects and had left many films unfinished. While making *Nagarik*, he had lost all the money he inherited from his father.<sup>42</sup> While making *Jukti Takko ar Goppo*, he used up his wife's money with whom his relationship had deteriorated during the filming.<sup>43</sup> Ghatak himself has complained many times how difficult it was to make films in Bengal due to financial reasons. While talking to an interview, Ghatak stated:

“Especially in Eastern India, it (WWII) broke the backbone of the society, economically and socially. Many evil practices were witnessed. People became rich overnight and it was ill-gotten money. And there were those who charged 10,000 rupees for a studio floor and 1,500 rupees for a roll of film. Extinction of the working class was total.”<sup>44</sup>

In another essay written in 1966 he writes:

“I began work on *Subarnarekha* after I had completed *Meghe Dhaka Tara* and *Komal Gandhar*. It was not so simple, however, as I put it now. I have known extreme anxiety, hassles, and physical debility after completing every film. It is impossible to explain to an outsider, to one who is not in the business of making films, how intolerably difficult it has become to make experimental films in Bengal.”<sup>45</sup>

The problem of funding his films existed throughout his career. In this way, we can say that the films he produced were interstitial.

According to Nacify, the accented filmmakers were more to be found in the third world countries that were once colonised. The volatile sociopolitical situation of these countries inspired filmmakers from those countries to make universally appealing films.<sup>46</sup>

Nacify then defines the term ‘exile’ as:

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<sup>42</sup>Bhattacharya and Dasgupta, eds., *Ritwik Ghatak: Face to Face, Conversations with the Master*. CineCentral (2003)

<sup>43</sup>Ghatak, Surama. *Ritwik*. Asha Prakashani (1977)

<sup>44</sup>Bhattacharya and Dasgupta, eds., *Ritwik Ghatak: Face to Face, Conversations with the Master*. CineCentral (2003)

<sup>45</sup>Ghatak, Ritwik. *Rows and Rows of Fences*. Seagull Books (2000)

<sup>46</sup>Hamid Nacify, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Cinema* (Princeton University Press, 2001)

“Principally referring to external exiles: individuals or groups who voluntarily or involuntarily have left their country of origin and who maintains an ambivalent relationship with their previous and current places and cultures. Although they do not return to their homelands, they maintain an intense desire to do so – a desire that is projected in potent return narratives in their films.”<sup>47</sup>

We can see that Ghatak’s films often embodied this feeling of exile. His films often talked about the journey from one place to another. We have seen in the previous chapter in *Komal Gandhar*, journey was an integral part. In the case of *Nagarik* and *Jukti Tokko ar Goppo*, also this impulse to journey is very much present. This journeying impulse is many times influenced by various socio-political reasons. For the characters of his films, the question of what is their ‘home’ and what is their ‘homeland’ is constantly raised. The characters do not always desire of the past homeland. Their desire is transformative and changes with time. That is why the characters are constantly trying to forget who/what they were and try to accept who/what they have become. This acceptability of their new ‘home’ and ‘homeland’ is also one of the elements.

In Ghatak’s filmography, he often positions himself and his characters as exiles in their motherland. He is thoughtful of what was the homeland and also is trying to understand that what will be the homeland in the postcolonial India/Bangladesh (then East Pakistan). That is why Ghatak’s characters are not just showcasing the physical journey but also demonstrate a tremendous mental journey to accept the reality of the downgrading of their social status.

Both the kinds of the journey, the physical journey and the mental journey are a characteristic of exilic filmmaking. Ghatak embodies both the elements and that is why I have argued that Ghatak is a perfect example of an exilic filmmaker. According to Nacify, there exist three types of journeys which get portrayed in films. Those are the home seeking/ home founding journey, the journey of homelessness/ quest/ lost and the homecoming journey.<sup>48</sup> These elements of the journey are present in Ghatak’s all films that I have discussed/ going to discuss. Ghatak uses the element of the journey to represent the political consciousness and identity of the postcolonial Bengal. The emotions of the exile in his films are shown in the journey from the village to the city and from the city to the village. In *Nagarik* and *Jukti*

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<sup>47</sup>Ibid.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid.

Tokko ar Goppo the journeys politically transform the characters (about which I have discussed later on). Thus Ghatak had emphasised on both the aspects of the journey, and therefore I can conclude that Ghatak is a perfect example of an exilic filmmaker and an accented filmmaker.

### **6.3 The Quest for Identity in Nagarik:**

The films, Nagarik and Juti Tokko ar Goppo, are about finding the identity of self and the post-colonial Bengali society. We can see this from the opening sequence of both films. Nagarik is about a family who is forced to leave their home due to partition and is in search of a new home in the urban Kolkata. The family is also in search of work. They are also trying to build a new home of their own. The family comprises of Ramu, the eldest son, Sita, his sister and a young brother and their parents. Ramu has a girlfriend named Uma. Ramu's family has taken a boarder named Sagar for some extra money. The opening sequence of the film narrates the struggle of thousands of Bengali family had to go through due to the partition. Partition led to change not just the geography of Bengal but also rural Bengal. Places which were rural once were quickly transforming into urban centres and were getting linked to the core of the city. Both the capital cities of Kolkata and Delhi saw a massive influx of the refugees which led to immense sufferings to the refugees and the native citizens as well as the administration. The rich of the immigrants bought their own houses, the middle class bought land to build a house, and the lower class were ghettoized to live in colonies.<sup>49</sup> These traumatic events lead us to the narrative of Nagarik which was set between the times of 1951-52 where India was observing a huge influx of immigrants.

After the credits roll we see a documentary montage of Kolkata, with the montage a voiceover says 'I know him, I have seen him.' The voice over is of Ghatak himself, and here he is referring to the Nagarik- the citizen. As for the movie, the citizen is Ramu but in real life, the citizen can be anyone. It is an open indication towards all those who were living in Kolkata at that time struggling with their newly adopted lifestyle. The montage showcases the Hooghly River, the outskirts of Kolkata. Then we see the Howrah Bridge entering in the city, and then slowly the montage takes us to the urban Kolkata. There the voice over continues by saying 'Here stands the metropolis where the river silently winds its way beneath iron girders', mocking the urbanization and mechanical life of Kolkata. The narration continues

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<sup>49</sup>Satyesh Chakrabarty. 'The Growth of Calcutta in the Twentieth Century'. *Calcutta: The Living City*.

when we see a tram; the narrator says “I saw him, in the middle of the teeming crowds, a lone citizen” and then we see Ramu, the citizen of whom Ghatak is talking about who is waiting for the tram to pass. Ramu is asked by an old woman to help her to cross the road. He does that carefully and with this Ghatak establishes Ramu as a dutiful citizen of the city. According to my understanding, the character of Ramu in this is the film is a representation of Ghatak himself. The character represents the utopian, optimistic political self of Ghatak from his 1950s days when he was associated with IPTA and before he was expelled from CPI and faced problems in making his films.

The sequence continues as we see Ramu walking through a narrow lane. The lane tells us about the suffocative environment in which Ramu was living and tells us about the deterioration of their family. This narrow lane also gives a stark difference with what Ramu perceives of a perfect home. At the end of the lane, Ramu hears a violinist play. When the Violinist sees Ramu, he abruptly stops playing, and Ramu asks him to continue to play. The violinist takes his hand out and asks Ramu for money, which Ramu is unable to pay. Ashamed Ramu then leaves the place and heads towards his home. This scene tells us about the sad state of affairs of post-colonial Bengal, where a talented musician is playing at the streets for money, and an educated, music lover cannot pay him anything because he is unemployed.

The sequence ends when Ramu enters to the shady, dark new home of his. There he sees his mother and his sister. Sita is being presented to a potential bridegroom’s family where she is being subjected to all kinds of judgments. She is asked to walk, to sing, to lift her saree to show her ankle. In between all this Ramu and his mother dreams of returning to their old home which Ghatak beautifully crafts by hanging calendar which has a picture of a village house. This picture of the village house is a kind of fetish for the entire family which reminds them of their past and also the ideal future that they want to see. Sita’s father says that he did not educate her daughter as that would mean giving her independence. We see this kind of commoditization of women or these regressive ideas getting represented in Ghatak’s films, about which I have discussed in the next chapter. The sequence ends with a discussion between the father and Ramu about the prospects of the latter to find a job. His father is pessimistic about Ramu getting a job as he believes that Bengal is falling out an old structure and has gone past its golden days. Answering to this the optimistic Ramu says that shouldn’t

he try? He also says that his aspirations are not high; he just wants a life with some happiness.

In the opening sequence itself, Ghatak establishes all the major conflicts around which the journey is centered. The major conflicts are economical, generational and gender. The narrative of *Nagarik* is about the transformation of a middle-class Bengali family after independence. The middle-class, post-independence had to go out of their secure zone to understand the wider social crisis. The ones who were affected by the partition had to face more problems than the others. Their dislocation took away the comfort of family, and they were denied basic human needs like food, dresses, shelter and education.

Ghatak's films have always been a conscious work of political criticism. His criticisms were sometimes didactic. Here in *Nagarik*, we have seen that he utilizes the cinematic teachings and elements of the neo-realist tools to construct his narrative about the quest/journey of the identity. In *Jukti Tokko ar Goppo* we see Ghatak trying to manifest more about the exilic sentiment and about finding one's identity in a more complicated way.

#### **6.4 The Quest for Identity Continues in *Jukti Takko ar Goppo*:**

By the time Ghatak made *Jukti Takko ar Goppo* (Reason, Debate and a story) Ghatak had become a much finer filmmaker compared to what he was while making *Nagarik* in terms of his mastery over the art and craft of the medium. *Jukti Tokko ar Goppo* was made in 1974 and was released in 1977. Ghatak had written the story of *Jukti Tokko ar Goppo* and also composed the music of the film. Bengali film industry at this time gave special importance towards sociopolitical turmoil around them. Two stalwart directors and contemporaries of Ghatak in the Bengali film industry, Satyajit Ray and Mrinal Sen, were making sociopolitical films at this point of time. Satyajit Ray created his 'Kolkata trilogy' which consisted *Pratidwandi* ("The Adversary," 1970), *Seemabaddha* ("Company Limited," 1971), and *Jana Aranya* ("The Middle Man," 1975). These films dealt with the issue of educated middle-class men struggling to find work and live in urban Kolkata. Mrinal Sen created his 'Kolkata Quartet' which had *Interview* (1970), *Calcutta, '71* (1972), *Padatik* ("Urban Guerilla," 1973) and *Chorus* (1974). Ray in his films remained much more subtle while talking about the

political issues while Sen vehemently attacked the social injustices and called himself a political propagandist filmmaker.<sup>50</sup>

Unlike the films of Ray and Sen Ghatak's *Jukti Tokko ar Goppo* was not centered around Kolkata. It certainly had some portion of the storyline set in Kolkata. But it is more about a quest journey of a group of dislocated individuals who were in their situation for several political, social, economical and cultural reasons. Their journey is in and around Kolkata and out of Kolkata to the countryside.

The film is set in 1971. The protagonist who is in quest for his identity is Ghatak himself, who plays the character of Neelkantha. *Jukti Tokko ar Goppo* is considered to be an autobiographical work of Ghatak where Ghatak introspected his own life and art. Neelkantha is another name of the Hindu god, Shiva. According to the mythological stories, Shiva drinks up poison during the churning of ocean to save the entire the universe. This gives him a blue throat. This was an act of self sacrifice. By the end of *Jukti Takko ar Goppo* we see Ghatak's character as someone alone protesting against the state of Bengali society in 1970s and the end result of that protest is no less than a sacrifice. Ghatak also answered in an interview why it was important for him to play the role. He says:

“I do not think that any other young man of Calcutta could have identified himself with this character. Unless one had gone through the struggles of a Communist one would not be able to play these parts. I could have had others act but that would seem fake. In the beginning, I thought of Madhabi (Mukherjee) [for the role of Durga]. But Madhabi could not have understood what I meant to say while Monidi (Tripti Mitra) could because we both joined the Party during the same time and left it together as well. Moreover, we both know how and why Bengal changed over the period. So I do not think anyone else could have done what we have done.”<sup>51</sup>

By inserting himself in the film, Ghatak made the film rich in meaning and symbolism. According to Hamid Nacify self inscriptions is the most important performative strategy an

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<sup>50</sup>Mrinal Sen. *Always being born*. Stellar Publishers Pvt. Ltd. (2004)

<sup>51</sup>Bhattacharya and Dasgupta, eds. *Ritwik Ghatak: Face to Face: Conversations with the Master*. CineCentral (2003)

accented director takes. He also says that autobiography is a strong idea of accented cinema.<sup>52</sup> We see all these elements in *Jukti Tokko ar Goppo*.

*Jukti Tokko ar Goppo* opens with the sound of drums, tabla, few percussion instruments and a flute. After the credits roll out screen fades out to black. Then when the screen lit up, we see an old man wearing a dhoti sitting in a village hut and looking directly towards the camera. The frame here is titled a little, and a rapid cut takes place making us understand that the man is looking at a film studio which is of barren white land with just one tree and three dancers are dancing. The dancers were entirely covered in black dress including their faces, and their dance is wild and accompanied by drums and cymbals. Ghatak through this sequence tries to represent the downfall of the modern Bengal society. At one side there is the exhausted old villager who also symbolizes what modernity has done to villages. At the other side, we witness the mad political dance of Bengal, which one can see as ‘Bhuter Nrityo’(Dances of the Ghost). This sequence of the old man and the dance comes in the film in the beginning, middle and the end symbolizing that nothing was changing with time and the misery that Bengal was facing persisted.



Fig (09)- The mad dance in *Jukti Tokko ar Goppo*

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<sup>52</sup>Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Cinema* (Princeton University Press, 2001)

After developing the Meta theme of the film, Ghatak cuts to a flat at Kolkata. At the end of the hallway of the flat, we see Durga, wife of Neelkantha, Satya, son of Neelkantha and a young unemployed engineer, Nachiketa. Alongside the name of Neelkantha other names also has symbolic importance. Durga according to mythology was the wife of Shiva. Neelkantha's son Satya's name means truth. Ghatak in *Jukti Tokko ar Goppo* explains how much he loved the youth and how he thought that the young are the most passionate about the betterment of the society. Nachiketa is named after young sceptic from Upanishad who burns for the truth. The refugee girl in the film is called Bangabala which translates to 'the daughter of Bengal'.

While walking through the hallway, Beethoven's fifth symphony starts to play. A quick cut reveals us a dejected Ghatak sitting in a room. Durga has come to tell Ghatak that she is leaving him and taking Satya with her to join a new job. She also says how she tried to be a good wife, but she could not take drunkard Neelkantha and his madness anymore. She also complains how she tried to save him by taking him to an asylum to get rid of alcoholism, but she could not succeed. What is to be noted here is that Ghatak himself in his personal life was an alcoholic and was admitted in an asylum in many brief passages and his wife Surama did leave him for all this. In the movie, Durga forcefully says 'separation is essential' in English. These were the exact words Surama wrote to Ghatak while leaving him.<sup>53</sup>

Neelkantha is then again exiled from his family. Neelkantha was once exiled, lost his home in 1947 and here in 1971 again he loses everything he had. He is only left with Nachiketa, who is supposed to take care of him and Neelkantha is again set to find a new home and a new identity of him.

The opening sequence ends with Nachiketa getting him a bottle of local liquor by selling the fan of the room. We now see Neelkantha sitting in an empty room as Durga had taken all his books and records to keep them as a memory of Neelkantha for Satya. Moreover, also she knew that if she had left them, Neelkantha will sell them and buy liquor. Neelkantha mutters a few words which translate to 'I am burning, the universe is burning'. He says these repeatedly in the film for a few times. Alongside these words, he also says 'Think, think! Practice thinking!' This was the way of Ghatak to remind people and his contemporaries to engage in critical thinking. These kinds of dialogues make this film a didactic film. The title of the film also suggests the motive of Ghatak. *Jukti* means Reason, *Tokko* means debate and

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<sup>53</sup>Ghatak, Surama. *Ritwik*. Asha Prakashani (1977)



Goppo means story. The title of the film tells that Ghatak wants an argument and a debate about the crisis the Bengali society was going through.

While Neelkantha was drinking, a young woman wrapped up in a sari enters the room. She was only carrying a bundle with her. Drunken Neelkantha puts up his glasses to see the visitor. When he sees the visitor, he asks “Are you Ma? I cannot recognise you. Have you come from Bangladesh?” Hearing this, the girl shyly replied “Yes! I am from Bangladesh. My name is Bangabala.” She narrates how her family was murdered by the Pakistani army and how she came to Kolkata, looking for shelter. Hearing the word, ‘shelter’ Ghatak mutters it many times- ‘ashroi (shelter)’. At this point, Nachiketa enters the room with Ghatak’s shelter- another bottle of local liquor. This constant quest for the shelter is a recurrent theme in both *Nagarik* and *Jukti Tokko ar Goppo*. However, unlike in case of *Nagarik* where the family shifted to home, in *Jukti Tokko ar Goppo*, Neelkantha declares that they will find their shelter in the vast land of Bangladesh and the newly formed family journeys towards to finding their new home and identity.

### **6.5 Politicizing the Quest of Identity by the end of *Nagarik*:**

The family’s home seeking journey in the film revolves around the small, suffocating dwells. The obstruction in their journey is symbolized by the boundedness they were facing in the urban city. Of all the family members only Ramu is shown to be wandering around the city, rest all are confined in their space. In Ghatak’s films, the cramped space is an integral part which shapes his films to become accented films. These shady environments are set up with low lights and different camera angles to symbolize the struggle of the characters. Amidst all this Ramu constantly refers to his dream house of the calendar where he wants to live with his lover, Uma. The concept of a perfect Bengali village comes into play in this film also. This fetish of Ramu makes us understand the naivety of Ramu’s Bengali identity. However, the struggle to find work in the urban Kolkata shatters all of his dreams to build his perfect house. The family’s physical and mental state is symbolized by the gloomy, hopeless face of Sita, the mother’s constant reminders of their old house and the father’s constant pessimistic comments about the degradation of the post-colonial Bengali society. Ramu’s optimism also dulls off slowly due to his failure to find work. The boarder Sagar they took in also had no job prospect and had no money to pay the rent. Ramu’s lover Uma also gets into family problems with her sister getting into prostitution. Moreover, towards the end of the film, Ramu’s father dies.

Towards the end of the film Sita and Sagar, who were lovers, talk about their possible future. Sagar tells Sita how they were crumbling like the banks of River Padma. This symbolization links the fragmentation of the urban Bengali society with the division Padma due to the partition. Overhearing this conversation, Ramu enters the room and says that whatever they were talking was history and the times are changing. He also says that when a mother gives birth to a child, she feels that death is almost near, but death does not come. It is a new life that emerges. Like that society is also trying to give birth. The birth of a new society which will be less exploitative and all this pain and the feeling of everything getting destroyed is just the kind of feeling a mother feels before the childbirth. He emphasizes on the fact that the times were indeed changing.

This conversation establishes the changed Ramu. The naïve Ramu's nostalgic bourgeois identity is shattered, and he has turned up to become a much more energized person with hope. Ghatak makes us understand his political consciousness by using 'Internationale' as a background track while Ramu speaks.<sup>54</sup> This usage of 'Internationale' connects the newly found consciousness of Ramu and the struggle of him with the larger political cause that Ghatak advocated, which was the sufferings of the working class and international communist movements. While writing and making *Nagarik*, Ghatak was still a member of the CPI and IPTA, so one can easily understand the roots of these ideological references in his film.

The speech of Ramu convinces Sagar that he should remain with the family and only together as a unit they can survive. This sequence ends with the family being uprooted once again as they were unable to pay the rent. They are forced to go to a slum and live there. While leaving, Ramu takes his calendar with him. In his way out he sees a young couple entering their left home. Ramu overhears the husband promising his wife that he will soon find a job and things will get resolved for them, and they will be out of the misery that they are in. Ramu remembers how he had said the same things time and again to his family throughout the family. He stands still in the doorway realising the ground reality for the first time, and in the background, the 'Internationale' starts playing. A few rapid cuts between the face of Ramu and the picture of the calendar take place, and suddenly we see Ramu tearing off the calendar while the sound of the tearing off getting exaggerates. This combination of the

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<sup>54</sup>Eugene Pottier, *L'Internationale*, music by Pierre Degeyter. Charles H. Kerr, trans., *The International*, in *The Industrial Workers of the World Songbook* (Marxists Internet Archive)

‘Internationale’ being played and Ramu tearing off the calendar symbolizes that he has understood the reality of the living conditions and the job prospects that lie in front of him. He has also understood the stagnant and sad state of the middle class in Bengal. What Ghatak had to say about *Nagarik* was:

“This was the first attempt to capture the crisis in the life of middle-class Bengalis in the post World War II period, realistically, in art. . . . A young boy dreamed he would flourish in life. He felt that around the corner a lucky good turn was waiting. However, he gradually realized that no good turn was waiting for him. It is not possible in our social structure. We, the middle-class, will always remain at this economic stage, we will never rise above it. The story ends with this realization.”<sup>55</sup>

While Ramu walks down the alley for the last time, he sees the violinist who this time agrees to play for Ramu for free, but Ramu does not wait. Ramu cannot afford to wait. He has to move on to continue his daily life struggle. The violinist stops playing as one of his strings gets broken. With this, the tune of ‘Internationale’ comes in the film for the final time while Ramu walks off our sight. In the end, the narration begins with the narrator saying “This was Ramu’s story. The life of a citizen, in another time and place, what course will it take? After that where will Ramu go....but that is another story”.

This is how in *Nagarik*, Ghatak journeys through the identity of the characters and the society and then tags everything with larger political discourse and politicizes the identity of both the character and the society. That is how the quest for identity in *Nagarik* ends.

## **6.6 The Quest ending With a Doubt in *Jukti Tokko ar Goppo*:**

After Neelkantha, Nachiketa and Bangabala come out from Neelkantha’s flat, they roam around various places of Kolkata from vendors to a park to the Hoogly river and Kalighat temple. In the park, they meet Jagannath who was an unemployed Sanskrit teacher who came from Northern Bengal where the Naxalites were active. He had come to Kolkata to find a job. Neelkantha asks Jagannath to join their group. Later on, in the evening they meet up with few of the intellectuals who were once comrades of Neelkantha. They were drinking and were discussing the fall of the Bengali society and culture. There Neelkantha asks one of them to

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<sup>55</sup>Bhattacharya and Dasgupta, eds., *Ritwik Ghatak: Face to Face: Conversations with the Master*. CineCentral. (2003)

think critically and asks them to do something as he was unable to do anything. Neelkantha in Jukti Tokko ar Goppo refers to himself as the broken intellectual. In between this entire journey, Ghatak continuously drinks.

The next day the group goes to a factory to look for a job for Nachiketa. However, the workers of the factory were on strike, so Neelkantha asks everyone to go to the village where Durga had shifted. In the countryside, they meet with Panchanan ustad who is primarily a Chhau dance mask maker.<sup>56</sup> He offers them food and shelter. Bangabala shows her interest to take part in the dance as Devi Durga. However, Panchanan ustad tells her that woman cannot take part in the dance. Still, Bangabala imagines that she is playing the role of Devi Durga and is slaying Mahishasur. This connection between Bangabala (Representing Bangladesh) and Chhau dance (Representing all marginalized tribal roots) lets us imagine the history that both suffered, the history of oppression and depravity. It also tells us about the present struggle of both, with both in the verge of losing their identity. With the partition, Bangladesh lost its old identity and with the modernization Chhau lost its space and identity in the Bengal society.

During the night of their stay at Panchanan ustad's house Neelkantha sings a song to Bangabala titled 'Keno Cheye Go Maa (why are you looking upon their faces, Mother)'. The song is a Rabindra Sangeet. The song translates into:

“Mother, you give them all that you have.

You give them golden grain and flowing water, knowledge and religion,

but they have nothing to give you, nothing.

From their wretched souls, they can only offer you lies.

Mother, keep your pains shut within and hide your tears.

Hide your face in the dust, Mother.

Keep your cruel children out of your mind, Mother.”

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<sup>56</sup>Chhau dance a folk dance form originating in western West Bengal in a district called Purulia. Ornatemasks are worn to assume the identity of gods, goddesses or demons, and stories fromRamayana, Mahabharata, and Puranas are performedthrough this stylized, athletic dance theater.

This song reminds us of the wretched men and women who take their mother for granted. Here the mother is the motherland and the partition of the motherland happened due to the wretched souls. Moreover, as Neelkantha sings the song to Bangabala, she is being represented as Bangladesh, the mother. This song is very much different in terms of subject material from other patriotic songs like 'Bandemataram' or 'Amar Sonar Bangla'. These two songs also talked about the motherland. These two examples portray the romantic motherland with all its children are trying to make their motherland better. Whereas 'Keno Cheye Acho Go Ma' is a bitter song which talks about the betrayal motherland faced from its children. This song in some sense also questions the romanticism of motherland that happened in countless songs. This song reminds that in 1971, it is only pain, agony and tears that exist for the motherland.

The next morning they leave from Panchanan's home and set their journey towards Durga's house. In the road, Jagannath dies in a clash between the local landlord and the peasants. This is the plot point 2 in the film, and in this point, the sequence of the old man and the mad dance comes to question the senseless violence that the audience witnesses.

After this incident, the three move to Durga's house where Neelkantha asks her to give them shelter, to which Durga refuses but agrees to keep Bangabala. However, Bangabala says that she does not want to stay and would like to be with Neelkantha and take care of him. The three then decides to spend the night in the nearby forest and Durga agrees that she will bring Satya to see his father the next morning. In the forest, they meet a few Naxalites. Neelkantha there discusses with a young Marxist revolutionary about Marxism and their movement and the politics of India. Hearing Neelkantha's views, the young revolutionary dismisses him by saying that he was just another drunkard, broken middle-class intellectual. This comment is indirectly addressed towards Ghatak. Neelkantha agrees to the remarks but ends by saying "But I spoke the truth when I said that I am confused. All of us are utterly confused. We are all groping in the darkness, not knowing which way to go". This is the high point of the film in terms of the main theme of the film is concerned. We now see a Ghatak who is utterly confused about society, and it's future. He is not anymore the Ghatak of the 1950s who is optimistic about the working class struggle. Rather we see a Ghatak questioning the authenticity of an armed rebellion. We see a Ghatak who claims that he is in utter darkness and we all are in darkness, not knowing what is right and what is wrong anymore. This is how in Jukti Tokko Goppo Ghatak describes the identity crisis of self and society.

At the end of *Jukti Tokko ar Goppo*, Neelkantha dies in crossfire between the police and the Naxalites on the next day. This death of Neelkantha symbolizes that he indeed was not like the immortal Shiva, rather for his sacrifice he had to give his life. During the end of the film, the difference between the actor, character and the writer fades out. In the death scene of Neelkantha, he rises to the frame standing tall and sees Durga and Satya coming, and that is when he is shot in his belly. He shouts out ‘Durga’ and stumbles towards the camera and pours the liquor bottle he was holding on the camera. This shot wiped out all the separation between Ghatak/Neelkantha (as the writer/character/actor/director) and the camera/audience. According to me this shot symbolically serves a few purposes. One can see it in a way that the audience is getting purified with the alcohol, as alcohol is a purifying agent. On another level, one can read the sequence in a way that the alcoholism that Neelkantha had inflicted upon himself which made him distorted, the audience themselves are being thrust into that feeling of disorientation now. This sequence shocks the audience and gives rise to polarized reactions from them. At one pole the audience empathizes with Neelkantha aka Ghatak, and on the other hand, the audience distances themselves from Neelkantha aka Ghatak.



Fig(10)- Ghatak pours alcohol on camera in *Jukti Tokko ar Goppo*.

As Ghatak falls into the ground, Durga and Satya run towards him and the fifth symphony of Beethoven starts to play for the final time. This again signifies the intermarrying of the local with the global. As Neelkantha lies in Durga's lap he utters his last monologue:

“Everything is burning; the universe is burning; I am burning too. Do you remember Madan the weaver in Manik-babu's story? The one who said, “How could I take money from Bhuban, the moneylender, to buy thread and set the loom rolling and

betray you? However, when my joints ache for the roll of the loom, I roll it – without a piece of thread in it. I must do something. I had to do something!”<sup>57</sup>

Throughout the film *Ghatak* constantly talks about ‘doing something’, ‘he was burning’, ‘practice thinking’. This was his way to suggest action, contemplation and sacrificing the self. This is the directive of Neelkantha/*Ghatak* to the audience that even if for the lost cause we must do something to preserve the society. After his death, we see the policemen who killed him, Durga, Satya, Nachiketa and Bangabala marching between the fields. They all represent something. The policemen represent the state which can be oppressive or supportive, Durga and Satya lost a family member, like many others in the time when the Naxalbari movement was at the peak. Moreover, Nachiketa and Bangabala represent the future. All of their action or inaction will decide the future of Bengal. Then after they march away, we see a barren land which is a classic trait of accented, exilic cinema where the journey is left open-ended. In *Jukti Tokko ar Goppo Ghatak* does not end the journey; rather he lefts it open for the course of time to decide it.

After the sequence cuts, we again see the old man sitting in his hut with his mouth open and watching the mad dance. This sequence tells us that the mad political dance in Bengal has not ended yet and probably will linger on for years to come.

In an interview in 1975 *Ghatak* said this while talking about the Indian society and how *Jukti Tokko ar Goppo* can offer a solution to those problems:

“The present anarchic state of affairs in the country is the direct result of the so-called independence of ’47. I have spoken of it in my film [*Jukti*]. Now, what are we passing through, neo-colonialism, absolutely neo-colonialism. I did not express this [directly] in the film. If I did, my film would become [merely] political. It would not be a film. In the film, I have tried expressing the situation in human terms. I do not think it is my business to suggest solutions by using big words or slogan mongering. I believe no one in this country has tried to grasp the problem in this way. If I can do this, to throw

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<sup>57</sup>The story he refers to is titled *Shilpi* (“Craftsman,” 1946) and was written by Manik Bandyopadhyay who was a well-known modern Bengali novelist. The tale focuses on a group of weavers who have stopped weaving in protest against an unscrupulous moneylender. The protagonist of this story is the weaver, Madan, who continues to weave on one night despite the community’s protest. When asked why he weaves on an empty loom, he says that without practicing weaving, he develops arthritis in his legs. The tale of the weaver weaving without thread illustrates the necessity of doing something, of taking right action.

the problem before the people [and say] this is your problem. Now think, what is to be done? Then it is enough. It seems this is my job.”<sup>58</sup>

From his first film *Nagarik* to *Jukti Tokko ar Goppo* Ghatak understood cinema especially his cinema as something that is a well constructed and committed artistic and political exercise which constantly tried to engage between the past and the present.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, by studying *Nagarik* and *Jukti Tokko ar Goppo*, we get a clear understanding that maybe Ghatak’s political understanding had changed over the time, but in core, Ghatak was a person with the same political ideology twenty-five years after making *Nagarik*. Surely *Jukti Tokko ar Goppo* tells us that Ghatak had overcome the nativity of his during making *Nagarik*, but in both times he tried to be as a realist while addressing the problem as he could. Moreover, the quest for the identity of the self and society for Ghatak became complicated as years passed by and the political turmoil of the 1970s left him doubtful over everything that he once thought to have understood and figured out.

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<sup>58</sup>Rajadhyaksha, Ashish and Gangar, Amrit eds., *Ghatak: Arguments/Stories* : Screen Unit (1987)

<sup>59</sup>Ghatak, Ritwik. *Rows and Rows of Fences*. Seagull Books (2000)



# Chapter 7

## The representation of Women in Meghe Dhaka Tara (The Cloud Capped Star) and Subarnarekha

### 7.1 Introduction:

In this last chapter, I have studied two films of Ghatak titled 'Meghe Dhaka Tara (The Cloud Capped Star, 1960)' and Subarnarekha (1962). Like Ghatak's most of the other films these two also revolves around a family affected by the partition of Bengal. In this chapter, I have tried to explain how Ghatak represents women in his films, and he portrays the commoditisation of Women in post-colonial Bengal. Even today we do not get to see many women-centric films. Ghatak was one of the very first filmmakers of India to make women-centric films alongside Satyajit Ray whose Devi (The Goddess) was released in 1960 alongside Meghe Dhaka Tara.

### 7.2 Synopsis of Meghe Dhaka Tara:

Meghe Dhaka Tara (The Cloud Capped Star) was released in 1960. It is based on a novel written by Shaktipada Rajguru. Ghatak adapted the novel and wrote the screenplay and directed the film. The film is set in late 1950s of Bengal. The story of the film revolves around an educated middle-class refugee family who is now staying in a neighbourhood in the outskirts of Kolkata. The protagonist of the film is Nita, who is the elder daughter of the family. She has given up her university studies to work and help her family as she is the only bread earner of the entire family. Her elder brother, Shankar who should have been the head of the household is an aspiring singer. Nita's father teaches in a school in the neighbourhood, and her mother maintains the household. Nita also has two younger siblings, her sister Gita and brother Montu who are students at school. Both are immature and selfish to understand the economic situation of the family. In Nita's gloomy life she looks forward to the return of her lover, Sanat who is a young scientist. As the story progresses, Nita's family becomes

more dependent on her. Her father meets with an accident and is forced to quit teaching. Her brother, Montu who was working in a factory also meets with an accident, so he is also not in a state of earning. Shankar also leaves home to become a singer.

All the stress and burden takes a toll on Nita. Sanat also got a job and wanted to settle down, but Nita asks her to wait as if she marries and leaves her home there will not be anyone to take care of the family. Impatient Sanat marries Gita. All of these put adversary effects on Nita, both physically and mentally. She grows Tuberculosis, but even in her illness she forcefully works to support her family. Shankar who had by then became a famous classical singer returns back to home to find out that Nita is wasting her life with Tuberculosis. Shankar then takes her to a sanatorium to treat her where she lives uncertain of the fact whether she will live or not and forgotten by everyone in the family except Shankar.

### **7.3 Brief Synopsis of Subarnarekha:**

Subarnarekha begins with an almost similar setting of Meghe Dhaka Tara. It is about a lower-middle-class family living in a refugee colony post the partition of Bengal in 1947. They are living in the 'Notun Jiban (New Life)' colony which signifies that the refugees had to start their lives newly. The film's theme revolves around the life of Sita who lost her parents during the violence of partition. She gets raised by her elder brother Ishwar. Ishwar also keeps a poor, lower caste boy named Abhiram with them. Abhiram had got lost from his parents during the partition. The three moves from the city to the countryside where Ishwar gets a job as an assistant manager in a factory. Sita takes care of her unmarried brother and later on when she grows up she falls in love with Abhiram. However, Ishwar wants an upper caste husband for Sita and asks her not to see Abhiram again. Ishwar then tries to arrange for Sita's marriage. However, Sita was determined to marry Abhiram, so she runs away to Kolkata with Abhiram on her wedding day.

Sita and Abhiram start living in a slum in the city. They also have a son named Binu. Abhiram starts working as a bus driver. One day while driving the bus Abhiram accidentally runs over a child and the angry mob beats up him to death. In this situation, Sita is forced to earn money to take care of herself and Binu. She starts by singing for people who pay to her but later on eventually becomes a prostitute. One day Ishwar visits Kolkata for a business trip. In the drunken state, he comes to Sita for her services. He does not realise that the prostitute is his sister. In the shock of seeing her brother in that scenario, Sita kills herself. At

the end of the film, a devastated Ishwar takes care of Binu. Ishwar tries to move on from the traumatic incident for the sake of his nephew, Binu.

## **7.4 Using the Archetypal Women Characters:**

In Ghatak's earlier films we have seen him building the female characters around the mother goddess. The two main characters of *Meghe Dhaka Tara* and *Subarnarekha* do not only get physically or mentally sacrificed by the rigid structure of family and society but also gets symbolically represented as a goddess. Nita and Sita represent the mother Bengal. The mother Bengal sacrifices due to the division and greed of the Bengali society. Ghatak thought that partition was not historically inevitable, but it was forced upon the people of Bengal by the national bourgeois, particularly by Indian National Congress.<sup>60</sup> He also thought that the people of Bengal were misguided and that was why they supported the division of the country. What the main problem of Ghatak was that although the middle-class refugees were suffering immensely post-partition, they still clung on to their rigid class values.<sup>61</sup> One instance of this is seen in *Meghe Dhaka Tara*. When Montu gets the job of a mechanic at a factory, his well-educated father is unable to accept the fact that his son will do such an ordinary job. Ghatak through this scene shows that the family still has not overcome their narrow class values despite the entire struggle they were going through.

The characters of Nita and Sita are archetypal characters. Using these characters, Ghatak critiques the post-partition lack of consciousness amongst the middle class. The characters were an amalgamation of women and mother goddess. Nita's character finds similarity with Uma, Durga and Gauri whereas Sita's character resembles with Sita, Sati and Radha.

### **7.4.1 Nita as Mother Goddess:**

*Meghe Dhaka Tara*'s Nita is a manifestation of many archetypal goddess characters, Durga as Jagadhatri as the eternal giver and Uma/Gauri as the mother goddess. Nita's birthday also is on the day of Jagadhatri Puja.

In one of her essays Era Bhaskar wrote:

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<sup>60</sup>Ghatak, Ritwik. *Rows and Rows of Fences*. Seagull Books (2000)

<sup>61</sup>Ibid.

“It is believed that Durga was born out of this smoke as a transmutation of human desires, taking the form of Jagaddhatri, the universal sustainer. One of the central images associated with Nita is the courtyard wherein are centred the ambitions of the rest of the family . . . These selfish ambitions pour into the courtyard, the symbolic yagna mandapa (where rituals take place), from which manifests Nita in the role of the Provider and Creator”.<sup>62</sup>

Traditionally the courtyard in Bengali family is a place where all the actions take place, and that is often lively. In Meghe Dhaka Tara it is opposite. The courtyard is the place where all the stress on Nita is manifested from her family. This courtyard is the place which denies that Nita has motherhood; Nita has an identity of her that she wants to build. The courtyard is the site of the deterioration of her by her family members. Ghatak often pans from the mother of Nita to Gita and then to Nita to showcase the stark difference between the characters. The previous two were, in my opinion, were a representation of destructive and greedy goddesses whereas Nita was the eternal giver satisfying them. Whenever the possibility of Nita’s marriage was brought into conversation in the courtyard, the sound of the boiling kettle and smoke signified the panic-stricken face of Nita’s mother.

Filmmaker Kumar Shahani observed that all three female characters in the film had three traditional aspects of feminine power. Nita had preserving and caring attitude, Geeta had the sensual side, and their mother had the cruel side. The fact that Nita could not manifest all these qualities led to her ultimate sufferings according to Shahani.<sup>63</sup>

Nita’s blind support towards her family at the cost of health represents her as Uma/ Gauri as the mother goddess. Uma is the archetype of daughter and bride in the Bengali household. In the case of Meghe Dhaka Tara, Nita’s resemblance with Uma is ironic because it is her family which has made her sacrifice her motherhood and womanhood. Throughout the film, the reference of Uma song comes into play into background music. The Uma sangeet is about Uma leaving her maternal house to go to her husband’s home. Ghatak uses the song various times in the film, most significantly when Nita’s senile father sends her away because of her tuberculosis. Nita is not the young woman who is getting married off to her husband’s home; she is a relatively older woman who is suffering from a contagious, terminal disease. For her

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<sup>62</sup>Ira Bhaskar, "Myth and Ritual: Ghatak's *Meghe Dhaka Tara*," *Journal of Arts and Ideas*, 43-50.

<sup>63</sup>Kumar Shahani, "Nature in the End is Grandly Indifferent" *Ajantrik 2* (March 1993), 78-9.

parents, she has now become a burden than an asset. Nita like Ghatak's other films gets pushed in exile. So Ghatak by using the Uma song sets an irony of showing the state of respect and love women received in Hindu mythology and those same mythological characters receives the same love in today's household whereas the real women are neglected and are often subjected to harassment and sacrifice.

The sacrifice of Nita as Uma/ Durga is further emphasised by the sound of a whip. The sound of the whip comes in the film many times. The first when Nita discovers Geeta at Sanat's flat. As she sees Geeta she comes down the stairs, and the sound of the whip becomes prominent, and her hands hold her throat, and she starts to gasp like she is unable to breathe. The scene ends with a close up of her with the neck being cut from the frame. This scene alongside the whiplash makes the audience feel for Nita's sufferings. Nita's character starts to feel everything from this point. She starts to perceive how she has been betrayed by her family and her lover and the illness which will slowly finish her life. The way the Ghatak audio-visually composed these scenes created the character of Nita, who has strongly portrayed her sacrifice as an abandoned archetypal mother and contemporary goddess.

#### **7.4.2 Sita as Mother and Lover Goddess:**

Ghatak portrays Sita as both the mother and the lover goddess. He achieves this by the dialogues and especially by the songs. Ghatak portrays Sita as the goddess Sita and as the lover of Krishna, Radha. When Ishwar takes his family to the countryside one day, Sita meets with his brother's boss. He asks Sita her name and then starts telling her the story of her birth and death. He tells Sita how the goddess Sita was found in the earth, and then Janak adopted her and how later on she returned to the earth back again after her husband abandoned her. Ram had abandoned her as he suspects Sita to have cheated on him with Ravan. In Subarnarekha also, Sita is forced to commit suicide (an act of sacrifice) after she sees her drunken brother at her doorstep to get her service as a prostitute. What is interesting here is like Sita of Ramayana, the Sita of Subarnarekha was also abandoned. Here Ishwar abandoned his sister as he thought that her love for the lower caste Abhiram was inappropriate. Here in the film, Sita cuts her own throat after seeing his brother. In Ramayana also the way Sita falls on the ground after she gets to know that Ram has banished her from the kingdom. She explained her feelings as if he had cut her down with a sword. Of course in Subarnarekha Ishwar directly did not cut the throat of Sita, but he was the prime reason behind her suicide.

That is why Ghatak brings the archetypal character of Sita from Ramayana to tell the story of Sita of Subarnarekha.

Another construction of the Goddess archetype is with the character of Sati. Sati is another name of the mother goddess who had sacrificed her life because her father Daksha in some way gets attracted in a sexual way towards her. Daksha opposes to the marriage of Sati with Shiva. In the case of Subarnarekha, Ishwar represents Daksha, Sita represents Sati and Abhiram represents Shiva. As the symbolic father, Ishwar has a problem with Sita marrying Abhiram, and in the of the narrative Sita commits suicide just like Sati did because of the shame they felt due to sexual advancements made towards them by Ishwar and Daksha respectively.

Sita also sings Krishna Kirtans (love songs sung by Radha for the love of Krishna). Sita sings these songs sitting in the bank of the river waiting for her love interest, Abhiram, who represents Krishna. This usage of Krishna Kirtan portrayed the dilemma that is there in love, the fear of separation. According to me, this was also a metaphor for the separated Bengal and the lost culture of Bengal due to the partition.

### **7.5 The Sacrifice Made by Nita:**



Fig(11)- The isolation of Nita after she gets Tuberculosis.

The last scene of *Meghe Dhaka Tara* takes place in a sanatorium where Nita is admitted for the treatment of her Tuberculosis. Nita's brother Shankar visits her and both are sitting outside in a lawn. The sanatorium is placed around Shillong hills. Nita is pictured as a small human being, discarded by her family and waiting for her death to come. When Shankar starts speaking, he says about the new born baby of Gita and Sanat. This feeling of motherhood that Nita will never get hurts her badly. She grabs Shankar's shirt and starts to cry in agony and say "Brother, you know I want to live. I love so much to be alive. Brother, tell me once that I will live. Brother, I want to go home. I want to live!" These words, 'I want to live' echoes and reverberates in the hills of Shillong. These phrases are joined with whirring sound and the sound of the whiplash. Both respectively symbolize her disease and the suffering she had to go through. Nita's scream gets louder, and in the camera her visual image gets absent, and we see panoramic shots of the mountains. Amidst all of these Nita, the diseased woman, the fallen goddess and the dystopian motherland wishes to live because of her unrelenting love towards life. Even when she knows that she is going to die she wants to live desperately. She knows that the attitude towards her of her family members will not change, she will again probably be asked to sacrifice for them, but then also she is willing to live, just like motherland who after all the wrongdoings done to her, wants to love its children. However, the sacrifice Nita made for her love was immense, which symbolizes the sacrifices of the motherland. Moreover, with these sacrifices, Ghatak inflicts a deep scepticism about the future of Bengali homeland and Bengali household.

## **7.6 The Sacrifice Made by Sita:**

In the film, we see that music has always been a mean of escaping the reality for Sita. She loved singing so much that it was her primary source of expression. So when she elopes to Kolkata with Abhiram, she considers singing to earn some extra money. However, Abhiram asks her not to do so. When Abhiram is murdered, Sita was left with no other choice than singing. Little did she know that she will be expected to do too much more than just singing to please her customers. When for the first time she prepares to sing we see how much terrified she was. Her neighbor reminds her about the dire need of money and calms her down. When Sita watches herself in the mirror after she gets ready, we see a frightened and an ashamed face as if to sell her singing would be equal to sell her soul.

Towards the end of the film, Sita is actually in exile, living in a slum with her son, Binu. The scene where Sita commits suicide we can term it as Sita's sacrificial scene. That scene is

constructed entirely with the usage of a song, sound effects and there are no dialogues. The Space was such a shocking space for both the audience and Sita I believe that no dialogue was needed to portray the shock. On the contrary of Sita, Ishwar was visionless. One he was too drunk and secondly he had broken his spectacles. Symbolically also he was visionless and that Ghatak symbolized by the inability of Ishwar look beyond the caste of Abhiram. In order to remain in his job and societal status, he had renounced Sita who was his only family member. For this attitude of Ishwar, Sita had to stoop down so low. So Ghatak in this scene literally and symbolically questions the vision of Ishwar.

In the final portion of the sacrificial scene, Ghatak creates a compelling montage with lights and sound. Sita's fast and high breathe lets us know about the tension rising, and a quick cut to a large kitchen knife makes us anticipate whose life she is going to take? Is she going to kill Ishwar out of rage as he destroyed his life or she is going to kill herself out of shame? One can understand how Ghatak creates tension among the audience and also makes the audience root for one character. After this, a quick cut of Sita picking up the knife and a sound of the knife cutting something leaves us to stun like Ishwar. Ishwar's kurta gets bloodstain. Then everything goes silent. The visual and sonic effects Ghatak used to construct the sacrificial scene of Sita is shakes the audience. The death of Sita, in my opinion, makes the audience root more for the character. The realist filmmaker Ghatak knew that if in the story Sita kills Ishwar then some would think that she got the justice and therefore the empathy Ghatak wanted to build for the women who get exploited by the rigid family and societal structure will not be achieved. Another section would term the killing of Ishwar as a crime and therefore will not be emphatic towards a murderer.

Moreover, Ghatak understood that getting justice or taking revenge of the wrongdoings done to her was not an option for Sita as again societal doctrines would not have let her have that. Her fate was that she had to suffer for all her life due to men and then had to sacrifice her life due to men! Sita's death happened due to the decadence of Ishwar; this death symbolized the sacrifices of Bengal due to degrading Bengali society.

In both *Meghe Dhaka Tara* and *Subarnarekha* Ghatak represented women, home and homeland. He talked about the sacrifices of the women in the rigid family structure. He shows the brutality of these rigid structures inflicted on women by a consumptive cry in *Meghe Dhaka Tara* and a devastating death in silence in *Subarnarekha*. These small things



leave a deep skepticism on the audience about the post-colonial independent Bengali society around them.



## Conclusion

I started working on this thesis to understand how the amalgamation of politics and cinema takes place and what kind of results we get from this kind of a constellation. To understand the workings of politics in cinema and cinema in politics I choose to study the cinematic life and the role of cinema in the political life of M. G. Ramachandran and N. T. Rama Rao. Moreover, to study how cinema becomes a political tool which can be used to by a person to share his political understanding of the world around him/her, I choose to study the life and cinema of Ritwik Ghatak. In the end, I can say that I have come to an understanding of both relations.

I have found out that in case of MGR the cinematic image that was built of him through the political propaganda films made firstly by DMK and then by AIADMK helped him immensely to win over his oppositions in the electoral politics. The archetypal character of the rebellious oppressed that he played on screen helped him become that person in the eyes of the audience off-screen, and the audience chose him as the leader of them. So it is the cinematic image of MGR that helped him succeed in electoral politics.

MGR's contemporary Telugu superstar NTR did not win the elections based on any rebellious image that he achieved by acting in cinema. Rather NTR was more famous for acting in mythological films and acting as mythological characters. What these mythological characters did is they elevated NTR to a godly figure. Moreover, NTR brought his method of delivering dialogues in the arena of politics. He delivered his political speeches in the same way he delivered dialogues in films, and that brought the fan-spectator-audience in the arena of politics, but here they had a different identity, that was of a voter and the price they were paying to witness 'the electoral performance' was their vote. The fan-spectator-audience also believed NTR's cry when he talked about Telugu nationalism in his speeches as they saw the demand for Telugu unity in his films. So NTR brought whatever he had learnt in his cinematic career and applied them in politics which helped him to win the election despite having a cadre-based party which was also only one year old.

So one can see that there existed a slight difference in the way cinema helped MGR and NTR to win elections. However, nonetheless, we can conclude that cinema played an immensely important role in their electoral success.

For Ghatak, film was a medium to express his political ideology and remarks. His association with the CPI and IPTA groomed him in a sense that he saw films as a political tool. His films never became hardcore political propaganda films unlike the films of his contemporary Mrinal Sen, but Ghatak's films were very much political. We understand that by seeing the kind of materials he was dealing with, he talked about the partition, poverty, exploitation, women's place in the society. All of these problems were deep-rooted problems of Bengal. He also tried to advocate for the cultural unity of both the Bengals. Once he said, "In all of my films I have tried to go into the deepest depths of our national culture complex."<sup>64</sup> In *Jukti Tokko ar Goppo* we explicitly see him talking about the tradition of Indian culture and the values of it. Filmmaking for Ghatak was a creative process of culture building.

In Ghatak's lifetime, three heart-wrenching events happened in Bengal. First was the 1943 famine, the second was the 1946 Noakhali riot and the last being the partition of Bengal in 1947. All three traumatic events led to the death of lakhs of people. These events found space in Ghatak's films. Ghatak thought that by forgetting the past one would not be able to move on. That was why he did not consider these films as nostalgic films as he thought if the Bengal society does not know of his past, then it will not be able to move forward. The works he made and the history of the traumatic events that he wrote were undoubtedly creative and fictional, but they were built around personal experiences of Ghatak and thousands of other who were affected by the volatile sociopolitical situation of Bengal in 1940s-1970s. However, still, as these works are work of fiction so we cannot study them as we study a well-documented book or a research paper. However, nonetheless, the historical accounts and the personal remarks of the affected ones by the partition and 1943 famine suggests that Ghatak was utmost honest while writing the history of traumatic events.

Ghatak also tried to explore the identity of the Bengal society of the 1950s- 1970s. He tried to understand how society had changed due to the traumatic events (Partition, 1943 famine and Noakhali riots) and various political uprising (Naxalbari movement). At the beginning of his career, we see that Ghatak was an optimistic Marxist who dreamt of achieving a utopian society through the struggles of the working class but as time went by Ghatak became more and more critical of the optimism he had. Towards the later stage of his life, his films show

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<sup>64</sup>Ghatak, Ritwik. *Society, Our Cultural Heritage, Filmmaking and My Effort*

that he became pessimistic about the Bengal society but advocated to save it even if it was for a lost cause. This tells us how Ghatak in the core was still a Marxist and still dreamt of a better society for the working class.

Ghatak in his films tried to portray the situation of ‘women’ and ‘family’ in the post-colonial Bengal in his films. Through his films, he brought forward a historical awareness of the adverse role of capital and class in the post-colonial Bengal.

The forces of capitalism, colonization, capitalism, communism and nationalism shaped his cinema. From his early days in the CPI and IPTA Ghatak realized the need to have a larger platform to display artistic creations. When he got involved in films, he found his medium. Moreover, as he became an artist to advocate his political understandings, films became a medium to give his political statements. So often in his films, Ghatak became more conscious about the political message of his film rather than the artistic value of his film. Ghatak felt that cinema has to be engaging with the audience and make them think about their surroundings. In one interview he says:

“Cinema cannot but be engaged, committed, to be worthy of its mission. That is exactly what our cinema is not in the broad sense of the term. It does not portray the burning reality around us. What is the mission of cinema? The awareness, the sense of reaction of a truthful artist to the small things of life.”<sup>65</sup>

Ghatak’s films are still relevant because it tells us how to transcend the barriers and engage with the past, present and future around us. His films cannot be seen as nostalgic films but as an exercise to construct the postcolonial Bengal and its culture. The Bengal culture often gets romanticised by several historians and writers. Ghatak there tried to critically question the structure of the society of 1940s-1970s. Even forty years after Ghatak’s death the society has not progressed much, and that is why an introspective of self is needed and the first step to do it is by understanding how to do that. For which Ghatak’s films are a starting point as his films dealt with the self-introspection.

With this dissertation, I tried to showcase a stark difference between the perceptions of cinema in three different individuals. For MGR and NTR the medium of cinema was merely a tool which helped them gain huge fame, money and a fan base which they later on

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<sup>65</sup>Ghatak, Ritwik. *Rows and Rows of Fences*. Seagull Books (2000)

translated into voters in electoral politics. While on the other spectrum existed Ghatak who used the medium of cinema as a didactic medium and who wanted to bring some social change using the medium of cinema. In the current world of commercialisation and the hyper-mediated world, we need to remember how a committed artist matters in our life and for the sake of art.

Ghatak died in 1976 due to cirrhosis of the liver. In his lifetime he could only make eight feature films, and while he was dying, he was shooting a documentary on Ramkinkar Baij. I mentioned a scene from that when I had started writing the thesis. I will end the thesis by mentioning the same scene. The scene is from the shooting draft of the documentary 'Ramkinkar Baij: A personality Study' and the scene goes like this:

'Ramkinkar is lying on his cot..and water is dripping from the roof.

He tries to protect himself from the dripping water.

So he picks up one of his valuable paintings and puts it below the roof.

Then he looks at the camera with a smiling face and says:

It is tough to be an artist.

What is more difficult is to understand an artist.'

# Appendix

## List of relevant films:

### M. G. Ramachandran:

1. Malaikkallan (Thief of the Hill, 1954)
2. Nanodi Mannan (The Vagabond King, 1958)
3. Periya Idathu Penn (The Wealthy Women, 1963)
4. Thozhiali (Worker, 1964)
5. Padogotti (Coxswain, 1964)
6. Rickshawkaran (The Rickshaw Man, 1970)

### N. T. Rama Rao:

1. Sardar Paparayudu (Commander Paparayudu, 1980)
2. Bobbili Puli (The Tiger of Bobbili, 1982)
3. Justice Chaudhury (1982)
4. Kondaveeti Simham (Lion of Kondaveeti, 1981)
5. Dana Veera Sura Karna (1977)
6. Naa Desam ( My Country, 1983)

### Ritwik Ghatak:

1. Nagarik (The Citizen, 1952)
2. Meghe Dhaka Tara (Cloud Capped Star, 1960)
3. Komal Gandhar (E-Flat, 1961)
4. Subarnarekha (1962)
5. Jukti Tokko ar Goppo (Reason, Debate and a Story, 1974)

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