Document Citation

Title	**Ritwik Ghatak**
Author(s)	
Source	*Publisher name not available*
Date	
Type	article
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	12
Subjects	Ghatak, Ritwik
Film Subjects	Komal Gandhar (E-Flat), Ghatak, Ritwik, 1961 Meghe dhaka tara (The cloud-capped star), Ghatak, Ritwik, 1959 Jukti, takko aar gappo (Reason, debate, story), Ghatak, Ritwik, 1974 Bari Theke Paliye (The runaway), Ghatak, Ritwik, 1958 Subarnarekha (The golden line), Ghatak, Ritwik, 1965 Ajantrik (The mechanical man), Ghatak, Ritwik, 1958

"PROFILES"
Festival of India
'85 - '86

RITWIK GHATAK

Civilization never dies, it may change, but it is eternal. Where the paddy field is born on the dry river bed of Titash, there begins another civilization.

Ritwik Ghatak

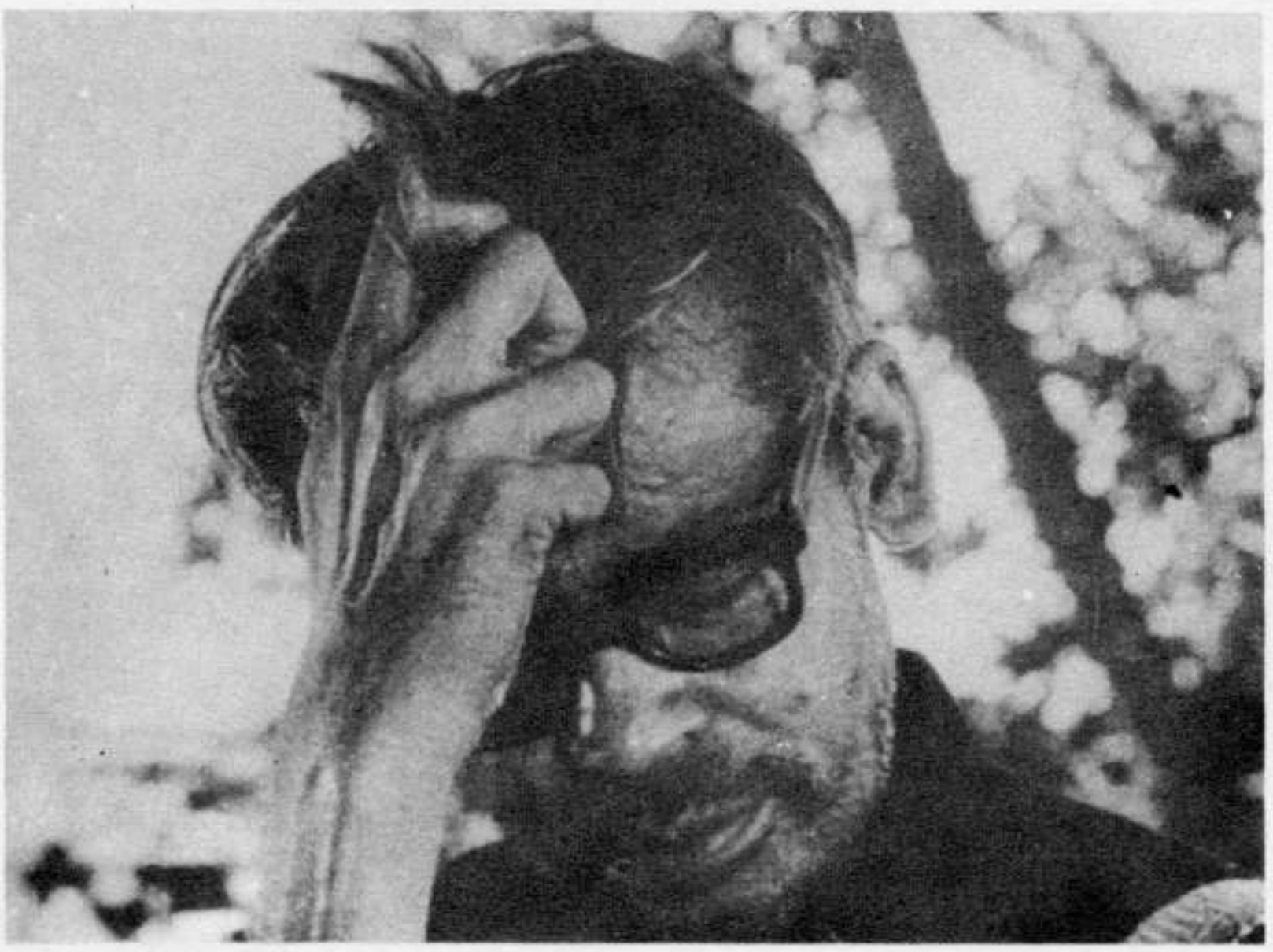
Born in 1925 in Dacca, now in Bangladesh, Ritwik Ghatak carried with him the landscape of undivided Bengal wherever his wayward feet led him down the winding path of his life. He also carried with him the anguish that attached itself to that landscape, ever since one people became two lands. Steeped in the rich cultural heritage of Bengal, he was influenced,like his compatriots, by the Tagorean legacy. But his artistic perceptions outgrew all that had gone into making him what he was: brilliant yet erratic, self-indulgent yet essentially humane.

After a brief flirtation with poetry, Ghatak took to writing seriously while still in college. The year he graduated, he joined the Indian Peoples Theatre Association (IPTA), the left-wing cultural organization that nurtured many major literary, artistic and theatrical talent of the age. But that was in 1948, when Ghatak was a young man of twenty-three. The preceding years had already witnessed most of the upheavals that were to shape independent India, and Bengal had had its special share of misfortunes. 'We were born in a deceived age,' he wrote later. 'The days of our childhood and adolescence saw the full flowering of Bengal. Tagore, with his overpowering genius, at the peak of his literary career; the renewed vigour of Bengali literature in the works of the "Kallol" group of young writers; the widespread national movement in schools and colleges, among the youth of Bengal; the villages of Bengal, with their folk tales, folk songs and festivals, brimming over with the hope of a new life. Then came the war, came famine.' The Bengal Famine in 1943 was a man-made disaster. In a year of very good harvest, five million people perished because their food had been sent away by the British in aid of their war effort. Bengal, always politically

restless, had already become the hub of terrorist activity in the eastern part of the country. The national movement against the British was gaining momentum when the shortages of the war hit the land. On the eve of independence came the Hindu-Muslim riots, and with independence, the partition of Bengal, dividing a single people with a common inheritance and leading to a mass migration that was to leave its scars on a whole generation of Bengalis.

The IPTA movement was founded in 1943 with the aim of revitalizing folk art and informing it with a revolutionary consciousness. In 1944 the group staged *Nabanna* (The Harvest), a play by Bijon Bhattacharya. '*Nabanna* completely altered my thinking,' wrote Ghatak. 'I started taking an interest in drama, became a member of the IPTA. When, at the end of 1947, a revised version of the play was produced, I acted in it.' Ghatak wrote, directed and acted in several revolutionary plays, became leader of the Central Squad of the IPTA in Bengal, and roamed its villages and towns, carrying the theatre to the masses. But dissensions soon broke out within the IPTA, and authoritarianism and sectarian militancy created an atmosphere that was too constricting for the individual artiste. By that time, Ghatak, who had

Ritwik Ghatak in Jukti Takko ar Gappo



been excited by the immediacy of the dramatic response, had started thinking of the cinema as a medium that would reach a much larger audience. 'I thought of the million minds that I could reach at the same time. This is how I came into films. Not because I wanted to make films. Tomorrow if I find a better medium, I'll abandon films....I have wanted to use the cinema as a weapon, as a medium to express my views.'

By 1950, Ghatak had entered the film world as an assistant director for *Tathapi*, a film directed by Manoj Bhattacharya. In 1951 he acted in Nemai Ghosh's *Chhinnamul*, the first neo-realist Indian film which was highly acclaimed by V.I. Pudovkin and subsequently shown in the USSR. In 1955 Ghatak joined Filmistan in Bombay as a script-writer. A year later he came back to Calcutta to make a career as an independent film-maker. His first attempt at directing a film was, however, as early as in 1951. The film, *Bedeni*, was originally being directed by Nirmal De and was handed over to Ghatak in a half-finished state. Ghatak wrote a new screenplay for the film and started shooting. But technical problems led him to abandon the project.

In 1952-3 Ghatak shot his first completed film, *Nagarik*, with a shoestring budget and a cast entirely unused to the film medium. Consciously rejecting the style of the popular cinema, Ghatak projected a little man in a world teeming with people, a common man who cannot win, and yet refuses to admit defeat. The story of a lower middle-class family which, by force of circumstances, finds itself declassed through poverty, *Nagarik* made a political statement that has remained valid even today. In later years Ghatak himself was aware of the technical deficiencies of the film, for it was shot with skeletal facilities and primitive equipment. Yet watching *Nagarik* today, one finds in it unmistakable signs of his emerging style and the unique sensitivity which permeates his later films. Amidst the squalor and degeneration of city life, *Nagarik*'s hero yet emerges with hope. The repeated blows of fortune cannot kill his spirit. From the tenements to the slums, the road leads to despair. But Ramu, the young, unemployed hero, will continue to fight for his right to live. In *Nagarik*, perhaps for the first time in Indian cinema, sound graduated from merely supplementing dialogue, and music from accompanying the action, to become an integral part of the entire artistic scheme. They presented a perspective by analysing the narrative context and commenting upon the dramatic development.

Nagarik was never released for public viewing. By the time his next film, *Ajantrik*, was released, six years had passed. These six years had witnessed the emergence of a powerful new director whose work was

to change the course of film-making in the country. The same year that Ghatak had completed *Nagarik*, Satyajit Ray had started shooting his first film, *Pather Panchali*. Financial constraints kept the film from being completed, and it was not released till 1955. The story of an impoverished brahmin family and their struggle for survival in a remote village of Bengal in the early part of the century, *Pather Panchali* made history by appealing to the sensitivities of both the mass audience as well as the intellectuals across the country. *Pather Panchali* also created a new atmosphere of receptivity. In an industry where nothing but entertainment could have survived before, it was now just possible to think of films with a serious content. Not that the practical problems were over, but the fact that in the next three years Ray could produce three more memorable films was indication enough that the climate was changing. *Ajantrik* appeared in that era of resurgence of interest in serious cinema. It was Ghatak's first released film, and it was totally different from the literary nostalgia that pervaded Ray's films of the time.

Among Ghatak's films, *Ajantrik* is probably the best known in Europe. In India, the nature of the film and its theme was startlingly new.

Kali Banerjee in Ajantrik

A taxi-driver's unusual relationship with his battered old jalopy is humanized and objectified with a comic, picaresque treatment. 'You can call my protagonist, Bimal, a lunatic, a child, or a tribal,' said Ghatak. 'At one level they are all the same. They all react to lifeless things almost passionately. This is an ancient, archetypal reaction....The tribal songs and dances in *Ajantrik* describe the whole cycle of life—birth, hunting, marriage, death, ancestor worship, and rebirth. This is the main theme of *Ajantrik*, this law of life—the cruelty inherent in the mad man's forgetting his beloved old tub after getting a new one, and right at the end the child playing with the car horn, the sound of which makes Bimal smile with a new realization—both these sequences describe the same thing. It is a variation on a minor scale of the main theme, a sort of echo, something that is essential for any symphonic structure.'

Ghatak made *Bari Theke Paliye* in 1959. Based on a story by a famous writer for children, the film revolves round Kanchan, an adventurous little boy who runs away from home in search of the El Dorado of his dreams. He leaves behind his sleepy little village and roams the streets of Calcutta, and discovers that the world outside is hemmed in by cruelty and injustice. He finds sorrow and love in the brick and mortar prison of the city, and goes back chastened to his father in the village, who now waits for his son eagerly, humbled by the experience. Though apparently simple in content, *Bari Theke Paliye* establishes the fundamental thematic boundaries which were indicated by *Nagarik*, and strengthened by his later films. Ghatak's cinematic world is a world of exiles, an area of shadow where dwell the homeless, the rootless, the child separated from his mother. His films are peopled with characters who have been driven from their homes, and often have to draw sustenance from the vitiated atmosphere of the cities. Even in *Titash Ekti Nadir Naam*, where the setting is entirely rural, the Malos, the children of the river, must seek a new and alien way of life, when the waters of the life-giving Titash dry up.

Meghe Dhaka Tara brought with it a new understanding of the dialectics of lower middle-class life in the mechanistic urban environment of post-partition Bengal. It also revealed a rare sensitivity that could turn the common, day-to-day sounds into a complex web of music, investing the events with a reality of breathtaking intensity. *Meghe Dhaka Tara* also made intensive use of melodrama, an accusation that critics of Ghatak have voiced again and again. Yet melodrama in Ghatak is used with the same amount of deliberation and mastery as the convention of dramatic coincidence which appears

repeatedly in his films. Both melodrama and coincidence form integral parts of the traditional theatrical conventions of the country, and have been identified as the two biggest impediments to realism in popular cinema. For Ghatak, however, melodrama is a deliberate refinement on the dramatic, a harking back to older theatrical traditions and drawing out of it a more contemporary interpretation of the intensely felt emotional experience. There is an innate cruelty in its exposition, a ruthlessness which refuses to compromise with the hypocrisies of well-bred reticence. When the dying Nita's cry reverberates in the hills, we are dealing with a harsher inner reality that must raucously proclaim her right to live in a world where she has died daily.

Meghe Dhaka Tara was followed by *Komal Gandhar* in 1961. The disintegration of the IPTA and the ideals it had once stood for, had forever left its mark on Ghatak. In *Komal Gandhar* he merges the motif of fragmentation of a revolutionary cultural movement with a broader motif, the fragmentation of a people. Bhrigu and Anasuya are both victims of the forces of history, exiled from the land of their birth. They are both struggling to find their own identity in a fast-changing environment where old values crumble, faced with the growing

Filming Subarnarekha

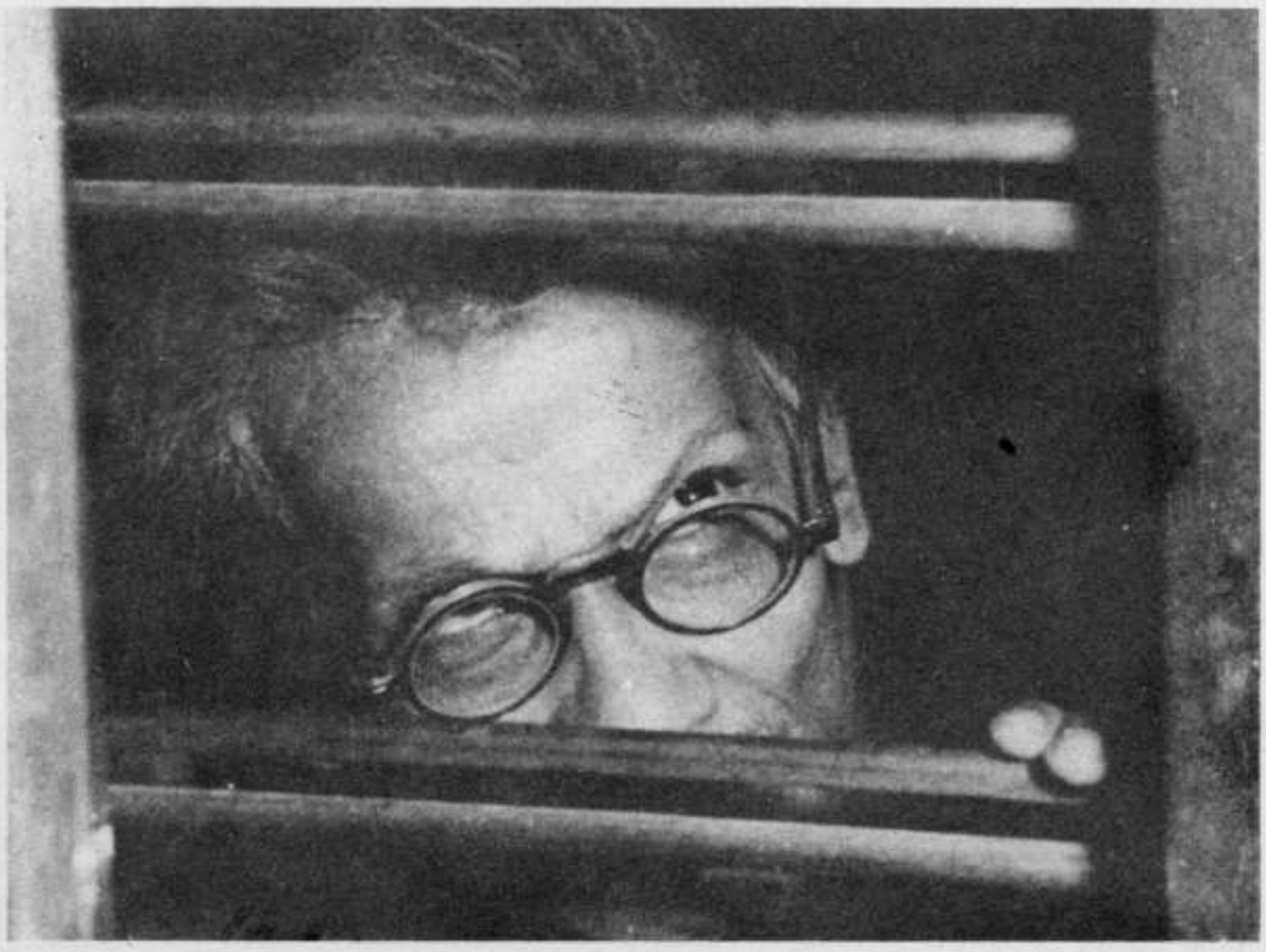
complexities of urban existence in post-independence Bengal. Within the microcosmic world of Bhrigu's group of players, is daily enacted the dissensions of the world outside. The struggle for survival in the new environment frustrates some, embitters others, vitiating the atmosphere within the group. But a subterranean tenacity yet holds them together. Confrontations and recriminations are defused with one successful show. Moments of disaster are averted with renewed faith in their comradeship. And amidst it all, with immense patience, Bhrigu builds his relationship with Anasuya, a little bit of solid ground to stand on in the shifting sands of their lives.

Komal Gandhar brought with it an overwhelming nostalgia for the IPTA days—the isolated comradeship, the ephemeral hopes, the faith and trust on which the movement had developed. It also brought a romantic determination to fight for that faith, those values, in a hostile environment. But with *Subarnarekha*, his next film, Ghatak had moved beyond the immediate problems thrown up by the partition of Bengal—unemployment, urban distribution, collapsing family ties. The story of Ishwar and Sita, two of a large, floating population of refugees immediately after independence, *Subarnarekha* provides a prophetic glimpse of the future where post-independence optimism gives way to the harsh realities and disintegrating moral values that are inextricable parts of civilized urban society. It is a bitter tale that mercilessly exposes the canker within. Visiting Calcutta in 1965, Georges Sadoul had seen the film and written to Ghatak, inviting him to participate in one of the international film festivals of Europe. But he had appended to it an interesting piece of advice, the gist of which was that though he himself had appreciated the sequence of Sita's death, the western audience would only be horrified by the confrontation between Sita and Ishwar when Ishwar comes in a drunken state into his sister's room as a customer, and Sita, shamed and desperate, cuts her own throat. Could Ghatak, therefore, considering the circumstances, spare the western audience by removing or changing the sequence? Considering that the West had already been exposed to Bergman's *Virgin Spring* and *Through a Glass Darkly* by 1961, it does seem rather strange in retrospect that Sadoul should have thought his audience incapable of accepting physical or mental violence, or even incest.

Brutal and shocking in its condemnation of the exploitative relationship foisted upon man and society by the degenerating values of a growing industrial civilization that was born of a historical dichotomy, *Subarnarekha* yet ends with a thin trail of hope, left by the

receding footsteps of Ishwar and Sita's little son on the banks of the Subarnarekha as they struggle onwards towards a new beginning. For the director of the film too, *Subarnarekha* marked the end of one phase and the beginning of another. The year the film was released, three years after its making, Ghatak joined the Film Institute in Pune as its Vice Principal. The regimentation of a government post and the rigid routines of campus life were hardly suited to his peculiar individual temperament. But during his short tenure there, he was able to inspire a crop of young and talented film-makers, without directly influencing their work or interfering in the natural flow of their creativity. 'The time I spent working in the Film Institute in Pune was one of the happiest periods of my life,' he said. 'The young students come there with a great deal of hope, and a large dose of mischief....I found myself right in their midst. I cannot describe the pleasure I experienced winning over these young people and telling them that films can be different.' But this was also the period in his life when alcoholism was beginning to raise its ugly head. Perhaps it was a symptom of his inner conflicts, as a bourgeois Marxist, as a serious film-maker unrecognized by the mass audience, as an exile unable to return to his roots.

Bijon Bhattacharya in Subarnarekha



With the liberation of Bangladesh there were renewed hopes of a cultural unity between the two Bengals. Bangladesh, fiercely proud of its language and culture, suddenly became the new frontiers of Bengalihood. But the euphoria arising out of this victorious struggle for ethnic identity was soon lost in a maze of political suspicion, and Ghatak found that his dreams were far removed from the reality. 'I did not realize that whatever ideas I had about Bengal, the two Bengals together, were thirty years out of date,' he said. 'My childhood and my early youth were spent in East Bengal. The memories of those days, the nostalgia, maddened me and drew me towards Titash, to make a film on it. The period covered in the novel, *Titash*, is forty years old, a time I was familiar with....Consequently, *Titash* has become a kind of commemoration of the past that I left behind long ago....When I was making the film, it occurred to me that nothing of the past survives today, nothing can survive. History is ruthless. No, it is all lost. Nothing remains.'

Based on a Bengali novel of the same title by Advaita Malla Barman, *Titash Ekti Nadir Naam* revolves round the life of a fishing community on the banks of the river Titash, of which Malla Barman was himself a member. The river that gives life to the community, steadily dries up, but Basanti, dying of thirst on its sandy bed, dreams of a new life, where a child playing on a leaf whistle runs through a field of golden paddy. This assertion of life in the midst of exploitation, betrayal and deprivation has been a recurring motif in Ghatak's works. In *Titash Ekti Nadir Naam* it expresses itself throughout the film in the simple joys and sorrows of a people living in daily communion with the river. The mendicant poet of a previous century, Lalan Shah's song sets the rhythm of the film. It ebbs and flows with the waters of the Titash, investing the protagonists, the Malos, with a poetic and sentient realism. Ghatak had an attack of tuberculosis before the film was completed. A version of the film was edited in Bangladesh while he was lying in hospital. Though later Ghatak went back to re-edit the film, the definitive version of *Titash Ekti Nadir Naam* has yet to cross the borders.

The last words that Ritwik Ghatak spoke on the screen were, 'one must do something.' Dying in the crossfire between the police and the revolutionaries, Nilkantha, Ghatak's alter ego in his film, *Jukti Takko Ar Gappo*, echoes the words of Madan the weaver in a short story by Manik Bandyopadhyay. Protesting with the other weavers of the village, Madan had stopped work on his loom, refusing to accept money from the village moneylender, Bhuban Mahajan. Worried that if he sits idle he will get an attack of gout, he runs his empty loom in the darkness of the night. 'One must do something,' he says. As an epitaph for

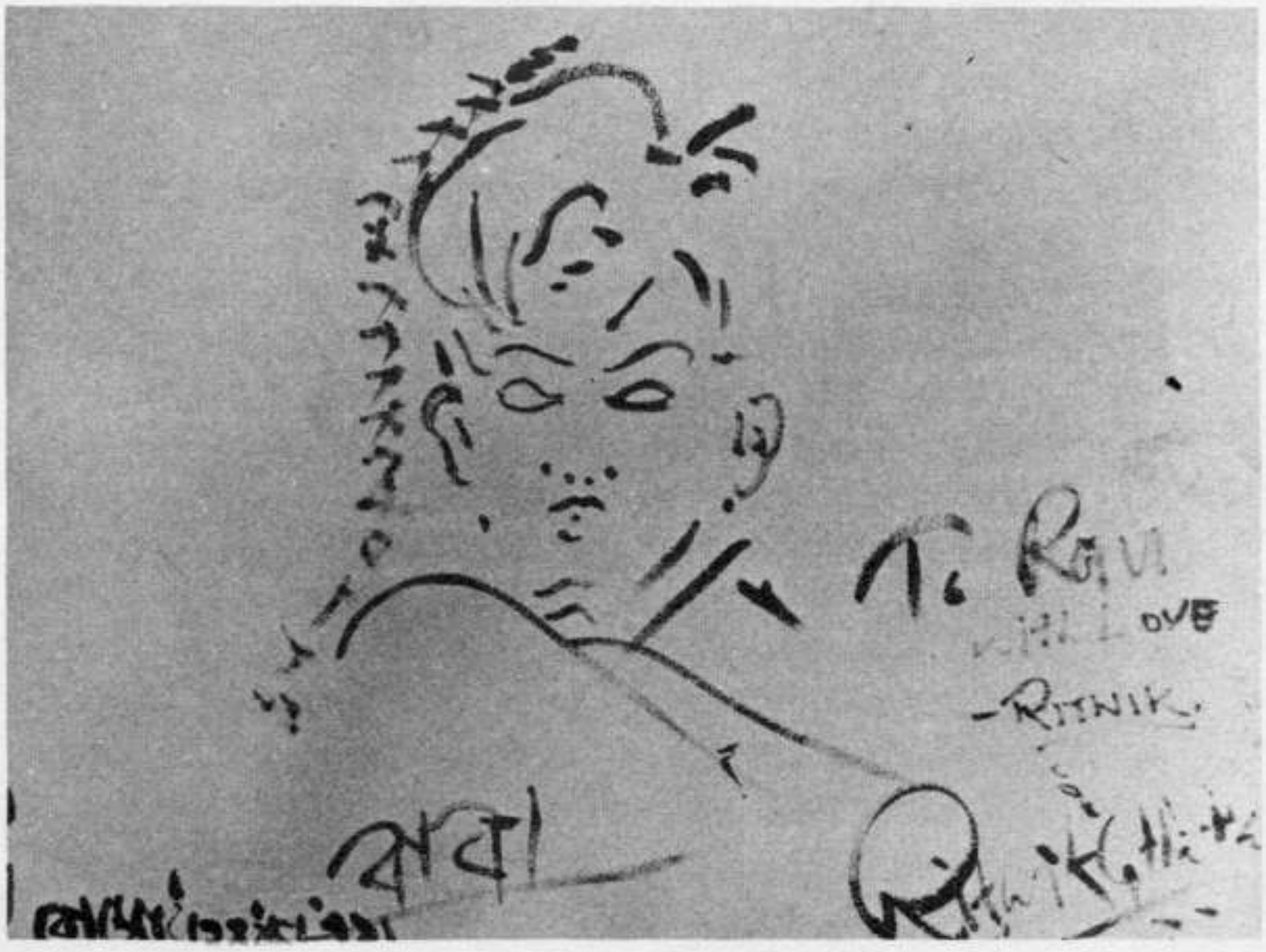
a career ridden with inconsistencies, where extraordinary craftsmanship often went hand in hand with childlike indifference, where alcoholism depleted the resources of a keen mind, Madan's words gain a special significance. Ghatak had kept his loom of awareness and understanding working all his life. The Bhuban Mahajans of the film world could never buy him off. Whatever compromises he may have been forced to make in his life, he never made one behind the camera. He had known the truth of Madan's statement, 'One must do something', and through his films he had done whatever he could as an artiste living in this 'deceived age'.

Jukti Takko Ar Gappo, Ghatak's last film, is indeed a statement of his own position in the context of a volatile political and cultural environment in the counry. It is also an expression of dissent against the cinematic language as it has come to be accepted. Flouting all norms, the film meanders with its allegorical hero, Nilkantha, in a rambling search for an answer to his confusion with the times he finds himself in. Tramping across his familiar world with friends he has picked up on the way, he finds everything unfamiliar. Searching for his roots, he reasons and argues in an earnest attempt to understand the changes that are sweeping across the country. Nilkantha drinks alcohol in the hope that he will absorb all evil and leave his world a cleaner place. But the unending humiliations of an exploitative system, intellectual hypocrisy, and ineffective political leadership lead to further confusion, further evil. Nilkantha can no longer understand even the language of the young revolutionaries. Lost in a jungle, he makes death his destination, and his final protest. Ritwik Ghatak's own death was not unlike Nilkantha's in that it was just another route to self-destruction.

Ghatak's films are the ideal subjects for academic theorizing. His uneven flashes of brilliance, his attempts to bring a fusion between Marx and Jung, his obsession with the archetype and the epic, his involvement with the Mother image as a destructive and regenerative force, have all found their separate identities in his work. He himself wrote at length on these aspects of his creativity, and so have his many admirers. For the majority of viewers, however, it is the final result of the merging of all his diverse creative instincts, that will remain the most significant. With all the contradictions inherent in his life and his work, it is not unnatural that Ghatak should find few admirers in his lifetime. It is equally natural that with the passage of time, a re-evaluation has placed his work in its true perspective. A rare showing of his films today attracts incredible interest from his

contemporaries as well as the new generation of film viewers. Cautious criticism is invariably overshadowed by spontaneous appreciation of his undoubted, though erratic genius. Long ago, in his passionate and futile appeal to his indifferent audience, he had called them 'one great wall'. 'Try to comprehend us,' he said, talking of the off-mainstream cinema that had just begun its struggle for survival. 'Try to understand that we are moving in the middle of a flowing river. Whatever we are at this moment, that is not our final entity. We shall grow and give shade. We are only waiting for a little sustenance.' If Ritwik Ghatak were to see the 'reason, argument and story' that his new audience has built around him today, it would appeal to his egocentric sense of humour.

A portrait of his son, by Ritwik Ghatak



Filmography

1953 NAGARIK *1958* AJANTRIK *1959* BARI THEKE PALIYE *1959* KATO AJANARE (Incomplete) *1960* MEGHE DHAKA TARA *1961* KOMAL GANDHAR *1964* BAGALAR BANGADARSHAN (Incomplete) *1965* SUBARNAREKHA *1968* RANGER GOLAM (Incomplete) *1973* TITASH EKTI NADIR NAAM *1974* JUKTI TAKKO AR GAPPO

Documentary and Short Films

1955 ORAON *1962* SCISSORS *1963* ALAUDDIN KHAN *1965* FEAR *1965* RENDEZVOUS (as supervisor in a Film and Television Institute of India production) *1968* SCIENTISTS OF TOMORROW *1970* CHHOU DANCE OF PURULIA *1970* AMAR LENIN *1970* YEH KYON? *1971* DURBARGATI PADMA *1975* RAMKINKAR

Screenplays

1955 MUSAFIR *1960* MADHUMATI *1962* KUMARI MON *1963* DWIPER NAAM TIYARANG *1965* RAJKANYA