Many Spaces in/of Cinema: Ritwik Ghatak's Films

Introduction

The maverick filmmaker Ritwik Ghatak (1925-1976) is one among the three pioneering figures of Indian art cinema. Ghatak, whose contributions gained prominence in the cinematic landscape across the globe after the 1980s, was born in the undivided Bengal. The significance of Ghatak in Indian cinema is extensive. In his capacity as a filmmaker, he surpassed mere narrative storytelling. He looked into the complexities of human existence. His films depict the anguish of humanity as collective, displacement, and existential crisis. Ghatak also presents societal inequities through his lens. He advocates for the middle-class. His films are important for their aesthetics, philosophy, and thematic complexities in addition to their historical and cultural importance. They distinguish themselves from the contemporary, and make themselves deserving of scholarly exploration again and again. Ghatak incorporates radical techniques to construct his complex views. They evoke intellectual responses and a sense of universal appeal. They invite thoughtful participation. More importantly, Ghatak's films exhibit a sense of spatiality. Space becomes a conceptual appatatus that gets generated within the film, and trancends the filmed places. The inner landscapes of his characters are mirrored in the physical spaces. The relationship between space and the narrative behind it provides a scope for academic discussion. It provides a framework to decipher and theorize the apparent overarching themes in spatial lens. By exploring the various domains of the medium called cinema, through a spatial lens, I undertake an attempt to theorize the aesthetic-philosophical network of connotations that reside beneath the films' exteriors. This project of a case study of spatial reading of cinema on

Ghatak's films goes beyond mere scholarly interest. It is also a tribute to the auteur whose opus stimulates, disrupts, and incites contemplation. Spatial elements are of paramount importance in the overarching motifs and themes of Ghatak's films. They function as metaphors and narrative devices. Ghatak make them talk. By examining the spatial elements, my research endeavours to uncover the strata of significance archived in Ghatak's films. I investigate how the tangible spaces reflect his philosophy, his developing aesthetic-theoretical vision and its significance in cinema.

Background and context

Ghatak reached his adulthood in a period of upheaval. It was marked by the turbulent 1940s,[1] and consequences of the Partition[2] which fundamentally transformed the socio-cultural spaces of the Indian subcontinent. The geo-political landscape during Ghatak's era was shaped by the revolutionary movements that ensued in the wake of the Partition of India in 1947. The Bengali people were deeply affected by the violent unrest and mass migrations that accompanied the Partition. They developed an intense sense of loss, trauma, and displacement. It reverberated

[1] The Bengal famine, the riots, the Independence—the 1940s saw everything. It also saw the August Movement, the naval revolt, thousands of strikes, street barricades erected by citizens, students, and workers. Ghatak said he was shaped as an artist by the 1940s. See Interview With Ghatak (88-89) in *Ritwik Ghatak: Arguments and Stories*.

[2] Following the Partition almost 2.2 million Bengali Hindus left Pakistan's East Bengal for India's West Bengal, and 1.9 million Bengali Muslims left India's West Bengal for Pakistan's East Bengal immediately. Nearly 500,000 death tolls would arise within the sixteen-month civil war, a figure equivalent to the total losses suffered by the British army over the six years of World War II. Many of these deaths occurred during the mass exodus in which Muslims headed to Pakistan and Hindus sought their way to India. See Nahid Kamal's PhD thesis *The Population Trajectories of Bangladesh and West Bengal During the Twentieth Century: A Comparative Study* (104-133), submitted at London School of Economics.

throughout the region. Ghatak was an eyewitness to all these occurrences. He himself endured the turmoil and distress of the Partition. He could never accept the Partition. As Ashish Rajadhyaksha says, "As the events of May 1968 in Paris and the Vietnam War obsessed Jean-Luc Godard, so Partition obsessed Ghatak" (20). His experiences would subsequently shape his filmography greatly. Ghatak said, "The engulfing uncertainty, the fracture that I see—the roots are in the splintering of Bengal" ("Manabsamaj, Amader Aitihya, Chhabi-kora o Amar Pracheshta" 9). In this period, the Bengali film industry which was headquartered in Calcutta (now Kolkata), a centre of culture, flourished for artistic novelty with social consciousness. There was a surge in cinematic ingenuity in the period following Indian Independence.

He had a foundation in both literary and theatrical traditions.[3] He also found inspirations in diverse fields including Jungian psychology (archetypes),[4] Brechtian dramaturgy,[5] Indian epics and mythologies,[6] classical drama and music, folk culture (music and theatre), Marxist

[3] Before he came into filmmaking he tried his hand in literature. His first story, *Akashgangar srot dhorey* (Upstream along the Milky Way), appeared in 1947 in the periodical *Galpabharati*, edited by Nripendrakrishna Chattopadhyay, an eminent writer who introduced him as a "powerful young writer" (130). See A Biographical Profile in *Rows Rows and Rows Fences*. He wrote stories and poems. Then he started translating (translated Shakespeare, Gorky, and Brecht), participating (such as *Nabanna*) and writing plays (*Kalo Sayar*, *Jwala*, *Dalil*). Seeing the possibilities to reach wider audience instantly through the medium, he came into films. He said, "Cinema still seems to be the ideal medium for this because it can reach billions once the work is done. That is why I produce films - not for their own sake but for the sake of my people" (85). See My coming into cinema in *Rows and Rows of Fences*.

[4] He explained: "The theory of the collective unconscious revealed that man carries in his brain images that were born long before civilization. We came to know that in the history of different races, certain fundamental archetypes repeat themselves. Throughout history, in the evolution of different civilizations, we see the same complex life image transform into symbols through archetypal images" (11). See An Attitude to life and an attitude to art in *Rows and Rows of Fences.*

[5] Ghatak translated Bertolt Brecht's *Caucasian Chalk Circle* and *Galileo* into Bengali.

[6] Ghatak pointed out: "We are an epic people. We like to sprawl, we are not much involved in story-intrigues, we like to be re-told the same myths and legends again and again. We, as a people, are not much sold on the 'what' of

ideology,[7] 20th century modernism, Tagore,[8] and existential and Indian philosophy.[9] These influences are evident in his films. He combined them with melodrama as a form[10] to create a cinematic idiom of his own from an unorthodox perspective. These elements, further, are woven into the expressive landscapes of Bengal.

The historical emergence of socially conscious films of Ghatak can also be traced back in the process of the Indian People's Theatre Association movement in India. In both pre and post-

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the thing, but the 'why' and 'how' of it. This is the epic attitude"(82). See Music in Indian cinema and the epic approach in *Rows and Rows of Fences*.

[7] He was involved in the cultural wing of the communist party of the then Bengal though he was later expelled from the part upon writing his *On the Cultural Front* (1954), a thesis submitted to the Communist Party of India. It discusses the state of cultural production among communist artists in India. But, as pointed out by Moinak Biswas, "Ghatak never made political films as a sworn Marxist like him would be expected to make. His politics becomes emotionally so rich because, alongside the bold picturing of everyday struggles, he repeatedly captures the necessary but tragic denial by individuals to tread into the full light of the day." See Her Mother's Son: Kinship and History in Ritwik Ghatak.

[8] Ghatak said, "I am reminded of Tagore. With his vividly plastic imagination, Tagore hits the mark. One feels so grateful to him. He faced parallel problems in his own sphere and solved them in his inimitable way" (5). See Film and I in *Rows and Rows of Fences*. He further said, "I cannot speak without him. That man has culled all my feelings long before my birth. He has understood what I am" (94). See Interviews in *Rows and Rows of Fences*.

[9] Ghatak said, "Along with politics I thought about philosophy and Indian tradition. The ancient Indian life is a great theme for new pictures. I am now deeply engrossed in it and so shall I be so long as I remain on this side of the grave. The plain reality is that a film as such provides me food. So long as I get the opportunities for showing pictures, I shall work for this art and thus keep away the wolf from the door... I am very much fascinated by the old Indian tradition, mainly by the *Rigveda*, the *Samhita*, the *Bramhana*, the *Aranyaka*, the whole of *Sruti*, the *Upanishada*. The *Smriti*, the *Purana*, the *Mahakavyas*" (102). See Interviews in *Chitrabikshan* (1975).

[10] Ghatak even declared: "Melodrama is a birthright, it is a form" (8). See *Rows and Rows of Fences*. He further added, "...All the forms, from utter naturalism to extreme expressionism, seem to me to be totally valid if your thesis and temperament demand it" (5). See Film and I in *Rows and Rows of Fences*.

independence India, the IPTA movement emerged as a critical cultural force.[11] It was instrumental in utilizing theatre as a platform for cultural revival, political awareness, and social change. Inspired by Marxist and socialist theories, intellectuals, artists, and activists tried to create a cultural front that could engage the general public, and increase awareness on socio-political issues. IPTA productions were distinguished by the utilization of minimal sets, direct address, and improvisation. They resulted in an immersive and participatory experience for the audience. Moreover, the public was moved by IPTA's emphasis on social issues by fostering a sense of activism and solidarity. The movement's influence was not limited to the stage. It also influenced the broader cultural and political discourse of the era. IPTA's productions acted as catalysts for social movements. It inspired subsequent generations of artists and activists like Ghatak. In his films, as Rajadhyaksha & Willemen say, "Bengal also saw the only instance in Indian film where melodrama became the site where popular and classical idioms of performance merged with a Brechtian aesthetics yielding a unique cultural practice" (147). Apart from these things, he was also a member of the film society.[12] Thus, Ghatak,[13] an exponent of

[11] They favoured realism and a focus on the lived experiences of the oppressed and marginalized. The approach was evident in productions like *Nabanna* (1944) written by Bijon Bhattacharya and directed by Sombhu Mitra. The emphasis on vernacular languages and folk traditions in the movement served to bridge the gap between urban and rural audiences. It made theatre more accessible and relevant to a broader demographic. Kaifi Azmi, Balraj Sahni, Habib Tanvir, and Prithviraj Kapoor were notable figures associated with IPTA. See Michael L. Waltz's *The Indian People's Theatre Association: Its Development and Influences* (32).

[12] For the first time in India in 1947, the Calcutta Film Society was formed. The idea of film societies then germinated in other cities like Delhi, Bombay, and Madras. It was founded by Satyajit Ray and others. Ghatak joined later. Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) was the first film screened at the Calcutta film society. It is seen as the harbinger of art cinema in India. See Debating Radical Cinema: A History of the Film Society Movement in India (731-737).

[13] Ghatak and Surapati Nandi were recruited to prepare a *Draft of the Policy Principles of Indian People's Theatre Association* (1951). It shows his organizational and political ideology as well as the cultural movement organizer in

IPTA theatrical and cinematic deployment of the melodramatic mode, drew it further. He came to adhere to a politicized perspective of culture as a cognitive and emotional resource for forming popular consciousness through his interaction with the IPTA in the 1940s.

The beginning of art cinema in India is another significant context for Ghatak's cinema. The Indian New Wave which flourished during the 1970s and 1980s first emerged in the late 1950s with the deviations from the conventionalities of mainstream Bombay (later Bollywood) cinema. Rather, it sought to depict the realities of Indian society from more artistic and socially conscious perspectives. Filmmakers began to voice their dissatisfaction with the formulaic and escapist mainstream cinema. This parallel cinema was influenced fundamentally by the Italian Neorealism which portrayed everyday lives and struggles of ordinary people in post-World War II Italy. The forerunners of art films in Bengal were Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen, and Ghatak. Ray's meticulous storytelling with poetic realism, Sen's radical political consciousness, and Ghatak's exploration of identity and displacement - each made distinctive contributions to the movement. They offered Indian audiences films that were both intellectually stimulating and socially relevant. Ray's *Pather Panchali* (1955) garnered international recognition. It established the foundation for the Indian New Wave. However, the tradition actually began with Nimai Ghosh's *Chhinnamul* (The Uprooted, 1950)[14] where Ghatak acted and assisted the director. After that

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him. It also expresses IPTA's goal for autonomy in art and culture, particularly in the need for democratic functioning. Ghatak solidified his understanding of art and culture in a particular cultural complex during the draft preparation process. His opinions on the importance of the folk form and the dangers of using art as propaganda are explicit in it. See the full draft.

[14] In *Chinnamul*, a group of peasants, uprooted from their ancestral homes in East Bengal, in the wake of the Partition, find their way into Calcutta as refugees. As they arrive in Calcutta, the cityscape invades the frame of representation to disperse the narrative. *Chinnamul* was a venture of IPTA workers after *Dharti Ke Laal* (Khwaja Ahmad Abbas, 1946). Ghosh and his colleagues from the Calcutta Film Society had yet to see Italian neorealist

Ghatak made his *Nagarik* in 1952, though it was ultimately released in 1977 after his death. Thus, Ghatak was a part of this shifting landscape of Indian cinema. But it is important to note here that he was the most original filmmaker among his contemporaries, who was unaffected by the Italian neo-realism or Hollywood cinema.[15] We can find only occasional echoes of Soviet cinema in his films.

The Soviet cinema had a profound impact on Ghatak's approach to narrative construction and editing. Ghatak was moved by Eisenstein's concept of montage which involves the juxtaposition of images to generate novel interpretations. He said about Eisenstein:

> He is the Kalidasa of the cinema - the theoretician and the creator. There are filmmakers galore. There were, are, and will be great and excellent filmmakers all over the world but they are just derivatives from Sergei Eisenstein. Eisenstein stands above all. Anywhere there is film, the filmmaker is only the child of Eisenstein, for he is the guardian, the father - he is Adam, the primeval Adam of the cinema, the first man. (94)

Ghatak utilizes montage to express the emotional and psychological landscapes of his characters, as well as the socio-political upheaval of his era. As far as the influences are concerned, Ghatak said:

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films, but the style was anticipated. See Moinak Biswas' In the Mirror of an Alternative Globalism: The Neorealist Encounter in India (86).

[15] Satyajit Ray wrote: "...This is all the more remarkable when one doesn't notice any influence of other schools of filmmaking on his work. For him Hollywood might not have existed at all. The occasional echo of classical Soviet cinema is there, but this does not prevent him from being in a class by himself." See the Foreword in *Rows and Rows of Fences*.

> Well, there were films like Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*, Pudovkin's *Mother*, *Krakatit,* the Czechoslovakian film, *Nema Barikada* by Otakar Vavra and books like Eisenstein's, *Film Form*, and *The Film Sense*, Pudovkin's *Film Technique,* and *Film Acting*, Ivor Montagu's collection of film articles in the Penguin series, and Bela Balasz's·*Theory of the Film*, all of which threw up a completely new world before my eyes. (85)[16]

Decidedly these films and books helped him develop his tastes, but they did not influence him directly. Although an artist may find inspiration in particular works, Ghatak firmly felt that an artist should learn to absorb influences so that an assimilation process could occur. He would prefer to experiment and develop a form of his own rather than bound himself to any tradition whenever he would create a play or a film. He was always experiencing the pangs of an artist searching for the most appropriate statement for the theme. Along the way, he experimented with forms of narrative, treatment, and image capturing and editing techniques. So, he did not become a part of any school. Before I undertake a spatial reading of Ghatak's films, it was crucial to explicate the historical, political, and cultural contexts in which they were produced. In addressing the issues at stake, the study concentrates mainly on Ghatak's films in order to know more about less, as a doctoral thesis should do. I shall make occasional references to other films for the sake of analysis.

[16] Pudovkin arrived in India in 1949, and the Communist Party assigned Ghatak to be a companion. See *Ritwik Ghatak Face-to- Face: Conversations with Master* (112–138), published by Cine Central Calcutta. Jean-Luc Godard's film also is somewhat comparable to the film's lively musical moods. Adrian Martin says: "Ritwik Ghatak (1925-1976) ... contemporaneous with the Nouvelle Vague filmmakers like Godard or Rivette who, at the time and for almost three decades to come, know nothing of his work" (205-6). See *Mise en Scene and Film Style: From Classical Hollywood to New Media Art*.

Some theoretical incorporation

My thesis is primarily aesthetic criticism. At times it is biographical descriptive criticism as well for the sake of the filmmaker's personal philosophy. Basically, through critical analyses of *mise-en-scène*, I analyze how the filmed spaces of the pro-filmic spaces contribute to the visual and sensory encounter of the filmic spaces.[17] Such distinctions between pro-filmic, filmed, and filmic space are crucial "in film theory because of a drive to establish the particularities of film language and the cinematic apparatus, with its formal tools of *mise-en-scène*, framing, lighting, editing, perspectival manipulation, layering of gazes, and so forth" (Jaikumar 9). Further, the analyses of spatial elements in films can be and should be grounded in some theoretical frameworks that inform interdisciplinary perspectives.[18] By employing them in the readings of Ghatak's film texts, I analyze how spatiality impacts the aesthetic and cultural representations in the films. By analyzing how spatial representations mirror more extensive socio-political issues, I attain a comprehension of how space operates as a conceptual apparatus in Ghatak's cinematic universe.[19] The social theory of space, *The Production of Space* (1992) by Lefebvre offers an all-

[17] Annette Kuhn and Guy Westwell defined filmic space: "The space created within the film frame as opposed to the space of the real world or of the profilmic event. Filmic space is a wholly distinct type of space, one that can only be created on the cinema screen through the techniques and language of cinema—one of the distinctive attributes of film as a medium being that it creates its own patterns of spatiality (and temporality)" (165). See *Dictionary of Film Studies*.

[18] Priya Jaikumar says: "To grasp how film toggles between the material, social, aesthetic, and immaterial spaces constituting our world, writing about cinema must seek methods that cut across the techniques and intellectual habits of political economy, production studies, media ethnography, textual analysis, film theory, urban studies, and geopolitical analysis" (10). See *Where Histories Reside: India as Filmed Spaces*.

[19] Ghatak, in this regard, said "I have found answers to almost all practical problems related to organising and coordinating men and objects and materials in cinema and issues related to the arrangement of my narrative and

encompassing social construction of space. It contends that space is a dynamic social creation influenced by human activities, perceptions, and power dynamics, and it is not merely a passive container. The triadic understanding of space as perceived, conceived, and lived by Lefebvre elucidates the construction, experience, and contestation of the cinematic spaces of Ghatak as well. In *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (1996),[20] Edward Soja, further, develops the ideas put forth by Lefebvre. He explores the relationship which exists among mental, physical, and social spaces. He talks about our subjective experiences and lived realities in various environments. Building upon these frameworks, I look into the filmmaker's lived spaces, and his poetic imaginations. The idea of "home" which serves as a repository for our memories, dreams, and desires, is a recurring theme of architectural spaces in Ghatak's films, evoking trauma, longing, and nostalgia. Incorporating all these concepts through a critical study of the symbolic, metaphorical, and abstract implications of space in films, I seek the strata of significance woven into cinematic spaces.

Literature review

I utilize three types of literatures—firstly, the Anglophone literature written on and around the films, and some other aspects in film studies relevant for the thesis; secondly, literature written in Bengali (from both West Bengal and Bangladesh); and, third, some film criticisms originally written in French, and later translated into English.

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direction of my cast by rummaging through the works of Stanislavsky" (10–11). See Two Aspects of Cinema in *Rows and Rows of Fences*.

[20] He has given the concept of the "third space," a socio-cultural space, a hybrid way to negotiate boundaries and cultural identity, distinct from first space (home) and second (workplace) (53-70).

The existing Anglophone literature on Ghatak is extensive and varied. Ghatak has been explored from the question of realism historically by Moinak Biswas in his thesis. For him "If realism and melodrama were the two main outcomes of the realist encounter, Ghatak represented the third, and necessarily 'eccentric,' outcome by launching a conversation with realism and melodrama" (36-37). We as critic are provided with a clue as to the position of realism in the given field of forms by Ghatak's practices. His other essays on and translations of Ghatak are also very important for me. They provide a vantage point from where the entire field can be conceptualized. For Ashish Rajadhyaksha, in Ghatak's works, we recognise how a work of art confronts increasingly larger and more complex mythic systems in its growth, until in the epic form the entire dominant tradition is taken on. We also recognise the "principle of the Eisensteinian epic" that art is revolutionary praxis (32). According to Bhaskar Sarkar, Ghatak "emerges as the emblematic mourner" (201). Sushmita Bannerji's dissertation (2014) also shows Ghatak's film stylistics of mourning the Partition. Ghatak's films are the reflexive arenas for cultural negotiations. The plot is remarkable for its meticulous attention to real life worlds, but it is not stymied by the demands of an orthodox realism. Rather, it aims to capture the post-Partition milieus in an emotionally proximate way and to highlight its deplorable dimensions rhetorically through the self-conscious and heightened interactivity of its elements. Simultaneously, Ghatak's highly formalized melodrama transforms our understanding of dramatic flow. It negates the possibility of projective identification while at the same time eliciting intense affect and engaging us in sensitized and conscious ways. This intensified epic form can be traced back to both Brechtian dramaturgy and India's pre-modern epics that contain numerous interwoven, mutually commentating narrative strands. Diamond Oberoi Vahali (2020) explored Ghatak's films and their intervention within the Marxist discourse regarding art and

culture. She tried to comprehend Ghatak's idea of nationalism and the anguish he experienced as a result of the Partition of India. Manishita Dass has done close readings of Ghatak's *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, informed by archival research on Ghatak's theatrical practices and the films' production history, drawing insights from his writings and interviews. She says: "…the originality of his cinematic language, the film's fluid movement between the theatrical and the cinematic, and its musical allusiveness, none of which can be fully grasped only in terms of melodramatic excess" (11). She focuses on his theatrical manipulation of film form - cinematography, editing, *mise-en-scène*, music and the sound-image relationship. Ghatak's fusion of theatrical modes of staging, expressive use of the body, cinematic modes of mobility and emotional access, dramatic use of sound, music and mythic motifs are central to his reinvention of the grammar of the film. Dass' essay transcends Ghatak's epicality and melodrama, instead emphasizes his cinematic theatricality. Dass employs the term "theatricality" to refer to a collection of effects that serve to remind the audience that the film text is a representation of reality, rather than reality itself. Paulomi Chakraborty (2018), on the other hand, read Ghatak's *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, as a text that frames the process which fixates women as metaphors by turning individual women into symbols of motherhood. She explains how the process promotes a relentless and ruthless exploitation of women and, further, how such a process of metaphoric violence claims individual women through sacrificial victimhood. Her central argument is that the figure of the refugee woman provokes a critique of the violence of the process of metaphor making. The film evokes the figure of the refugee woman beyond the character of Neeta. The film also gestures towards a post-metaphor space for women. Priya Jaykumar has found that "Ghatak disinvests himself from the question of cinema's ontological proximity to any particular form or style but reinvests value in the encounters that cameras can

stage between viewers and the world" (177). For her, it becomes complicit with an orientalist sublime when filmed locations, such as India, are permitted to transcend their role as a topographical foil by serving as an inspirational source for metaphysical abstractions. Adrian Martin characterizes Ghatak's cinema in this way:

> In his films, events do not simply trek along a pre-set, more or less predictable narrative path: rather, they unfold, unexpectedly cracking apart and opening up into multiple, often contesting worlds, male and female, old ways and new ways, feeling and reason, nature and civilisation (both fragile), speech and song...changes of setting (from house to forest to riverbank), of mood (melancholic to euphoric with several gradations in-between), of mode (everything from a neorealism of homely, gestural detail to full-out musical expressionism), of method (from a diagrammatic mise en scène of bodies in space to lyrical, avant-garde abstraction). (216)

For Martin, the tradition of directing films about women by men was established by Douglas Sirk, Max Ophuls, Roberto Rosselini, Carl Theodor Dreyer, and, most significantly, by Yasujiro Ozu, Mikio Naruse, and Kenji Mizoguchi. Ghatak, despite the constraints of technology and funding, was able to cultivate a distinctive aesthetic through his unconventional stylistic experiments. His frames are characterized by a strong sense of structure. Parichay Patra considers Ghatak as "the precursor to the Indian New Wave," under whose tutelage the majority of later New Wave filmmakers like Mani Kaul and Kumar Shahani received their formal filmmaking training. He examines the aesthetic and narrative references to Ghatak in several representative New Wave films. He also analyzes Ghatak's affinities to the European cinematic scenes and demonstrates how he discursively interacts with the emerging politico-aesthetic options of the era (80-119). Rochona Majumdar (2021) examines the essential works of Ray,

Sen, and Ghatak, as well as the archives of the film society. She elucidates how the trio of Indian art cinema transcended the concept of nation-building by producing exceptional cinema. Instead, they endeavoured to capture the insoluble complications of post-colonial India. Majumdar provides perspectives on the connection between film and a post-colonial nation. Sanghita Sen's (2021) contribution on Ghatak's unreleased projects and unfinished written works is also important in this regard. Ghatak was a filmmaker and an outcome of his time and space. He was affected by the socio-political issues of Bengal in the middle of the twentieth century and the global community at large. Historical, cultural, and ideological, philosophical influences formed his artistic sensibility and influenced his creative decisions.

Ghatak's *Rows and Rows of Fences* (2000) and *Chalachchitra, manush ebang aaro kichhu* (2021) (in Bengali) are the books that I mention at the very outset while talking about vernacular literatures. From these two anthologies, I try to extract his philosophy of aesthetics and art. Almost every aspect of his cinema is presented in these two books. From these books, I find out his personal perspectives on filmmaking, the state of cinema in India at the time, a variety of filmmaking techniques, and discussions on his individual films.

The Bengali anthology *Ritwik Ghatak* (2020) edited by Rajat Roy fosters a conducive space for the ritualistic practices of Ghatak, and expands the scholarly viewership of his cinema. The essays, though most of them are not "academic writings," gain broader traction of a robust cultural phenomenon in Ghatak studies. The critical essays exhibit distinct perspectives and varying levels of significance. Film society critic Gurudas Bhattacharya conducted a theoretical examination of the thematic layers present in *Subarnarekha*. In his analysis, historian Gautam Bhadra examines the comparative merits of *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam* as both a novel and a film. Theatre critic and academic Dipendu Chakraborty critiques the film *Jukti Takko Aar Gappo,* and

commends Ghatak's sincere originality and his willingness to engage in self-critique. Another film society critic Dhruba Gupta expressed commendation towards *Komal Gandhar* for its innovative qualities, providing illustrations of both domestic and international films. Poet, essayist and public intellectual Bishnu Dey's iconic essay presents a contemporary analysis and evaluation of the work *Meghe Dhaka Tara*. For him, the film's narrative structure and choreographic elements evoked a sense of optimism in him regarding the trajectory of Bengali cinema. A subsequent evaluation of the film is authored by censorship scholar Someshwar Bhowmik, nearly two decades later. According to him, the utilization of ancient fables to address the contemporary economic crisis and inequality prevalent in middle-class society lacks both rationality and artistic merit. He recognizes the fact that Ghatak's *Nagarik* was the initial Bengali film to authentically depict the harsh and gritty reality on celluloid. In her analysis, the pioneering women's studies scholar Yashodhara Bagchi critically examines the narrative of Ghatak's first film, *Nagarik*, and lauds the film's authentic essence and socially aware disposition portrayed by the protagonist. Bagchi endeavours to establish that Ghatak, from the outset, exhibits a deliberate avoidance of romantic sentiments encapsulating the extensive scope of middle-class consciousness in Bengal. Film society critic Mrigankshekhar Roy lauds *Komal Gandhar* as a commendable endeavour in experimental arts. According to Haimanti Banerjee, the film *Bari Theke Paliye* can be characterized as a memoir that explores the theme of homelessness. In his analysis, Dipendu Chakraborty aptly commends the film *Ajantrik* for its artistic prowess, while concurrently expressing the viewpoint that Ghatak's portrayal of the film is characterized by a mechanical approach. In his discourse, Somnath Mukhopadhyay provides insights into the innovative approaches to cinematography that Ghatak sought to introduce. The critic asserts unequivocally that a significant deficiency of the film lies in Ghatak's limited

comprehension of the pivotal significance of politics in effecting the transition of bourgeois class consciousness into proletarian class consciousness. There is also a collection of essays aimed at conducting a comprehensive evaluation of Ghatak's films from multiple vantage points. The editor Rajat Roy provides a summary of the perspectives that European critics have expressed regarding the films of Ghatak. Based on interviews conducted with Jyotirindra Maitra, it is evident that Ghatak possessed a profound understanding of the application of sound and music within the realm of cinema. In the extensive essay authored by Gurudas Bhattacharya, a comprehensive analysis is conducted on Ghatak. He executed the task devoid of any sympathy. Iraban Basuroy's article offers a comprehensive analysis of Ghatak's artistic prowess. In spite of harbouring an admiration for Ghatak, he exhibits no hesitation in vehemently criticizing and highlighting Ghatak's flaws and inconsistencies. In a series of three interviews, Samik Bandyopadhyay provides insights into the characteristics of Ghatak in theatre and Ghatak in film. Ultimately, Bandyopadhyay concludes that Ghatak's tendency to employ archetypes can be seen as a form of limitation. Jyotirmoy Roy admits that Ghatak had been unsuccessful in producing feature films and short films due to inherent deficiencies. There are discussions on how Ghatak was as a human being. The remembrance of Mahashweta Devi is a precious one as it recalls Ghatak's childhood days. The minor personal occurrences like childhood days have the potential to be scrutinized within the psyche and philosophy of Ghatak's creations as once he said, "Every artist somehow manages to carry his childhood with him, tucked into his pocket, right into adulthood...He ceases to be an artist, and he becomes a theorist" ("Chalachchitre Porichaloker Baktobbo" 174). Mrinal Sen also reminisced about his formative years while talking about Ghatak.

Another Bengali anthology from Bangladesh is *Ritwikmangal* (2001), edited by Sajedul Awwal. Here I come across Ghatak's interviews conducted in Bangladesh, along with newspaper articles, film criticisms especially on *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam*, published and unpublished essays on Ghatak, information on Bangladesh film societies and their efforts commemorating Ghatak. They provide insights into Ghatak's exploration of East Bengali cultural identity, landscapes, and socio-political struggles. Critiques from Bangladesh highlight the cultural specific visual iconography of East Bengal that Ghatak integrates into his films. This regional perspective is valuable in understanding how his work reflects the traumas of Partition, migration, and identity that remain relevant in Bengali society.

I also explore film society literature (such as North Calcutta Film Society's magazine Chitravash) on Ghatak, Surama Ghatak's biographical documentation on him. I have gone through some additional essays by film society activists in special issues. I got the opportunity to go through some screenplays (prepared by film enthusiasts) of Ghatak's films. Yatir Binyas by Moinak Biswas narrates the process by which the microcosm of *Subarnarekha* expands in order to capture the broader history of time and space. In the same vein, Nisorgo o Natyalap deftly examines Ghatak's excursion through the film's narrative.

The essay authored by Kumar Shahani (2015) exhibits a high degree of complexity and theoretical underpinnings. However, within the framework of Ghatak's philosophical perspective on life, the utilization of symbols, the vibrant portrayal of natural landscapes, and art and culture in a nation influenced by its colonial past, he has articulated a statement that should undeniably warrant our consideration. Safdar Hashmi's (2020) essay in Rajat Roy's book contextualizes Ghatak's talent. However, a limitation of the essay lies in its tendency towards political monotheism. Bhaskar Chandvarkar (2020) lauded Ghatak's musical sense.

In an inspired effort to elucidate the filmmaker's art through a close analysis of *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, Raymond Bellour discovers that Ghatak is a consummate modernist with a highly developed style which is uniquely his own, despite the classical arc of the narrative. He captivates our attention by utilizing the montage of sound and image to organize emotions. He achieves a form of "expressive modulation" (Bellour). He also read Ghatak's *Komal Gandhar* and commented: "Abstraction thus seems a principle common to both films and, beyond that, to Ghatak's entire oeuvre" (Bellour). Serge Daney, on the other hand, did a close reading of *Ajantrik*, inevitably compared him with Ray:

> Time does not hold the same meaning for Ghatak as for Satyajit Ray. Ray is an aristocrat, Ghatak was an agitator. Both are Bengali, but Ghatak was born in 1926 on the "wrong side" of Bengal, in Decca, not yet capital of East Bengal, later Bangladesh. Ray knows how to evoke the past in mists and clouds. Ghatak, on the other hand, is a man with a clean slate. There is no nostalgia in him, or rather there is a nostalgia so strong (for an undivided Bengal) that it is everywhere and nowhere.

Ghatak's are intensely personal, but epic in form, scope and aspirations. But, as Jacob Levich also argues, Ray's films are flawless, exquisitely rendered, conventional narratives aimed for the kind of psychological insights prized by nineteenth century novelists (30).[21]

I also utilized some other aspects in film studies in general. The relationship between cinematic image and sound is uncovered by Michel Chion (1994). He discusses the concept of "added value" (Chion 5) which posits that the combined impact of sound and image is greater

[21] Jacob Levich, further, says : "If Satyajit Ray was the suitable boy of Indian art cinema - unthreatening, career-oriented, reliably tasteful - Ritwik Ghatak, his contemporary and principal rival, was its problem child"(30). See Subcontinental divide: the undiscovered art of Ritwik Ghatak published in Film Comment, issue 33 no. 2.

than the sum of their individual components. The theory of reciprocity between image and sound, which is always in equal proportion, is the primary argument of Chion. *The Role of Voice in Cinema* (1999) is another brilliant work on film sound by Michel Chion, edited and translated by Claudia Gorbman. Chion investigates the history and poetics of film sound, as well as the role of the human voice in film. I was particularly drawn to his arguments regarding the hidden and faceless voices of cinema and the magical power they possess, which were discussed in the context of *Testament of Dr. Mabuse* (1933). This inspired me to reflect on Ghatak's work. *Journal of the Moving Image* sound issue (2004) also delves into the intersection of sound and Indian film form, encompassing voice, speech, music, performance, recording, historical dynamics, and authorship study. On the other hand, Sumangala Damodaran's *The Radical Impulse* (2017) attempts to study IPTA tradition's music connecting the links between various artistic forms in post-colonial India. Elsaesser regards melodrama not only as a genre but also as a narrative and aesthetic framework for conveying the inner conflict and suppressed memories in *Melodrama and Trauma: Modes of Cultural Memory in the American Cinema* (2017). Using heightened emotionalism, moral polarizing, and expressive *mise-en-scène* to reflect social and historical conflicts including issues around race, family, and gender, he argues that melodrama serves as a repository for suppressed histories and unresolved traumas. Thomas Elsaesser also emphasizes how melodrama often exposes the limits of language in expressing trauma; hence, it turns to visual excess, music, and physical expressions as other means of conveyance of extreme suffering and loss. In *The Melodramatic Imagination* (1995) Peter Brooks broadens his discourse by integrating the three most prevalent art forms: literature, theatre, and films. *Melodrama: Stage, Picture, Screen* is the result of the 1992 international conference on melodrama, which explored the connections between melodrama and the theatre, as well as theory, history, and

musicology. The debates and stages of film authorship are documented in the book *Theories of Authorship* (1981) introduces recent publications on the subject and proposes potential revisions to the authorship debates. David Bordwell's *Figures Traced in Light: On Cinematic Staging* (2005) is a significant work that examines the role of cinematic staging in the transmission of emotion, narrative, and visual composition. Additionally, the book demonstrates the viability of the poetics of cinema in terms of narrative and stylistic elements that influence the audience experience. It is the poetics of cinema that enables us to appreciate the skill and aesthetics of the filmmakers and makes us more receptive to the films we watch. All these serve, mainly, as the foundational elements to connect the dots, and to provide a comprehensive narrative in the dissertation.

Finding a gap

I acknowledge the fact that the existing literatures play a big role in facilitating the historical, formal, political, and cultural studies of Ghatak's cinema. But we see that they rarely delve into the spatial aspects of his films. Moreover, the extant scholarly literature concentrates predominantly on a handful of his more well-known films, such as the Partition Trilogy. They are sometimes theme-based study of a particular film. So, a more holistic spatial comprehension of his developing aesthetic and theoretical vision is needed.

Research question (s)

Keeping the gap in mind, I study how the filmmaker creates, represents, philosophizes space in films. The specific research questions are: How does Ghatak utilize space as a conceptual apparatus? How does Ghatak's spatial representation challenge or reinforce the socio-political issues of the time? What role does space play in the aesthetics of the apparent themes? I explore the historical, social, political, geographical, and cultural milieus that influence the spatial politics throughout Ghatak's filmography. My objectives are to reveal the meanings, to clarify the spatial dynamics, to theorize his spatial aesthetics, and ultimately to make a contribution to the discussion around cinematic space, Indian cinema, and Ghatak. By achieving these goals, this project intends to enhance our understanding of his cinematic contribution and its importance in the wider context of the medium of cinema.

Methodology

The primary method employed for writing this thesis is *mise-en-scène* analysis and criticism. Apart from textual analysis, (con)textual readings, cultural readings, archival explorations are employed to furnish the historical, cultural, and socio-political backdrops of Ghatak's films. The analyses are then informed by theoretical frameworks. I also conduct comparative analysis of various films to find and situate recurring spatial motifs in a larger context. To overcome my personal and subjective biases, and to enhance the credibility of the thesis, I engage with other researchers' interpretations, and the filmmaker's own writings and interviews. The films incorporated in this study are chosen with the intention of reflecting on the cinematic oeuvre of Ghatak. It entails both widely known and lesser-known films. It guarantees a comprehensive analysis of Ghatak's exploration of spaces over the course of his career. *Nagarik* (The Citizen,

1952), *Ajantrik* (The Pathetic Fallacy, 1958), *Bari Theke Paliye* (The Runaway, 1959), *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (The Cloud-Capped Star, 1960), *Komal Gandhar* (E-Flat, 1961), *Subarnarekha* (The Golden Line, 1962), *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam* (A River Called Titas, 1973), and *Jukti Takko Aar Gappo* (Arguments and a Story, 1974) are the films selected for analysis.

Chapters

We need to place a high value on the symbolic centres of the films, from where we can organise spatiality in the films. Some parts develop the idea of "home" and its ultimate loss in spatial terms. Often spatiality develops on soundscapes. Sometimes it is developed by the thematic utilization of space, and cinematographic techniques, and by thorough investigation of his compositions. Likewise, it also develops structurally, and through philosophical discourse too.

The first chapter "Early Phase: Multiple Spaces" is divided into three parts. The very first one is titled "The metro city: a space not for the middle-class." In it, I discuss how the filmmaker exposes the middle-class is marginalized in the metro city. It is a socio-political plane of inquiry. With a series of pans in the city, the Marxist filmmaker invokes both the city and its dwellers. In his film, city is with its distinctive characteristics. Camerawork reproduces the spatial settings for the film, by capturing the interiors (mostly studio-built) as well as the exteriors of the city. The urban setting is used to show how the characters feel or what happens to them. We see human activities, perceptions, and power dynamics. For the filmmaker, the city and its values—or lack of values—are bourgeois ones. The capitalist system is personified in the city. The tall, vertical skylines all around push them down into well-like situation. We see the transformation of the middle-class to lower middle class in rented house to even lower class of the slums in the city

space. The middle-class people also participate in the city-building activities. But they never gain the true status of its citizens. The city cannot be home to the middle-class people. The city always wants to crush them. The middle-class family is a failing system in the city. Being poor is the most embarrassing situation. It is a never-ending cycle of hopelessness that defines middle-class life in the city. Every now and then a city sign, an event is a metaphor of denial. Through the visual compositions of the cityscape, ambient sounds of the city, and community spaces of the citizens, we understand that the middle-class people have nothing to do with the city's apparent gleaming façade. The next part is "The ethnic space: a site of conflict with modernity." This time the setting is far away from the city, it is Bihar-Jharkhand hills. The city has no direct role in it like in the previous part, but there is intrusion of civic characters—a character opposite to the values of an *adivasi space*. The character attracts a city girl to elope with him, then dumps her there, and flees. Again, quite strongly, the indirect presence of the city is there. The filmmaker's civic mind did not want to see the modern life the city could offer. The reworking of the interactions between the human and the mechanical in an *adivasi* space basically questions the binaries between the modern and the pre-modern. It also questions the dominant reaction to technological modernity in postcolonial India by conceiving an affective relationship with one of the producers of capitalist modernity—the car. In 180 degree pans, we see that Nature is indifferent to human joy or sorrow. We see mental motion in shots of trees and hills. The Oraons of central India, the vast, undulating plateau of the western borders of Bengal, its rough-hewn texture, and its combination of barren tracts and forests offers the filmmaker a freedom to explore the spatial articulation of it. The filmmaker, having been among the Oraons, as a documentary filmmaker for five years, becomes an ethnographer by creating a contrast to urban space, engaging in tribal rituals, incorporating tribal music, and empathizing with them. "The

rural vs. urban where one always yearns for the rural space" is the last part of this chapter. In it, I concentrate on characters' archetypal novelistic journeys from the tranquil countryside to the seemingly vibrant metropolis. They are, at the beginning, enthralled by the clash and clangour of steel and the arrogant construction of the Howrah Bridge reaching the sky, the streets opened out like black ribbon braids, the dancing street lights, the steamers on the river. But the big city remains an El Dorado until they reach there. The reality of the city space is harsh. The civic symbols—parks, streets, tea shops, and train stations—become social spaces to reveal the views on the city space. We see subjective experiences and lived realities of homelessness, extreme poverty, economic exploitation, and various other sufferings in the collage of the film. We see people gathering the food thrown out by the rich, chasing away the dogs, and rummaging through trash cans. The city does not show any possibility of romanticism. All have to struggle for survival in the city. As a result, though the theme of adventure in the city is important, they desperately want to get out of the city. But they seem to be entangled in the web of it. They cannot embrace it. Their only desire is to sink themselves into the memories of the former life they left behind, the undivided rural Bengal. The good things cannot happen in the city. The city lacks so much. The city is criticized. The city is disapproved. The mythical power of return to the root is so fascinating that they arrive almost at the same conclusion that they want to go back to the peaceful rural space of values and ethics, where they will not feel suffocated. The filmmaker brings out the theme by framing the countryside as a place of nostalgia, innocence, and simplicity in contrast to the cold, chaotic, indifferent urban space.

The second chapter titled "Fragmented Spaces" is also divided into parts. The very first part is titled "The suburb: a site of refugee colony."In it, I discuss how the refugee lower middle-class family is now situated on the fringes of Calcutta. The filmmaker fills the scenes with details

of the neighbourhood of the refugee colony in Taratala. The refugee suburb dwellers have to depend on the city. They have to go to the city for work. They become labourers in the factory of the city, seeing no prospect in future. They come back to the suburb at the end of a day. Still, the city cannot be kind to them. It betrays them, makes them paralyzed. The architectural spaces of the city become claustrophobic for them. Under these circumstances, the filmmaker tries to solace them in his own way. Tuberculosis as a disease becomes a romantic disposition, as a rejection of urban modernity in order to convey the rejection of technologically-driven urban-industrialism. The prescribed treatment for the illness becomes a provincial space of isolation—the unified Bengal of the filmmaker's vision, a rejection of all that is urban and corrupt. He also takes the characters for outing in the village, a symbol of their lost homeland. We see a reference to Keats romantic poetry in the film, "The Poetry of the earth is never dead." But it is a temporary escape. They have to come back to reality. They have to navigate from the makeshift residence in the refugee colony of the suburban area. Being unacknowledged everywhere, they have no choice but to slowly waste away. Finally, all the pains of the embodiment of the fragmented Bengal make an outburst of primal cry in a sanatorium of Shillong hill, another site of escape from reality: "*Aami bachte cheyechhilam* / I wanted to live." The suburb becomes a site of the struggles and complexities of post-Partition refugee life. It is transformed from a mere location into a metaphor for displacement, survival, and marginalization. It is neither the bustling city nor the homeland they left behind. The sound design and *mise-en-scène* emphasize a yearning for space and freedom yet a forced containment. The second part is titled "Musical excursion to make us face the fragmentation." Unlike the third part of the first chapter, this time, a group of theatre practitioners makes outward journeys from Calcutta to various destinations of Lalgola, Bolpur, Budge Budge and Kurseong. Their journeys invite us to unravel the aesthetics

woven into the fabric of the narrative. The landscapes become stages and musics our guides. On a visit to Lalgola for a performance, they confront the current state of the Padma River. They find out the place they lived across the river before the Partition. The river earlier used to connect the two sides of it with ferries. Now, after the Partition, the catastrophe is, the other side of the river is a foreign land. They share memories of separation and loss, snatching away from mother land by the communal violence of the Partition. Now, they are no longer permitted to go there. The characters get overshadowed by the encompassing landscape, and the *abhed ākāśa* (the indivisible space) as if it says: who are we to divide a country? Who are we to create borders between spaces, between human beings? The camera proceeds in a forward direction across the railway track, which assumed a "minus sign" now. As the vocal ensemble reaches its crescendo, the camera abruptly shifts its focus to a buffer as if to hammer us. Thus, the entire effort of the excursion to make us confront the fragmentation due to the Partition becomes successful. It is meant to bring back the moment of rupture to the consciousness of the traumatized that they have forgotten. The sense of freedom is only felt in wide open spaces and in Kurseong. We see a relay of setting, sound and images, layering of history with allusions through an inter-textual approach. The theatre group becomes a space of collaboration despite internal conflicts. The film moves from the stage to the backstage. It draws parallels between the classical drama *Shakuntala* and the tensions of the then Calcutta. The river embodies both the physical border which divides Bengal and the continuity which flows despite political barriers. Music becomes a space where characters feel a connection across borders, evoking a shared Bengali identity that defies the imposed division. "Fragmented space as dystopia" is the final part of this chapter. In it, I focus on the victims of the Partition, their existential crisis, and their attempts to relocate throughout spaces. In the filmmaker's view, the Partition obliterated the utopia of Bengal. It is no more a

gorar Bangla (flourishing Bengal) of Rabindranath, Saratchadra, it is a *bhangar Bangla* (breaking Bengal) now. It is a waste land. In the refugee colonies, the landlords kidnap refugee women. A group of people who lack aesthetic sensibility is turning arts into commodities in the city. Opportunists, deserters and caste issues plague the new refugee settlements in the outskirts of Calcutta. The haunting spectre of the Partition is perpetually present in both the dialogues and the landscapes. The dejected men immerse themselves in the vices of hedonistic pleasures in the Calcutta city which did not experience the war, the famine, riots, or the Partition. Sisters become prostitutes of the slums in Calcutta, and brothers become their clients. They seek resettlement, rehabilitation in a new "home." But it remains elusive and unachievable. They are never permitted to be domiciled anywhere. Moreover, it is raised to a universal phenomenon that the human race is homeless, and the dream to own a home remains forever in human beings. This can also be interpreted as a new horizon of a community or a nation. The visual landscape of despair and dislocation captures the dystopian essence of the post-Partition fragmented Bengal. Each space – representative Nabajiban colony, the outskirts of the iron foundry of Chhatimpur, an abandoned airfield built during the World War II on the banks of the Subarnarekha River in Chhotonagpur, and the city – becomes a reminder of the rupture caused by the Partition. They symbolize a world where the characters are trapped in an environment that alienates them from their heritage, community, and humanity. The use of space communicates the dystopian essence of the fragmentation. It creates visuals of a homeland that has become unrecognizable and inhospitable.

The third chapter is titled "The Sublime Space." In it, I concentrate on how a riverine landscape is utilized to create metaphysical abstractions. In the filmmaker's poetic imaginations, it becomes a sublime space of "the eternal Bengal." Bengal with its festivals, religious diversity,

rituals, and practices is more than a microcosm of the nation. For the most original Bengali filmmaker, Bengal is a riverine civilization with so many rivers in the Bengal delta, and Bengalis are basically those who are vulnerable to change, internal conflicts, and external forces working against them. The film in question is concerned less with the authority of representation and more with a mode of experiencing and engaging with a sublime spatio-temporality. The river's constant flow and changing course philosophise the impermanence of everything and the inevitability of change. There is contemplation on the cycle of birth-marriage-death, and beyond. An entire civilization perishes due to the river's changing course. However, it is capable of generating a new sandbar as well. With his deep-rooted philosophy and class consciousness, the filmmaker captures in his film what history taught him in his lifetime, by drawing on the concrete, abstract, archetypal, and epic dimensions of the land of Bengal. The rich city men's exploiting the community becomes symbolic of the divisions within the whole Bengali community. The physical landscapes of Brahmanbaria of greater Cumilla District in Bangladesh are transformed into a sublime space which is both breathtaking and humbling. The sublime is invoked by emphasizing the vastness, mystery, and power of the river, and its surroundings to explore themes of transience, beauty, and the association between human history and the river. Through the physical space, we are invited to confront the limits of human control and understanding. It creates a cinematic experience which resonates with awe, reverence, and existential wonder. The perceived, conceived, and lived spaces by the filmmaker explain the construction, experience, and contestation of the filmic space.

The fourth and final chapter is titled "Discursive Spaces." It revolves around how discursivity is employed into spaces to reflect philosophical musings on the contemporary times. We see a dialogic approach through the contagion of various discursive units, inducing

arguments in thoughts. Using journey as a motif from the pavement of the city to the forest indicates complete acceptance of homelessness. It presents a diverse array of political, historical, and cultural dialogues. It refers to the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 from a rented flat, again a result of the Partition, the "sham" of India's bourgeois independence from the *khoai* (barren land), the lost generation of the post-Partition Bengal from Kalighat-Keoratola, gender dynamics and power relations, value of cultural integrity from the rural folk space, socio-political instability in the post-Independence period from a factory area, the Naxalite movement, critique of Marxism, it's implications for revolutionary praxis, and India's cultural history extending over millennia from the forest. Recalling the past times happens in the greenery and hill, contemplation happens beside the Prinsep Ghat on the bank of the Hooghly River, and dreaming about the future happens only in city Park. The director establishes a teacher-student relationship between his caricature and us. He shows that the system needs to change if we are to face the crisis of the time collectively. Every event depicted in particular physical spaces is the filmmaker's exclusive commentary on the realities he encountered as a stand-in for the disoriented and failed middle-class intelligentsia. It concludes the political discourse we started with in the city space in the first part of the first chapter that as a common individual you can do nothing but accept. The settings—from village courtyards to makeshift camp of the Naxalites in the forest—become arenas for dialogue, debate, and introspection. The protagonist Neelkantha becomes an anthropologist, and moves through these spaces. He engages in discussions that touch on the issues, and personal dilemmas. The spaces act as more than just physical backdrops. They symbolize the discursive, evolving nature of ideas within the society of the time. The mental, physical, and social are used as discursive spaces where ideas, arguments, and philosophical reflections unfold.

In the conclusion chapter, I map all the developments throughout the thesis for further theorization. It reflects on how Ghatak becomes a modernist filmmaker in terms of spatiality by bringing regional, national and global cultural dialogues into creative collision. He employed space in an abstract, symbolic way to evoke specific ideas. There is a romantic sensibility in Ghatak's spatial aesthetics. They can be easily linked to outward journeys towards nature and the landscape, and emphasizes on individual subjectivity, and emotional excess. Ghatak's films always offer "something more," hence, it is imperative to read between the shots, between the scenes, and between the films to gain a comprehensive spatio-temporal dialectic. *Mise-en-scène* is of paramount importance to understand spatiality of his films, where the shots are richly conceived in deep focus. The shots are not only elements of montage; they are sometimes cells of violent ruptures. He employs sound and music to expand the perception of space. He establishes a dynamic interplay between what is seen and what is heard. Ghatak becomes a philosophically inclined film theorist from India in his use of space. His legacy can be traced in later New Wave filmmakers and their approaches to the use of space in cinema. Finally, I acknowledge the limitations of the thesis, and offer suggestions for further research.

Chapter 1: Early Phase: Multiple Spaces

Introduction

Ghatak's early films, *Nagarik, Ajantrik,* and *Bari Theke Paliye* are varied in terms of their general use of of multiple spaces. Despite being mostly overlooked by film scholars and critics, especially the first and the third, these films too, have rich utilization of spaces. They too, have complex utilization of spaces. The filmmaker placed a high value on the symbolic spatial centres from where we need to organise the spatiality of the films. They do require us to consider new ways of defining his spatial aesthetics. The moving images of landscapes, cityscapes, human beings, and nature combined with soundscapes speed up our perception of the multiple spaces of his early films. The spatial imageries and apparatuses not only create new meanings for rendering extra filmic spaces, but also for thinking and making them visible. Ghatak incorporates spatial elements of the city, *adivasi* space, and rural spaces sometimes neutrally to create a purely aesthetic meaning, and sometimes with the characters interacting with and surrounding them. The spaces, sometimes, appear to be unrelated suggestives. The study extends theoretical inferences drawn from spatial theories in order to identify the operatives in Ghatak's cinema. How urban, rural, and ethnic spaces extend far beyond the boundaries of mere real settings - we will see in this chapter. It sets the stage for Ghatak's spatial preoccupations, and propels us towards a deeper spatial understanding.

I. The metro city: a space **not for the middle-class**

Satyajit Ray in his speech on the occasion of Ghatak's death anniversary said:

> There was a print of a film when we were working on the production of *Aparajito* at Bengal Film Laboratory. The film was *Nagarik* by Ritwik Ghatak. We instantly watched the film. Despite obstacles, the film was made. It is noticeable. Nothing has been polished. However, I saw some great traits in the new director that made me respect him highly. (27)

As pointed out by Ray, the first finished but unreleased until 1977 film by Ghatak, shows possibilities of a great hand in creating spatial possibilities of a film as well, apart from the "great traits" of a filmmaker. In the film, the central protagonist is Ramu, a fresh graduate looking for a job. He is introduced as being in the city of the post-Partition Calcutta by an off-screen narrator – "a single citizen, one of the millions." The opening series of shots in the scene that runs for the first two minutes twenty seconds of the film are wide angle panning shots of the city streets, buildings, trams and most importantly Howrah Bridge that establishes both the city setting and its citizens. We see a day's work getting completed beneath the wire-strewn night-time sky in the city. Streets become crowded with home-going workers. The film's brilliance lies in the "naturalism" of mostly studio-sets (Rajadhakshya and Gangar 38). The meticulous aspects of the city space and its characterization are what capture my interest. The images of the city are taken from a high angle.[22] They emphasize how enormous the skyscrapers are in comparison to the

[22] In this regard, the cinematographer of the film Ramananda Sengupta said, "...I used to love the way he composed his scenes. It was either too low or too high: he did not like the normal camera" (44-45). See I have never seen such a talented Man in Technology and Cinema in Bengal: A Historical Overview, restored by The Media Lab, Jadavpur University Film Studies Department.

vulnerable citizens gathered in the streets. The city appears to be exciting from the outside, but when the camera follows Ramu to his home, we encounter the real nature of the city space - the run-down, ugly, and filthy houses in the hidden alleys. Slowly, the city is portrayed as an uncompromising system driven by a cruel capitalist framework. The landowner who approaches Seeta and requests rent claims that maintaining a "solid business connection" is the cornerstone of love. The refugees who took shelter in Calcutta city after the Partition used to reside in that city space. Ultimately, we as audience would come to know that the middle-class have nothing to do with the metro city's apparent gleaming façade.

The film focuses on a lower middle-class family in the city—a ramshackle rented house—as the protagonist Ramu returns home after a day of fruitless searching from the busy and cruelly indifferent administrative and commercial areas of the city to the impoverished neighbourhood where he lives. Then the story of the film centres on his family that was compelled to leave their homeland in East Bengal, and relocate to Calcutta after Bengal was divided. The family includes an older couple and their children. His sibling Seeta who is in her late 20s is still unmarried and unhappy with her pointless existence in the family. Pintu, the youngest is a young boy who has a chronic fever. Ramu's father lacks prospects and has no hope for the future in the city, whereas the mother expresses her love for her favourite child and her disappointment in her dark-complexioned daughter not getting married. Every marriage proposal is a traumatic event for Seeta as she is humiliated again and again. Ghatak portrays the challenges faced by the refugee family. He encapsulates the harsh realities of their lives as they go through poverty, shattered dreams, and societal expectations in the bustling metropolis of Calcutta.

Rajadhyaksha, while talking about the city in *Nagarik*, points out:

> The milieu is Calcutta, the filthy, garish metropolis to which thousands of refugees came every day in that terrible period, hoping to somehow eke out a miserable existence. The environment in the film is as significant as is the story or characters, an ever-present, inescapable backdrop. In fact, this is the first expression of the relationship that is the most basic to his subsequent work: that of the characters the natural, and contrasted against this, the urban environment. The city, the phenomenon of urbanism that through *Komal Gandhar* and *Subarnarekha* grows to archetypal dimensions in his portrayal alienated relationships within the urban milieu, something that first finds expression in *Nagarik*. (35)

Truly, the city itself exerts an influence throughout the film. Ghatak depicts the characters by juxtaposing their spatial conventions of portrayal with the more abstract portrayal of the city. The fundamental connections between the characters and the city space, the character and the creator of them, and the manipulation of spatial dimensions to convey new a meaning - are all apparent in *Nagarik*. Against the bustling backdrop of the metro city, the film unfolds through the lives of characters like Ramu, Uma, Jatin-babu, and Ramu's friend. They encompass aspirations, hardships, and the disparities woven into the fabric of their city life. Ramu first appears to be bursting with optimism about finding a nice job soon in the city. His father mocks him. He tells him that getting a job in the city is only like winning a lottery. The mother also hopes Ramu will get employment so they can return to a good house like they formerly had. Uma, who lives with her mother and younger sister in a filthy housing complex, is the lady of his affection. Uma also shares the same level of destitution and unrelenting survivalist constraints in the city, with her sister Shefali and their mother as Ramu's. Their neighbour Jatin-babu, living in the space under the staircase, represents the unsightly side of the city. Each time Ramu pays

them a visit, he is forced to encounter Jatin-babu who begs for a small loan to purchase a particular item for the ever-crying child off-screen. Ramu always cites his incapacity. Ramu's friend, Sushanta, who helps identify employment vacancies, Jatin-babu who wants to borrow money and constantly discusses basic necessities of life, employers who turn down job applicants, the underprivileged, and people of the old tea stall, street-singing beggars who are unable to attract anyone's attention, the landlord threatening to evict the tenants, and the street performer playing musical instrument occupy different sides of the city space of that time frame. Thus, Ghatak's portrayal of Ramu and his acquaintances in the city transcends individualities to reflect the collective challenges and disparities in a city space.

Amidst the shifting urban landscape of the post-Independence period, *Nagarik* also exposes the impact of urbanization on the middle-class in the city space. While Seeta gets "examined" by her potential in-laws, Ramu and his mother engage in a conversation outside on their current residence. Ramu remarks, "I hadn't taken a proper look all these days," while his mother shares memories of "the enormous house" they earlier lived in. "Today was the first time I really saw how the tall, vertical skyscrapers that are erupting all around it had pushed us down into a well. How people live here?" Ramu says. It is as if due to the skylines in the name of urbanization and industrialization, the middle-class community is being cornered, marginalized. So, the aged, myopic, and lame father is cynical and dejected while suffering from poverty. It is up to the son and daughter to comfort him as best they can, considering and caring for her father's impairments, the daughter and the son with his optimistic job prospects in the city.

Sagar stays in the city with Ramu's family as a paying guest. A chemist by training, he struggles to make ends meet but makes an effort to provide for the family as much as he can. Ramu first takes offence to Sagar's elevated position in the household. But once Ramu's

ambitions of landing a job fails and his father passes away, they come to some type of understanding with the city. Ramu has been unable to pay the rent for months; the landlord abuses him in front of Sagar and everyone. When Sagar is about to leave, Seeta makes a last-ditch effort to get close to him. Sagar, who has been shy and reserved his entire life, finally admits that he has loved Seeta all along but that there is no way they can be together without a shelter and a place to live other than the street in the city. "You said you wanted to live a little," he says to Seeta. "Do you even perceive such a possibility? We are all being beaten down like the Padma River's banks. We are unaware of any new land that may be developing. There must be a way, and we'll look for it. Let me look for it, Seeta. I'll make an effort to survive because I won't be able to forget you." Unable to pay any rent, towards the end of the film, Ramu and the family must vacate their home and relocate to a slum. Thus, we see the transformation of the family from middle-class to lower middle class to even lower class in the slums of the city space.[23]

Ghatak brings forth the alienation of the refugee metropolitan humans. The territory of the city cannot be home to the middle-class people in the film. The mother feels suffocated and laments the loss of their large house in the village. Ramu claims he wants to leave the "well-like" location. In the house, Seeta is irritated and dejected. Uma is incompatible with the environment. Her younger sister ultimately becomes a prostitute. Sagar feels alienated and delays accepting Seeta's love until the very end. Every character in the film experiences a loss of identity in the

[23] Ghatak also conceptualized a film by contrasting the then Vietnam situations with the lives of the underprivileged and struggling residents of Calcutta's slums. From his point of view, Vietnam becomes any place where inequality, oppression, and exploitation are pervasive, which is why he decides to show the many Vietnams in India. Ghatak wrote: "It is whenever, wherever people protest that Vietnam is born...for the little I have realised about Vietnam tells me that the fight is being fought here too" (54-55). See *Rows and Rows of Fences*.

city. In the pauses between their forgotten words, the music is always wailing. In their sporadic moments of youthful bliss, they consciously search for a meaning. They also participate in the city-building processes. But they never gain the status of its citizens. The city always wants to crush them. The city absorbs their energy and transforms them into living-dead, much like the enormous capitalist machine outside the window that annoys Ramu's father with its noise. As a result, they cannot live peacefully in that alienate situation.

The middle-class family is portrayed as a failing system in the city. Due to their responsibilities to their families, Seeta and Ramu are unable to fully express their true passions. Ramu, Uma, and Jatin-babu's families are unable to keep their members together. The family's estranged members are kept together by Ramu's father. Uma's elderly, bedridden mother is the driving force for her family. Family is merely something that needs to be adequately fed in Jatin-babu's eyes. Ramu's father passes away. The Gandhian father figure had been keeping the family together. In the end, all of these families are forced to leave their homes and look for new quarters in slums. Maintaining a sense of private peace of middle-class life for each family is impossible there which has been depicted by the car's noise outside the window of Ramu's father's room. Individualistic ideals are not possible in the slums. So, the familial bond fails as soon as the father dies and they move to the slum.

According to Ghatak, poverty is a political issue that can only be resolved by the affected population waking up together. Ghatak's use of melodrama continues to present the cycle of loss, impoverishment, and dislocation. To convey the impression of everyday life, the film's titles are displayed against a background of news articles. The narrator states, "I know him, I have seen him where the river flows calmly under the harness of the iron bridge and on its side rolls a narrative of tears and laughter," along with the first glimpses of the enormous Howrah Bridge in

the panning establishing shots. It serves as a metaphor of development. But the adoption of very firm political decision is necessary for both the system's improvement and survival of the poor in the city. Attempting to document the hardships of a "middle-class family facing proletarianization" (Bhattacharya "'Nagarik': Ritwik Ghatak's First Film" 62), Ghatak adopted the classic melodramatic determinations of personality, kinship, and accidents, and has moved onto a socio-political plane of inquiry of the city space, in the unceasing, almost cruel depiction of family pauperization, and in pointing to socialist movement as the only horizon where this distress can be redeemed.

Through symbolism Ghatak offers a glimpse into the hopes and shattered dreams of citizens, "Horatio Alger-esque ambitions," as Levich calls it ("Subcontinental Divide: The Undiscovered Art of Ritwik Ghatak" 30). He ultimately exposes the perpetual cycle of hopelessness that defines life in the city. Ramu's calendar image serves as a symbol of a citizen's own private and intimate hopes for his own happiness. It alludes to the wealthy and peaceful way of life that they recently lost. The house with the curtained window represents optimism for a successful future. Ghatak's use of a calendar image to create abstract and idyllic space in the film is very promising for his later films especially in *Subarnarekha* where we find find it taking a specific shape. The image in the calendar represents Ramu's dream in the cruel city space that he will get a job, a small house with a red-tiled roof, in that far-away field among the palm trees where there will be a lot of sky and the homes will not suffocate its residents. This dream makes him dreamy over and over again. Uma visits them one day. Ramu runs his fingers through Uma's hair while holding up the calendar house. But his dream is eventually dashed. He rips the calendar up, as he looks out the window. A new tenant arrives in the rain in search of new shelter, reminding the never-ending circle of hopelessness in the city space.

Ultimately, in *Nagarik*, Ghatak disrupts the concept of the modern metro city, the emblem of economic ambition, a space of opportunity, progress, and inclusivity. It alienates the very class that forms its backbone—the middle-class. The metro city thrives on an economic duality that disproportionately benefits the affluent while exploiting the lower classes. The middle-class, trapped in a liminal zone, is neither privileged enough to seamlessly integrate into the city's elite spaces nor sufficiently marginalized to qualify for working class. Lefebvre's idea of the "right to the city"[24] resonates here. The metro city denies the middle-class the right by prioritizing capitalist interests over equitable spatial distribution. Urban development in metro cities increasingly focuses on luxury housing, high-end retail zones, and exclusive gated communities, relegating affordable, middle-class-friendly spaces to the urban periphery. Spatially, the metro city perpetuates exclusion through gentrification and hyper-commodification of land. The middle-class, with its limited economic capital, gets displaced from city centres to suburban fringes, which we will discuss in the second chapter. This spatial marginalization also mirrors Foucault's idea of "heterotopias"[25]—spaces that exist outside the normative order. The middle-class suburban existence becomes a heterotopia, disconnected from the vibrant urban core, yet linked to its labour and consumption economy. This dynamic erodes the middle-class's

[24] Henri Lefebvre's idea of the "right to the city" argues that urban spaces should not merely serve the interests of capital and economic elites but should be reclaimed by all inhabitants as spaces for collective life, creativity, and social interaction. It extends beyond the mere right to access urban spaces; it encompasses the right to participate in shaping and transforming these spaces to reflect the needs, desires, and identities of the people who inhabit them. See *The Right to the City* (63-77).

[25] Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopias refers to spaces that exist outside the ordinary, everyday order of things yet are intimately connected to it. These are "other" spaces—distinct, contradictory, and multi-layered—where norms and rules of typical social spaces are simultaneously enacted, subverted, or suspended. See Foucault's 1967 lecture *Of Other Spaces* (24-27). It outlines a way to understand the complexity and diversity of spatial arrangements in society.

access to quality infrastructure, public spaces, and cultural life, turning the metro city into an inhospitable space. The metro city as a symbolic space perpetuates the myth of meritocracy. It promises success through hard work and perseverance, but this promise is undermined by systemic inequalities. The middle-class, burdened by unemployment, rising living costs, stagnant wages, and lack of upward mobility, experiences a dissonance between aspiration and reality. The metro city, instead of serving as a conduit for their dreams, becomes a space of disillusionment and existential struggle. Ghatak's film offers a critique of this urban alienation, and the human cost of modernization—elements that resonate deeply with the struggles of the middle-class in metro cities in the socio-political context of the post-Partition Bengal. The spatial aesthetics serve as visual allegories for the metro city's exclusionary nature.

Nagarik is a prototype for Ghatak's later films because it contains all of the essential Ghatakian elements. The tone is purposefully didactic under the influence of IPTA, and the presentation is in the form of a melodrama, as Ghatak did not regard any of them as subservient to realism. The agony of the Partition is palpable in the lead characters, all East Bengali refugees who have lost their homeland and took shelter in Calcutta. It is noticeable that it was a template that Ghatak had built while working on *Chinnamul*, and it would pervade his later works. Though it apparently seems, the film does not serve pessimism; rather, it ends on an optimistic note with Ramu's speech wishing for a better future. Given Ghatak's attachment in film society movement, this has been labelled as overtly Marxist (Bhattacharya "Marxian Aesthetics and People's Democratic Movement" 80–90). The film's scenes are filled with distinct Ghatakian aural and visual registers.

But, the film's promise of a voiceover involving the city, which begins with a succession of pans over the urban landscape, a voice recounting in first person about the "citizen I have

seen," remains unfulfilled. Ghatak is yet to find a way to utilize the present of the city in extending his assertion into the world. The promises are constrained by the rules of set, lighting, makeup, composition, music, and performance, so that the realist promise is limited to the subject matter and not worked properly through the spatial elements. The advanced content stems from Ghatak's artistic and ideological education,[26] but a cinematic tool for creating the utopia of his imagination escaping from the city space was still unavailable for him to work with. Ghatak could not develop a method to integrate the city as a location into the narrative itself. He still had the problem in developing a style beyond that of the studio social of that time in his first film (Biswas 86). But, after the portrayal of of the larger group of the middle-class within the city space, in the very next film, Ghatak goes on to talk about the effect of the city, industrialism, machine age in an ethnic space. The anthropologist Ghatak is seen in *Ajantrik.*

II. The ethnic space: a site of conflict with modernity

Ghatak returned to filmmaking six years after his first film, after coming back from Bombay where he worked as a screenplay writer with Bimal Roy.[27]The focus of the next film *Ajantrik* is on a taxi driver named Bimal[28] and his venerable vehicle *Jagaddal* (the immovable one in

[26] He had become connected to the communist party around 1945, and to the IPTA around 1948. See *Chalachchitra manush ebang aaro kichhu* (238-41).

[27] For the 1958 Hindi film *Madhumati*.

[28] He said that Bimal in *Ajantrik* is archetypal: "Bulaki, the mad man, is his absurd extension and the dancing Oraons his sublime extreme. Pyara Sing (a rival cab driver) is the tough-minded opposed to the tender-minded Bimal. The children slinging mud at the car are another allegory of Bimal and they represent the cruelty of the poetic life" (19). See Manabsamaj o amader oitijjyo in *Chalachitra, manush ebang aaro kichhu*.

Bengali). He views the automobile as a living creature. It takes place in Ranchi, a mining town, in a tribal Oraon clan and its surrounding landscapes. The film opens at a small-town cab stand somewhere in the hills of western borders of Bengal, with an uncle hiring the decrepit cab to take his seemingly psychologically disturbed nephew to the latter's wedding. The film is set on a space not particularly familiar with the then major Bengali film-goers.[29] For the plainsmen of the Gangetic delta, the landscape was quite new. They attach nothing emotionally to it. But Ghatak wanted to do something beyond nostalgic sentimentalism prevalent in the contemporary cinema as a filmmaker. He had to develop new values within the frames of this film. On the other hand, Ghatak could profit from the landscape's novelty.

For that, we need to know a little about the Oraons. There are influences of propagation by religious missionaries on them, not only Western but also Indian. Their culture exists on a very mixed level. But we can see a healthy, ever young, primordial pattern of culture which takes us back thousands and thousands of years of prehistory. The Oraons of today are not what they were even fifty years ago. Most likely they are the only tribe still lives in central India that has kept their ability to communicate their mental ecstasy via the medium of dancing. Nothing could totally eradicate the trace of that irrepressible joy which bursts forth in rhythm from thousands of

[29] We would later see Mrinal Sen and Satyajit Ray explore such unfamiliar landscapes namely in *Bhuvan Shome* (1969) and *Aranyer Dinratri* (*Days and Nights in the Forest*, 1970). As far as a car is concerned, *Naya Daur* (1957) by B. R. Chopra is filmed with a tonga-*wallah* (horse-cart driver played by Dilip Kumar), battled a mushrooming bus service that progressively threatened the livelihood of drivers of horse carts in a post-independence Indian village. Ghatak said, "For twelve long years, I had thought about this story before I made it into a film... What struck me most was its philosophical implication. Here was a story which sought to establish a new relationship in our literature the very significant and inevitable relationship between man and machine" (38). See Some thoughts on *Ajantrik* in *Rows and Rows of Fences*.

years of oppression involving waves of migration, swindling and torture by the higher and more so called civilized brethren of the land and other countries.

Ghatak wrote:

> Our literature, in fact our culture itself (i.e. the culture of middle-class city-dwellers) has never cared very much for the machine age. The idea of the machine has always held an association of monstrosity for us. It devours all that is good, all that is contemplative and spiritual. It is something that is alien to the spirit of our culture the spirit of ancient, venerable India. It stands for clash and clangour, for swift, destructive change, for fermenting discontent. (38)

The Oraons, however, do not have any such problem. They always adjust with anything fresh that comes their way. Among the indigenous people, this phenomenon is evident. They have a strong cultural bent and are sensitive.[30] The Oraons approach externals the same way. This is the emotional basis of this film. Their pathetic fallacy and Bimal's seems to be complementary in the film. This is why they suit as the perfect setting for this film. Ghatak applied their many customs in the film. The most artistic temperament is expressed in several moods produced by their high-flying *bairakhis* (flags) tilted at different angles and hung in different tempos. He included them into the consistent pattern of life beyond just tribal festivity. Everything starts with dances there, then continues entwining with it and ends only when their feet get tired. The dancers sink into the collective with the rhythm. These dances are for this kind of expression. They also help us to see another point: the natural harmony of the indigenous form of life. Work and leisure, worship

[30] Ghatak wrote: "I had a nodding acquaintance with them, having been among them as a documentary filmmaker for about five years. And I wondered again and again at their vigorous imagination. They would fully understand Bimal, for they themselves are like him" (40). See Some thoughts on *Ajantrik* in *Rows and Rows of Fences*.

and pleasure are so entwined and so well balanced that emotional disbalance—the worst affliction of civilized society—has very little chance to show. Furthermore, every age group has a clear and appropriate range of participation in the community. By guiding man's attention to what nature and surroundings provide, the great pleasure of living checks the craving to have egoistic ambitions. Therein is the lesson, the message of the tribal societies, viz. contentment, simplicity, a passionate love of life - they are ingrained among them from birth.

Like an anthropologist, Ghatak explains the phenomena in the film:

> This apathy may be due to the fact that all change and the very introduction of the machine age was the handiwork of foreign overlords. It might have more comprehensive causes, encompassing all the pangs of Western civilization. But the end product of all these causes seems to be an ideological streak which is doing immense harm in all practical spheres of life. (38)

Ghatak's reworking of the interaction between the human and the mechanical basically questions such binaries between the modern and the pre-modern (Sinha 105). With a mechanical object to show how the act of useless and unproductive possessing can subvert the narrative of modernity from inside. Jagaddal too is a living example of that obsolescence against economic development. *Ajantrik* questions the dominant reaction to technological modernity in postcolonial India by conceiving of an affective relationship with one of the most well-known signifiers of capitalist modernity—the automobile. Ghatak re-turns the mechanical to the zone of wonderment as a modern commodity. It is related to Ghatak's obsession with indigenous consciousness. Working with the Oraons, he was very struck with the animist symbologies that permeate their expression: the imbuing of life into the inanimate is also a means of rendering it

functional, of making sense of the universe. For Ghatak, the animist is also a means of returning to the childlike — Bimal's connection with the car — to the unities with the Mother Nature that had been fragmented by the intrusion of a mechanical modern.

The film begins with a strong gesture toward creating a corporeal intimacy between Bimal, Jagaddal, and the surrounding landscape. Jagaddal arrives to save all other vehicles that are afraid to be driven through the poor road conditions. The car starts its trip in a jittery manner through its frayed canopy. The passengers themselves have to assist in restarting it when it gets caught in mud. This scene not only emphasizes the movement between the natural and the mechanical with clear awareness of a rough and imposing landscape caught through wide-angle shots. The long, apparently accidental series prepares the ground for the whole engagement in a close conversation with the car. When Bimal talks personally with the car at the end of the film, he finds himself alone with his worn-out old friend in the large open field. Bimal asks Jagaddal, and the car reacts with different body motions. Techniques to anthropomorphize the car are the turning headlights, the auditory responses, and the corporeal. The machine becomes literally animated.

The film broadens the horizons to include the mechanical as well as the living entities.[31] Unlike other residents of the town, Bimal and Jagaddal are seen against the open landscape of the area; occasionally their togetherness is caught together or followed by images of natural surroundings, animals, and driving Jagaddal in the backdrop. We observe disturbances into the space's natural peace. Ghatak captures Jagaddal as indistinguishable within the frame on several times using long shots with great range. Sometimes hardly noticeable and covering screen space,

[31] For further interpretation regarding this aspect see Suvadip Sinha's Magical Modernity: The Fallacy of Affect in Ritwik Ghatak's *Ajatrik* (101-30).

Jagaddal becomes one of the natural space elements— trees, stones, and hillocks. Often underlined by non-diegetic sound, the spatial juxtaposition of natural and mechanical is far more startling when we come across the wagons moving along the overhead wires, the lonely woman positioned in front of a factory, the railway gates, and the train running over the dry riverbed. They show up in consecutive quick views to emphasize sudden unbalancing, and they are instantly matched by a race between the car and the train. Jagaddal is positioned next to the other machines to highlight its whimsicality, even while they are reminders of how nature has been controlled and subdued in the hands of a disenchanted, rationalized modernism. This is especially clear in a shot showing a broken down Jagaddal being pushed along an overpass while a train passes beneath bisecting the line of movement. The montage-like visual overlapping the mechanical and natural highlights the dialectical link between the two. The dialectic comes out of the attraction of opposites making us rethink our view of their relationship without sacrificing the technicity. The crisis is severe and urgent enough as political reality so reflects a civilization now stretched against a modern technology, of the machine threatening to wipe out something that lies beyond its awareness. As formal alternative, the attempt to understand the fragmented modern in terms of life-assertive forces that vitalizes a primitive consciousness, the collisions provided by montage also let Ghatak negotiate his own past into a political and cinematic present.

The lively young girl makes the journey of elopement with her fiancé, relishing the journey and the glimpse of the sky through the tear in the hood of the cab and the tribal space only to be abandoned eventually by the young man from the city. The film's setting is far from Calcutta, the city. Though the city has no direct role in it unlike the previous film *Nagarik*, there is an intrusion of civic character—a character opposite to values of the ethnic space. Played by

Anil Chatterjee, the character attracts a city girl to elope with him, then dumps her and flees. Again, quite strongly is the indirect presence of the city in this film too. The filmmaker's civic mind sought to grasp the interrelationship between nature and man rather than become totally absorbed in it. He was drawn to tiredness and exploitation of the space; he did not want to see the modern life the city could offer.

The camera leaves Bimal and his jalopy in the film when Bimal drives up a hill to the deserted young woman at the next station in an effort to convey the mental state of Bimal. Instead, it focuses on the fading landscape of forests and hills through which the car races. Ghatak make the landscape respond for emotional reasons of the character (Rajadhyaksha and Gangar 45), as is his tendency more noticeable in later films as well. All of these motion-based shots in that space are true uses of mental motion. They are the outcome of the failed and misunderstood artist's escapist vision. Men and the camera both move before coming to a halt. It results in a complete design that is inspired by the escapism of the filmmaker. Ghatak immediately counterpoints the romantic extension of a character's emotions into nature with his unique 180° panoramics on empty landscapes. In the end, nature is essentially indifferent to human happiness or grief.

Bimal submits for the night to the energies and rhythms of the tribal festival. The narrative space is reprimanded when Jagaddal breaks down. Bimal was attempting to speed to the next station in order to catch the runaway woman. The Oraons take over the scene with their procession in the landscape. As Serge Daney puts it, "...and then the film changes direction, transforming into something dreamlike." Ghatak points out elsewhere how the struggle is to renew the lost method of relating to the world represented by the Oraons in Bimal's own setting, whose predicament is basically that of the contemporary ("Some Thoughts on Ajantrik" 39). He

described the indigenous performance as depicting a life cycle, including birth, hunting, marriage, ancestor worship, and death. A complete story, told in a spatial language. To accomplish all of this, the procession halts the advancement of the main story. “I invited a lot of abuse because the Oraon dance sequence was inordinately long. But you know, I have never felt that way”, writes Ghatak, “I could not objectify it into something accessible to all. But I had no choice...I had to remain esoteric; I couldn’t make it commonly recognizable” (“Chalachitra Chinta” 144). Unlike the original story of the same name by Subodh Ghosh, here “Ghatak’s entire preoccupation with a tribal consciousness” as suggested by Rajadhyaksha and Gangar (50). But it was difficult to make the *mise-en-scène* as accessible as the rest of the film because it occurs at a point in the film where it begins to acknowledge the excluded, the remnant. This also explains why the scenes of Bimal’s insanity. They are inconsistent with the film’s usual balance and poise. Ghatak takes the leaps as the ground from which he is taking off is being laid. Reconstituted within an awareness that the space shown is far from the postcolonial modern of his other films, the visual explication of the landscape and its original occupants is rebuilt. Usually more often than not, the tribal people show on screen without any relation to the story’s plot. Sometimes the camera seems to show a chance meeting. The people show up in their own celebrations; they show up in their own market places; they show up as unexpected visitors; they show up as a crowd to be lost in. The tribal people’s amorphous character haunts the camera, but they never form part of the narrative. They are anachronistic and nonfunctional presence. Though the element of exoticist treatment of the people cannot be overlooked, these people serve as the signifying marker of the limits of capitalist and bourgeois rationalism. Bimal and these people have commonalities. Only these people find no difference between Jagaddal and other vehicles. Only these passengers, rather joyfully, agree to travel in the ramshackled car. Many

women riding on a truck and chanting accompany Jagaddal's path. Bimal pushes Jagaddal while a happy woman rides on the rear bumper. Ghatak emphasizes continuity between Bimal's world and that of the by using such images on several times.

Ultimately, Ghatak incites the idea that ethnic spaces— both geographically and culturally hold profound significance in human history. They serve as reservoirs of collective memory and continuity, community ways of life. However, with the onslaught of modernity, ethnic spaces become sites of conflict. Industrialization, urbanization, and globalization, seek to standardize and rationalize spaces to serve capitalist and technocratic objectives. Lefebvre's concept of "abstract space"[32] is relevant here. Lefebvre argues that modernity reduces space to a commodity, stripping it of cultural significance and subjecting it to the imperatives of profit and efficiency. Ethnic spaces, however, resist such reduction. They are "lived spaces," imbued with symbolic meanings, rituals, and collective identities. This incongruity transforms ethnic spaces into contested spaces, as modernity seeks to assimilate or erase their distinctiveness. The tension between ethnic spaces and modernity is not merely antagonistic. It also creates possibilities for negotiation and hybridity. Ethnic spaces, while resisting modernity, adapt and reinterpret modern influences to preserve their essence. This dynamism fosters what is called "third space," a site of cultural hybridity where tradition and modernity coexist in creative tension. The spatial conflict manifests through urban expansion, technological development, and gentrification. Modern cities encroach upon ethnic spaces, indigenous communities' cultural landscapes. For instance, the transformation of traditional ethnic quarters into tourist destinations (as in the film) commodifies

[32] Henri Lefebvre's concept of "abstract space" refers to a type of space produced under capitalism, where the primary focus is on commodification, control, and efficiency. Abstract space is characterized by its homogenization, standardization, and detachment from lived experiences, prioritizing economic and bureaucratic interests over the social, cultural, and emotional dimensions of space. See *The Production of Space* (285-291).

heritage, diluting its authenticity. This spatial dislocation reflects what Edward Said terms the "othering" process,[33] where ethnic spaces are rendered exotic and peripheral to the modern urban core. The conflict is rooted in the homogenizing tendencies of modernity. Globalization promotes a universal culture driven by consumerism and technological advancement, marginalizing ethnic practices. Modernity dissolves stable identities, favouring transient and commodified forms of belonging. Ethnic spaces, with their emphasis on rootedness and tradition, face existential threats. Rituals, oral histories, and community ties—integral to ethnic identity—become obsolete in the face of modernity's quest for progress. The ideological conflict between ethnic spaces and modernity is most evident in state policies and nationalist projects. Nation-states, as products of modernity, and harbinger of modernization, seek to integrate ethnic minorities into a unified national identity. This assimilationist agenda leads to cultural erasure, as seen in policies targeting indigenous groups. Modern states exercise control over populations by regulating cultural and spatial practices.[34] Ethnic spaces, in resisting such control, assert their autonomy and challenge the hegemony of modernity. Ghatak provides a film-philosophical framework to understand the struggles of ethnic spaces caught in the crosscurrents of tradition and modernity.

[33] Said's concept of "othering" describes the process by which dominant groups define and construct identities of subordinate groups as fundamentally different, inferior, or alien. He argues that othering is a discursive practice deeply rooted in power dynamics, where the dominant culture (the "Self") creates an exoticized, dehumanizing image of the subordinate group (the "Other") to maintain control and justify dominance. See *Orientalism* (1-7, 54-58)).

[34] Michel Foucault's theory of biopolitics explores how modern states exercise power over populations by regulating life itself. Foucault examines how power shifts in modern societies from sovereignty—exercising power over death—to biopower, which governs and optimizes life. Biopolitics is the political application of biopower, focusing on the management of populations and the individual body to achieve societal order, productivity, and control. See anthology of lectures given at the Collège de France in *Society Must Be Defended* (239-64).

The film echoes Wordsworth, one of Ghatak's favourite poets:

...I'd rather be

A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;

So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,

Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn.

- William Wordsworth (The World is Too Much With Us)

Kumar Shahani also found that "...(Ghatak's cinema) claims to be Christian in its ethics and pagan in its celebration of life" ("The Passion Of A Resurrected Spring" 114). This very fact presented a great variety of plastic and dynamic possibilities in the ethnic space of the Oraons.[35] Ghatak always returns to mechanical speed, with possibilities of bringing in the time-honoured mechanism of the chase and hair-breadth escapes and breakdowns at wisely selected moments. Ghatak, in his essay, Experimental Cinema and I, stated:

> My first film, *Ajantrik* is generally called an experimental film. I don't know how far that is true. But I have been asked from different quarters for whom am I making this film. I always answer that I am making it for myself and for nobody else. (33)

The film seems close to Ghatak's heart and thus perhaps makes an effort to make himself "less forlorn." He had clearly made enormous strides in finding his style. He was already in a position

[35] Focusing on Chhotonagpur area of India, before his *Ajantrik* Ghatak made *Adivasiyon ke Jeeven Srot* (1955), a documentary on the life of the Oraon community—the same community that is depicted here. In a brief essay titled About the Oraons of Chhotanagpur—on the documentary and the community—Ghatak clearly expresses his fascination and attachment with the people.

to test the limits of screen space, to introduce deep cracks in its logic, to displace the centred notions in order to give structurally repressed abstract ideas a chance. It brings in a decisive break in the lyrical identification with Nature (Biswas 193). Though there are passages where the expanse of the land, the silent passage of time over space are allowed to speak for themselves, Ghatak is after a discursive style from the outset and would be difficult to find the descriptive impulse playing a major role in his films. He breaks out from the theatrical mode in *Nagarik* to the documentary impulse in the film.

III. The rural vs. urban where one always yearns for the rural space

Now let's see the archetypal novelistic journey from the tranquil countryside to the apparent vibrant metropolis, and the mythical return in Ghatak's film in this section. In *Bari Theke Paliye*, the big city of Calcutta is an El Dorado[36] in the protagonist Kanchan's dreams. However, the reality of the city is harsher, and the citiscape he encounters gives him different perspectives on the city when he reaches there. He learns about honesty and dishonesty, love and hate, and lives in the City of Joy. He runs into Haridas, the sweet little girl Mini and her family, as well as folk singers, hustlers, roadside conjurers, beggars, and thieves. To return to his village "home" ultimately, he must struggle for his own survival and experience the city space as it is.

Kanchan is initially mesmerised by the clash and clang of steel, the haughty construction of the Howrah Bridge reaching into the sky, the streets that stretch out like braids of black

[36] El Dorado is a mythical city filled with riches. The legend originated in Spain. The Spanish also called the chief of the mythical expedition "El Dorado." The legend inspired centuries of European and Spanish expeditions in search of El Dorado in Latin America. Mrinal Sen also made a film called *Calcutta My El Dorado* (1990).

ribbon, the dancing street lights, and the hoots of steamers on the river. But gradually he begins to take a closer look at the city and its citizens. Kanchan is captivated by the city of Calcutta only initially, with its brimming monumental structures. He is surprised to see people entering the manhole. This is beyond his comprehension - what a pain those people are in! In the exploration of Calcutta's essence through Kanchan's eyes, Ghatak intertwines the city's vibrant yet deceptive facade. Kanchan wanders into a hotel and eats his fill. While he eats, a group of young men talks about current political space and the mythical Calcutta heritage. One of them tells how, as a child, he ran away from home and became enchanted by the beat and mysticism of the city. After the Partition, the city appears strangely out of place. In their conversation, Ghatak, in his usual style, comments on the political scenario, uses excerpts from Annadashankar Roy's iconic poem on the Partition: "*Teler shishi bhanglo bole khukur pore rag koro, tomra jesob dhere-khoka Bharat bhenge bhag karo...?*"(You are mad at the kid as she breaks a bottle of oil, then what about you old fools who divide India?)

Kanchan's journey prompts a questioning of the city's inexplicability. He sees the fairy princess and the helpless boy in the demon's grasp from the fairy stories he had heard from his mother come to life. He barges into a wedding party and meets Mini. He is infatuated with her and dreams of bringing her to his mother, to the village, as his wife. The next morning, he is shocked to see a malnourished family rummaging through the wedding leftovers for food to save from the street dogs. On his way back, he meets a boy who continues to draw images of divine beings with chalk. The orphan boy acts as a mute, earns money and gives it to the gangster, and then gets beaten up for his inability in gathering more. He is also from the village, but he cannot remember it. Kanchan stands up for the oppressed, releasing the helpless boy. He discovers that the boy is a part of a huge group of children used by a man to beg for money. Both of them plan

to escape this infernal city. Kanchan loses faith in the city and wonders why it contains so much pain and suffering.

A *baul* singer sings about Calcutta's wonders. In a series of shots Ghatak captures the city spaces –Howrah Bridge, buildings, trams, slums, people living on footpath, Kanchan witnessing them. The industrial city space is also visible. The song also incorporates in its lyrics how the *baul* (or the director himself) comes to Calcutta (the Partition tragedy implied). Kanchan gradually meets the poor cart man (Bijan Bhattacharya) in Calcutta. He claims that dignity has no price in the city, and says, "This is a battleground; go, go back to your home." To survive in Calcutta, one must fight; fighting is the motto of life there. Unfortunately, in the strange city of Calcutta, one must earn money by playing the fool - a pitiful part.

Haridas saves him from being run over by a car and gets him under his wing. Haridas is soon revealed to be a Partition refugee, a former schoolteacher who wears a wig and beard to offer *bulbul-bhaja* (fries) to young children. Kanchan sees trams, crowds, and busy people. Haridas becomes the city's conscience (M. Mukhopadhyay 230), with a fake beard. Kanchan realizes that Calcutta cannot exist without fake clothes. "Don't you have a mother?" helpless boy Kanchan inquires of Haridas. Haridas describes how many helpless poor mothers he sees in Calcutta. For Ghatak the soul of undivided Bengal is lost in the city space. He implies the fact that after the tragedy of the shameful division the mother Bengal has become a beggar who roams across the alleys without any peaceful shelter. On the other hand, the character of Mini's mother and the mother of the runaway child embody unhappiness and agony of the mother in the city. Their fate is ultimately heartbreaking. Ghatak clearly identifies the city space of Calcutta - the metaphorical aspect of the mothers' tragic destiny in the city.

Ghatak, in later films, especially in *Komal Gandhar* and *Subarnarekha*, would complicate his ideas further. However, in *Bari Theke Paliye*, the theme is presented in a straightforward manner. The mythical power of return to the roots in the countryside[37] which is symbolic of homeland is so fascinating. All of the characters in the film - Kanchan, Haridas, and Mini's mother - arrive at almost the same conclusion. The allure of the village entices them in the end. Haridas is taken in by the perilous city space. Mini's mother cannot bear the suffocating pain in the city. The metropolis' effect on the other characters is roughly the same. They are all victims of extreme poverty, economic oppression, and various types of sufferings. They desperately want to get out of this pain, but they seem to be entangled in the web of various futile activities of city life. The failed attempt to break free from this web is a growing longing for an open rural space. They want a peaceful space where their limbs will not be torn apart by suffocation; a place to live that would not brutally suffocate them or drive them around in search of safety.

Kanchan returns home after finishing his Calcutta-*darshan* with some humane and some terrifying experiences. It is entirely done again in Ghatak's documentary style. So we see many incidents, many characters in the autopsy of Calcutta - the pain of a modern industrial city, sorrow, anger, despair, joy, all on a wide celluloid tape, and, to our surprise, we accept co-incidences in the sequence of events very easily. These coincidences tear off the mask of cruelty

[37] As Moinak Biswas observes, Ghatak was fascinated by the mythical power of return; he aimed to turn history itself into a subject of inquiry rather than contented with a form that reflects the historical flow. Giving the sense of violation brought about by the historical transportation of his people into the scene of the modern city seemed to be one crucial responsibility for him. Though he had to remain oddly alone in his decisions, he could not do this by suggesting a healthy tradition and past, over and against modernity, a road taken by most popular cinema since the 1970s. See Moinak Biswas' Her Mother's Son: Kinship and History in Ritwik Ghatak.

that had been attached to the urban space that is in Calcutta. The wide-angle lens[38] aids him in analyzing the setting and its people. Ghatak employs this lens in *Bari Theke Paliye* to highlight the insignificance of human life in the context of the complex structure of city life. Ghatak attempts to subvert the city space in almost every shot since landing the lead role. Ghatak himself stated about the film's context, "I tried to drag Shibram Chakraborty's post-war Bengali film into post-war Bangladesh" (qtd. in M. Mukhopadhyay 228). So, Kanchan, the boy who ran away from home, instituted his creator's eternal questions. As his Calcutta-*darshan* and the creator's philosophy go side by side, the unavoidable question, "Why is there so much sadness in the city?" emerges. So, Kanchan declares, "There is nothing better than home." Calcutta nips as if it has taken on the mask that its creator has cast upon us in frenzy - much like in the film *Ajantrik*, there is something vague but never invisible. The city has become heartless with the postcolonial nation-state's mission of modernization-industrialization. Ghatak becomes nostalgic at this point, longing for the eternal return.

Ultimately, Ghatak stimulates the binary between rural and urban spaces, a subject of long philosophical reflection. The rural is idealized as a space of simplicity, authenticity, and connection to nature, while the urban is associated with progress, complexity, and alienation. The rural represents a prelapsarian ideal, akin to Rousseau's idea of "noble savage"[39] or a state

[38] Ghatak further said, "It is a child's view of the city. Hence I used a different type of lens. I have paid special attention to its technical side...I have intentionally distorted objects by using 18 mm lens. This is the little boy's subjective view of the objects" (23-28). See As an Artist I believe in involvement in *Ritwik Ghatak Face to Face: Conversations with the Master*, published by Manchasha.

[39] The "noble savage" represents Rousseau's philosophical vision of humanity's natural goodness and the corrupting influence of society. While not a literal historical account, it serves as a critical lens to question the assumptions of progress and the moral consequences of civilization. See Jean Starobinski's *Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Transparency and Obstruction* (290-95).

of harmony with nature. It embodies a life free from the corruption and artificiality of urban existence. In rural spaces, life is slower, relationships closer, and nature more accessible. The rural fosters an ontological connection, a space where one can experience the poetry of existence. The rural space is not just a geographical location but an existential condition—one that promises freedom from the alienation and fragmentation of urban life. In contrast, urban spaces are seen as sites of alienation and estrangement. Industrialization and urbanization estrange individuals from their labour, community, and even themselves. Modern cities, with their ceaseless activity, impersonal interactions, and focus on efficiency, exacerbate this alienation. Urban spaces are also spaces of surveillance and control. The grid-like designs of cities, with their rigid structures and mechanisms of governance, stand in contrast to the organic, unregulated flow of rural lives. The yearning for rural space is not merely nostalgic but reflects a deeper critique of the values and consequences of modernity. It signals a desire to escape the commodification and depersonalization that characterize urban existence. This yearning is not mere nostalgia but a critique of the values and consequences of urban modernity. The rural, in Ghatak's vision, represents a lost utopia, a site where human relationships were once possible. Its loss is emblematic of a broader cultural and spiritual disintegration wrought by urbanization and the Partition. This longing, however, is often fraught with contradictions. Ghatak romanticizes the rural without engaging with its realities, such as economic stagnation or limited opportunities. The rural becomes a symbolic construct, shaped by what the urban lacks rather than what it truly offers.

Conclusion

In *Nagarik*, Ramu runs across the violinist once more as he comes out on the street. The violinist starts to play his favourite song for him, but the strings get torn apart and the narrator's voice rounds off Ramu's story in the city. In *Ajantrik*, Jagaddal is destined to break down into a mass of scrap iron dumped onto a cart for a scrap dealer. But Bimal finds delight in seeing a small child attempting to honour the detached car horn by capturing its life as it were. In *Bari Theke Paliye*, Kanchan himself has to fight for survival and experiences life as it is - only to return to his village home, a maturer person, with the knowledge that his father is only another victim battling poverty and growing harsh and resentful in the process but a loving father still. We see there is an ultimate acceptance of the reality, before moving forward. As we transition to the next chapter, the groundwork of spatiality is laid in this chapter. The exploration of spaces in Ghatak's early films sets the stage for a deeper analysis of how the Partition of Bengal is reflected more in the cinematic spaces of his well-known trilogy. Characters in Ghatak's films also become spaces where a multiplicity of social forces and discourses intersect and condense into temporal defined by the forces that comprise and move them. In the next chapter it gets more complex. Learning, resisting, submitting, trying to live; as the mix of social forces gets rearranged into different patterns — as it inevitably does since the social is always in process — the characeters also change along with that dynamic. Actually, Ghatak's films can be considered as the solution to the main question: how to probe the reality of the modern society using space, sounds and images? Fragmented spaces of a divided nation are scrutinized for their aesthetic significance and the thoughtful resonance they carry in the historical contexts he sought to capture.