

## A Return to the *Primitive*: Ritwik Ghatak, Romanticism, and Indian Non-Dualism

Soumya Ganguly

*Assistant Professor; Department of Film Studies; The Bhawanipur Education Society  
College*

### Abstract

The purpose of the paper is to locate the films of Ritwik Ghatak within the framework of Sankara's Advaita metaphysics, along with Romanticism and an ecological critique. The paper aims to mitigate the representation of human (especially woman) and nature relationship in Ghatak's films, keeping Romanticism and Indian Non-Dualism at the core of discussion. The task would be to justify and analyse the question of woman and her intimacy with nature. Why there is an urge to return to nature or return to a phase which I would like to call; '*Primitive*', (with reference to "primitive communism") in most of the Ghatak's films. Indian Non-Dualism or Advaita Vedanta shows the path to become 'one' with the 'absolute'. Though, it is not convincing enough whether Ghatak or other modernists tried to reach a state of 'absolute' through formal innovations in artistic practices. But here, the purpose is to trace a possibility or an urge; a 'Romantic sensibility' which Ghatak perhaps tried to articulate. Unlike Classical Hollywood filmmaking, Ghatak presented (not "re-presented") characters that are more organically related to the space. In most of the cases the emphasis was more on woman.

**Keywords:** *Non-duality, Advaita, Romanticism, Primitive Communism*

*Dehabhimane galite vijnate paramatmani*

*Yatra yatra mano yatri tatra tatra samadhyah*

“With the disappearance of the attachment to the body  
And with the realization of the Supreme Self,  
To whatever object the mind is directed  
One experiences Samadhi.”

## I

### Introduction:

In *Jukti Tokko Aar Goppo* (Ritwik Ghatak, 1977), there is a moment when Nilkantha Bagchi (played by Ghatak himself) confronts few Naxalite young men. There, Nilkantha proclaims that the potential of the youth is undoubtedly appreciable; but they are misguided. They are rigid and blind simultaneously. One of the Naxalite then asks him that, whether he has gone through Red Book, Guevara's Diary, or CPC report. Nilkantha told him to keep calm and try to understand that Marxism is very much guided by dialectical and historical materialism, and then gives an elaborate account of its evolution from Engels to Lenin then to Stalin, Mao and finally to Guevara. And suddenly there is a leap into an arguably unconnected stream, where he almost concludes by saying that;

“Look son! India consists of you. The history of India dates back to thousands of years, and it has given birth to some glorious philosophical thoughts and India has adopted these days of glory.”

Now, what is the basis of such a proclamation, and why Ghatak mentions Indian philosophical thoughts being a staunch Marxist and materialist? Nilkantha, in the film, further comments that the perpetrators of the land, needs to be eradicated from its core. And for doing that, a severe understanding and realization of Indian philosophical thoughts should be there. These claims apparently seems unconnected though we might actually understand Ghatak better if we take a detour into the heart of Indian Philosophy and try to comprehend the aesthetics of his cinematographic equivalents.

### Advaita (spiritual) and Primitive communism (material):

In his commentary on Bharata Muni's work on dramatic theory *Natyashastra*, Abhinavagupta argued that, any aesthetic experience is a manifestation of the innate disposition of the *self*, and is characterized by the contemplation of the *bliss* of the *self*, which is akin to spiritual experience by transcending the limitations of one's own limited self (Abhinavagupta).

Abhinavagupta was the great Kashmiri Saivite spiritual leader, and Kashmir Saivism has its root in Vedanta. Vedanta, happens to be the fruition, the converging point of all Indian Philosophies; both the *Aastik*, and *Naastik* schools. The whole Vedanta could be summarized into one single statement; “*That thou art*,” or “*you are Brahman*.” It is indeed a philosophy

which talks about overcoming discrimination and recognizing a deeper sense of unity.

Primitive communism as explored by L. H. Morgan in *Ancient Society* (1877), and which was later developed by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, refers to early human societies characterized by communal ownership and egalitarian structures which discards private ownership (Engels). Perhaps, for both Engels and Marx the concept of ‘mine’ is an illusion.

While Advaita and Primitive communism stems from varied intellectual traditions, the former being a metaphysical philosophy and the other is an anthropological or socio-economic concept. Still, metaphorically speaking, primitive communism's emphasis on communal living and equality resonates with Advaita's principle of non-duality, where distinctions between individuals are seen as illusory. Advaita's realization involves transcending individual ego and recognizing oneness with Brahman. Primitive Communism's notion of Individual ownership, shared resources almost parallels the Vedantic notion of world as an interconnected whole. Advaita's transcendence of duality replicates the de-emphasis of private ownership and material possessions of primitive communism which was born out of material conditions. As many liberals and post-modernists claim Marx's use of the term “primitive communism” is not based on race, rather it's an economic term used to describe mode or relation of production. Before the Neolithic revolution the resources were produced, distributed, and allocated without advanced tools or machinery. Attachment with the material world was less a concern. Humans were closer to nature, since everything was communally owned and based on egalitarian social relation. Since private property didn't existed economic disparity didn't existed, social hierarchy didn't existed, exploitation didn't existed, and thus no class existed. Even disparities between man and woman also didn't existed. Human and nature were one. With the rise of social classes primitive communism came to an end leading to the formation of slave society and finally capitalist society.

Liberation from illusion (illusion of private ownership) is the fundamental principle and objective of these two vastly different domains, even without having a direct historical causal link. And thus, one may establish philosophical parallels between the underlying principles of communal unity/harmony and transcendence of ego found in both. Though, in this case the theoretical usage might differ from the established one.

Vedanta embodies timeless wisdom beyond Hinduism. It creates a doubt. It asks to doubt everything. It says that we experience the world as body – mind duality (materiality – Spirituality). In all our experiences there is a clear distinction between the subject and the

object; the experiencer and the experienced, the knower and the known. Advaita proposes that, there is one non-dual existence, consciousness, bliss (*sat chit ananda*), and the world of plurality is merely an appearance, i.e., Brahman alone is real, the world is an appearance, and we are Brahman: the non-dual reality. That non-dual reality consists of the *Atman* (the individual self/ reflected consciousness) which consolidates with *Brahman* (the absolute) to form the *Sakshi* (witness consciousness). And this witness consciousness never becomes the object of knowledge. Thus, the knowing nature of the knower is never absent (Nikhilananda 15). It is an objective spirit independent of human consciousness, as objective idealists would put it. In essence, both Advaita Vedanta and Natyashastra guide an individual towards a profound understanding of the self (*Atman*) and the cosmos (*Brahman/Sakshi*), using art as a medium to experience and realize the truth behind material conditions of existence. In a way, this spiritual/metaphysical/transcendental awakening doesn't necessarily mean an unworldly divine intervention. Rather it might be regarded as a kind of "universal empathy" which unites everyone and everything together.

### **Romanticism, Modernism, and Advaita**

In the third issue of the journal called *Alochona*, (December 1966), contained a discussion on the Romantic versus Modern. 1966 was a time when student and youth movements had emerged, the Naxalbari movement had begun and in the field of poetry the 'Nai Kavita', in the tradition of the modernist poetry of Eliot and Pound, had more or less come to an end (Singh 17). In that context there was a discussion on the Romantic versus the modern and we have poets like Ram Vilas Sharma, a professor and Marxist critic, who was included in the first collection of modernist poetry, *Tarasaptak*, which came out in 1944. The discussion on "Romanticism versus Modernism" took place in 1966, when there was a new political atmosphere. Non-Congress government had taken office in the states, the Fourth General Election had been held, and for the first time a change had taken place (Singh 18).

Romanticism began with the poetry of nineteenth century by Rabindranath Tagore, who was influenced by the Vaishnav philosophy of love. The first poem, *Nirjharer Swapna Bhanga*, was written in 1882, appeared in the *Prabhat Sangeet* (Morning Songs). Nature and the individual, spiritual and personal freedom is central to Tagore's philosophy.

"[...] for Rabindranath, *Prabhat Sangeet* took place in the late nineteenth century around 1882. At that time Gandhi was nowhere close to India. Lokmanya Tilak was

also not around. In *Prabhat Sangeet*, in the poem *Nirjharer Swapna Bhanga*, the call for freedom is heard for the first time in the words “bhang, bhang, bhang kara” (break, break, break the shackles)” (Singh 18).

With the fall of English Romanticism, the Romantic philosophy found its vivid articulation in Germany. In India no big movements were taking place and feudalism was still at its peak. Singh further suggests;

“[...] During this period (i.e. after the uprising of 1857, when the landlord system was established by Cornwallis leading the rule of Nawabs continued in Bengal, and Zamindari was established) this special type of German Romanticism was born which started its political struggle through aesthetic struggle. Therefore all its quandaries were similar to those of the early Rabindranath at the time of writing *Sonar Tari: Niruddeshya yatra kothayeaamakeniyejabere – swapnasundari?* (Where will this journey with an unknown destination take me – oh beautiful dream?) The journey had to have an unknown destination because far and wide the end of the colonial domination was not in sight” (Singh 21).

Though Romanticism has been started by Tagore in the nineteenth century, but it became a proper movement and an all-Indian phenomenon during the non-cooperation movement. So, in that period the Romantic Movement become directly political. It was not just an aesthetic substitute as it was in Germany. This is the reason the Romantic Movement had a longer life in India, starting from 1880 it lasted until 1940. After which we found its articulation through Ghatak’s films along with other new wave filmmakers of the later generation. For both Ghatak and Tagore personal liberation, detachment of the body, search for unity, a cosmic consciousness, and questioning materialism persists across their body of work. Their themes are reminiscent of romantic yearning for unity, the concept of oneness of the self with the universe, along with modernist reflections of fractured self. In case of Ghatak, the tragic fate of his characters results from the tension between personal desires and larger material forces of history. The Romantic quest for individual freedom, the modernist critique of tradition and identity, and the profound spiritual unity has always been crucial for mitigating their aesthetic sensibilities.

## II

In *Ajantrik* (1958), *Bimal* has to undergo certain detachment with his car (when his car finally

gave up), so that he could contemplate on the true essence of existence beyond the scheme of industrial modernity or material forces. Asish Rajadhakshya in *Ritwik Ghatak: A Return to the Epic* examines that;

“[...] we see Ghatak's point of departure as the romantic splintering of the values adopted by a people, from their material existence. Modern romanticism of the sort that we have received from the past, is for him specifically defined thus, for as he repeatedly shows, sensuous response to nature within a very different tradition is certainly not prevented from being an entirely materialist one, possessing all the possibilities of extending to a larger world-view” (Rajadhakshya 120).

This particular mechanism to some extent is evident in case of any neoclassic art and especially Romanticism. To the Romantics, modernity is a phase;

“[W]here Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,  
Or new love pine at them beyond to-morrow” (Keats).

The tendency was to return to a phase undisturbed by private possession of wealth and mode of production; a phase beyond the habitual scheme of modernity. Marx in his *Economic and Philosophic manuscriptsof 1844* argues, which Rajadhakshya also mentions in that chapter that;

“[...] the worker can create nothing without *nature*, without the *sensuous external world*. It is the material on which his labour is realised, in which it-is active, and from which and by means of which it produces” (Rajadhakshya 121).

Moinak Biswas in his essay, ‘*Her Mother’s Son, kinship and History in Ritwik Ghatak*’ mentions that;

“[...] the mythical power of return will fascinate Ghatak; he was not satisfied with a form that enacts the historical flow but sought to turn history itself into an object of investigation” (Biswas)

Ghatak’s entire oeuvre sets a paradigm where he locates and restores the lost juncture between human and nature, keeping material forces of history at the centre. In such a case, probably freedom, for Ghatak, is a possibility to return to a state of non-dual existence, consciousness. Though, Biswas likely emphasis that Ghatak was not documenting history, rather he was more concerned about the emotional and psychological impact of historical events, which often blurs the difference between individual suffering and collective trauma or collective human experience. Thus personal experience is not isolated form broader cosmic reality. The unity of

history and personal experience in films like *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960), the personal suffering of the protagonist *Nita*, is deeply tied to the larger historical and social forces. All of Ghatak's characters (especially women) experience a sense of alienation and displacement. The disintegration of families, the trauma of partition, along with clash of identities in his films suggests that, the historical and social constructs that divide people (national border/class system) are ultimately illusions (*Maya*). Advaita suggests that a true realization that separatism is a false perception can bring pure bliss. Ghatak questions these constructed divisions and shows that all human experiences are interconnected and indivisible. Since, we are *Brahman*, the ultimate. Advaita's focus on Moksha (liberation from illusion), Romanticism's emphasis on the individual and the sublime, and Ghatak's films points towards a similar kind of liberation through the intense realization of the tragic bond between the individual lives and collective history.

### ***Titas: The Death of the Mother***

In S. T. Coleridge's *Kubla Khan*, the "deep romantic chasm" where the divine life enters the human landscape is the place where man is in closest and most direct contact with the divine. The mysterious "woman wailing for her demon-lover" can possibly be explained in Neoplatonic terms as the human soul longing to be one with its divine source (Rookmaker 211).

Kubla Khan gives certain deceptive images. Nature in Kubla Khan is tamed by human agency, the river Alph as mentioned in the poem flows down to a "sunless sea", or later as Coleridge gives an image of "lifeless ocean" (Rookmaker 212). The point is why these images are important to us? Let us have a look into the very first shot of *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam* (1973), which is stuffed with Romantic innuendo.



**Image1. Opening shot of *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam* (Ritwik Ghatak, 1973).**

Image1 remains crucial in deciphering Ghatak's scheme working in building the narrative forward. This image appears again at the end of the film, when the river gets dried up. Adrian Martin calls *Titas*, A River of no Return. He says that;

“[...] *A River Called Titas* (1973), Ghatak's penultimate and most fondly remembered film, begins with a dedication to “the myriad of toilers of everlasting Bengal.” But is there anything everlasting in Ghatak's cinema? His films track the slow, painful deterioration of places, communities, personal relationships; his characters separate (less by choice than circumstance), wander, go mad. Even the mighty Titas River begins “behaving strangely” (as an observer in the film comments), as if in response to the general disintegration of all things; in haunting, indelible images, Ghatak shows us its increasingly visible, drying-up bed” (Martin).



**Image 2. First shot of *Rajar Jhi* in *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam*.**



**Image 3. Last shot of *Rajar Jhi* in *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam*.**

The image of the dried-up river bed almost gives an impression of a womb of a pregnant mother, but ironically this womb is bereft off its every possibility to procreate, preserve or sustain. *Titas* is perhaps lost forever. Just like *Nita* in *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, who appears from nature and finally lost in nature. We can only hear the weeping landscape; “Brother! I wanted to live”.

Her death evokes a tragedy of violation of woman in a world dominated by patriarchy, where narrativizing the woman or taming the woman is primarily done to establish an entire control over woman (as well as nature and animals). *Basanti* in *Titas* remains such a victim whose independence or ‘immoral’ acts became an object of fright and shame for her family. And in the opposite end *Rajar Jhi* (who was addressed as Goddess *Bhagabati*, “everybody’s mother” by her son) remains almost the incarnation of *Titas* itself, who rises from *Titas* and sets in *Titas* (as shown in image 2 & 3). Every character, the men and especially the woman in *Titas* like the flow of *Alph* and the pleasure dome of *Kubla Khan* engulfs the narrative with an intense tussle between *Eros* and *Thanatos*, drives towards life and death, which accompany these doomed cinematic mortals against the background of a passionately indifferent nature. In his essay “In defence of A River called *Titas*”, Parichay Patra writes that, Ghatak;

“[d]id not ‘represent’ the lost plenitude. His obsession with the catastrophe that the capitalist-industrial modernity is associated with manifests in every film in his oeuvre. In *Subarnarekha*, the film that preceded *Titas*, this catastrophe is more allegorical in the disguise of a morality play. In *Titas*, it is more literal in his interpretation of the loss of a pre-industrial way of life” (Patra).

This image of the retrieving woman or the lost-mother in *Titas*, which becomes an object of a disastrous consequence (i.e. the ecological disaster), returns in *Jukti Tokko Aar Goppo*, in the figure of *Bangabala* where Ghatak himself addresses the woman as “mother” while he sings, “*Keno Cheye Acho Go Maa...*”. In an interview Ghatak mentioned that “The Great Mother Image” in its duality exists in every aspects of our being, and he incorporated this image into films like *Meghe Dhaka Tara* and *Jukti Takko Aar Gappo*. Ghatak in that same interview further comments that;

“There is an epic tradition which dominates the Indian mentality. It has seeped into the Indian subconscious. It is no surprise, therefore, that Indians are attracted to mythologicals. I am a part of it. I cannot think of myself without the epic tradition. I am all for it. It is in our civilization since time immemorial. In my films I rely mainly on the folk form” (Ghatak 68)

Ghatak was actually drawn towards the Indian folk tradition where there is a strong and inevitable presence of the mother image, which influenced him to a large extent, and also his great interest in Jungian Mother Archetype.

Woman as nature’s own manifestation is central to Ghatak’s scheme. Since, the evolution of modern civilization woman and animals are considered as sub-human entities. Ecofeminist theorists have extended their analysis to consider the interconnections between sexism, the domination of nature (including animals), and also racism and social inequalities. Most of the time a woman is compared to nature, and thus a question arises, “why woman and not man?” David Pepper aptly answers that, “Marx recognized the priorness of an ‘external’ or the first nature that gave birth to humankind. But humans then worked on this ‘first’ nature to produce a ‘second nature’ for the benefit of humans” (Pepper). Vandana Shiva argues that woman have a special connection to the environment through their daily interaction with it that has been ignored (Shiva and Mies 34). Woman has a strong role in subsistence economies, for producing and reproducing wealth in partnership with nature. They have been experts in their own right of holistic and ecological knowledge of nature’s process. But these alternative modes of knowing, which is oriented to the social benefits and sustenance needs are not recognized by the capitalist/reductionist paradigm, since it fails to perceive the interconnectedness of nature and women. There are moments in *Komol Ganghar* (Ritwik Ghatak, 1961), and *Subernarekha* (Ritwik Ghatak, 1965), where the woman are portrayed against the backdrop of nature graphically using wide angle lenses.. *Meghe Dhaka Tara*’s opening shot is the most striking

and explicit where the woman emerges out of nature (under the huge banyan tree); being a “part” of it, and “whole” at the same time. For Ghatak, nature is the mother, the lost plenitude.



**Image 4: Opening shot of *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (Ritwik Ghatak, 1960).**

***Shiva and Shakti: The Non-Dual Consciousness***

*Nilkantha* as the name suggests, played by Ghatak himself in *Jukti Tokko Aar Goppo*, becomes his alter-ego, and is the name of the Hindu god Shiva, who drank poison that emerged from the ocean to prevent it from destroying the world.

Sir John Woodroffe states in the second chapter ‘Siva and Sakti’ of his book ‘*Introduction to Tantra-Sastra*, that;

“[t]he eternal immutable existence which transcends the turiya and all other states in the unconditioned Absolute, the supreme Brahman or Para-brahman, without Prakrti (niskala) or Her attributes (nir-guna), which, as being the inner self and knowing subject, can never be the object of cognition, and is to be apprehended only through yoga by the realization of the Self (atma-jnana), which it is. For, as it is said, “Spirit can alone know Spirit.” Being beyond mind, speech, and without name, the Brahman was called “Tat,” “That,” and then “Tat Sat,” “That which is.” For the sun, moon, and stars, and all visible things, what are they but a glimpse of light caught from “That” (Tat)” (Woodroffe 5).

The song sequence “*Amar onge onge ke...*” actually transcends that individual bodily limitations and we see both *Nilkantha* (Shiva) and *Durga* (Shakti) into the heart of nature. The “affect” (ownerless emotion) is no longer confined within the physical reality rather it has an overwhelming presence all over the landscape, and thus human and nature remains non-dual. This non-duality of nature is actually evident in Hindu non-dual tradition in the *Shiva Lingam* and *Sri Yantra* which express Advaita or Non-Duality.

The entire mechanism of being formless, or being in a state of formlessness, is manifested in the mise en scene of “*Aamar Onge Onge Ke...*” where *Nilkantha* and *Durga* (Shiva and Shakti) dissolves into a primitive cosmic procreative madness; a return to a plenitude where the world of appearance, plurality, private ownership is yet to dismantle the juncture. Human and nature remains an undivided consciousness.

### III

#### The Return to the *Primitive*

In *Ajantrik* (1958), *Bimal*’s disjuncture with *Jagaddal* leads him towards a state where he could actually allocate himself among the tribal *Oraon*. That “return” is only possible at the moment this detachment with industrial modernity happens. On the other hand *Jagaddal*’s consciousness, posited a counterpoint to the habitual scheme of modernity where objects are

considered to be passive stuffs on which humans actions leaves its imprint or trace. The mechanism within which *Jagaddal* becomes a part of may be called, Animism, i.e.

“[W]henver this passive/active nexus between objects and subject, humans and the non-human is disturbed or even reversed – as in the coming-to-life of seemingly dead matter, the becoming autonomous of inert things – we inevitably step into the territory of animism: that non-modern worldview that conceives of things as animated and possessing agency. With regards to Forensic Aesthetics, the historical discourse of animism provides a foil for a reflection on the boundaries at stake (Vera list centre for Art and Politics).”

*Jagaddal* on one hand gains consciousness and becomes an individual, and the camera is able to become its “gaze”. Simultaneously Ghatak also makes it a point to alter this equation by dismantling *Jagaddal* at the end of the film, which is as a product of industrial modernity. At the end *Bimal* enter into the realm of pre-industrial, pre-modern, a primitive way of living, where the relationship between man and nature is finally restored. That primitive self, that sensuousness is not only presented through the *Oraon* tribe, but the vast nature outside, whose presence is all pervasive, and who is present there throughout most of Ghatak’s films. John Bellamy Foster mentions while arguing about Marx’s *Theory of Metabolic Rift*, that;

“[I]t was in *Capital* that Marx’s materialist conception of nature became fully integrated with his materialist conception of history. In his developed political economy, as presented in *Capital*, Marx employed the concept of “metabolism” (*Stoffwechsel*) to define the labor process as “a process between man and nature, a process by which man, through his own actions, mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism between himself and nature. Yet an “irreparable rift” had emerged in this metabolism as a result of capitalist relations of production and the antagonistic separation of town and country. Hence under the society of associated producers it would be necessary to “govern the human metabolism with nature in a rational way,” completely beyond the capabilities of bourgeois society” (Foster 141).

Thus, the intertwining of the human nature and the nature outside, the journey to attain a state of maternal plenitude, the supreme absolute, remains a tendency, a romantic sensibility which remains very implicit throughout Ghatak’s films. This mechanism of not only being a “part” of the “whole”, rather a possibility of being ‘that’ (*Tat*) “whole” is found in ancient Indian philosophical tradition *Advaita Vedanta*; an idea which Ghatak perhaps had in mind while



speaking to the Naxalites in *Jukti Tokko Aar Goppo*, about the glory of Indian Philosophical thoughts.

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