

An Electric Whip

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There is no one left to torment with an electric whip.

This middle-class affluence and smugness

*You have left, the swagger's gone, humility has arrived.*¹

(Shakti Chattopadhyay, 'For you, Ritwik')

In an elegy written right after Ritwik Ghatak died, the poet Shakti Chattopadhyay compared the impact of his films to the lash of an electric whip. Where the electric whip hits one the hardest depends on one's perspective and preoccupations. I have often thought that how viewers respond to Ghatak's films is akin to what is called the Rorschach test in psychology, i.e., what one sees reflects one's thoughts and preferences, and not just the image on the screen. Perhaps it is true of all works of art or even life, more broadly. Those who are politically inclined will see in Ghatak's films a ruthlessly clear-eyed critique of society, politics, relationships – what humans do to each other. Those who are invested in a certain idea of "art cinema" will appreciate sequences of sheer cinematic beauty, involving both visuals and music, but may frown upon touches of melodrama and a sense of humour that sometimes borders on the pantomime (for example, the sequence of a groom going to his own wedding at the beginning of *Ajantrik*).

For me, the resonance of his films extends beyond shaping a certain cultural and political sensibility or an appreciation of the power of art, to my own academic work. As an economic theorist, I am interested in understanding the role of monetary incentives versus intrinsic motivation (for instance, commitment to people and causes), in driving human agency. To me, many of Ghatak's films dramatize a core dilemma of individuals operating in a market economy: the inherent risk of destroying what we intrinsically value in our pursuit of success.

Monetary incentives fundamentally make you work for someone else. As the famous Dylan song puts it, "Well, it may be the Devil, or it may be the Lord/But you're gonna have to serve somebody" -- usually someone with money and power. This may not draw on the vast reservoir of human motivation and creativity and end up making you feel unfulfilled even after notching up the material markers of success. Or worse, having to take up any available economic opportunity to make ends meet can lead to the stunting of potential, both for individuals and communities, and create a huge gap between the lives they could have lived and the ones they end up living. On the other hand, pursuing your passion often runs the risk of failure, in terms of not receiving the critical appreciation you covet; moreover, not paying attention to financial considerations can add to this the pain of economic hardship and imposing this cost on your loved ones.

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Interestingly, this tension between the profitable and the meaningful is central to the two personal anecdotes I have about Ritwik Ghatak, who died when I was only eight years old. Of the few occasions when I met him – he was my grandfather Manish Ghatak's youngest brother – there is one that I remember well, from 1974. My mother introduced me to a tall, somewhat scruffy

looking middle-aged man with very piercing eyes and said, “This man is your *chhotodadu* (youngest granduncle) and he makes films.” This was in Berhampore, a mid-sized town about two hundred kilometres north of Calcutta, where my grandfather had built a large house with a garden and there was always a stream of visitors, family, friends, as well as stars from the Bengali literary world. This was because my grandfather was a well-known novelist, poet, and short-story writer who wrote under the pseudonym of Jubanashwa and was a leading figure in the neo-realist era of Bengali literature known as the *Kallol* (named after a magazine) era. However, Berhampore was a sleepy town, and films (mostly Hindi) would land there with a certain gap after their release and I, all of five years old, had just seen *Haathi Mera Saathi* (*The Elephant, My Mate*, 1971, M. A. Thirumugam). My parents were not into mainstream Hindi films, but because this was publicised as a “children’s film”, one of my aunts had arranged to take a bunch of us cousins of a similar age to a local film theatre called Surya.

This was a hit film starring Rajesh Khanna, about the friendship between an orphan and an elephant who start out by performing at street corners to earn a living. The film did not make much of an impression on me, but I did enjoy watching elephants dancing or kicking a football with their trunks, somewhat expectedly given my age. Hearing that this *dadu* of mine makes films, I asked him if he had made *Haathi Mera Saathi*. I remember him responding affectionately, with an impish grin and a gleam in his eyes, “I wish I had, kiddo, then I would not be such a sorry state”. While said light-heartedly, his comment clearly captures the tension between— staying faithful to one’s artistic vision and pursuing commercial success.

My mother also recounts a similar exchange between Ritwik Ghatak and my uncle Abu Ghatak, who was only a few years younger and more like a sibling than a nephew to him. Abu Ghatak also spent some time in Bombay working as a film-journalist as well as a directorial assistant and associate screenplay writer to directors such as Bimal Roy and Shakti Samanta -- he is credited as an associate writer for story and screenplay for the film *Chinatown* (1962, directed by Shakti Samanta). At an event in the Berhampore Film Society, now named *Ritwik Sadan*, Ritwik Ghatak gave a talk highlighting the challenges of making innovative films and criticizing mainstream commercial Hindi films. In the question-and-answer session, my uncle, who was very polite and well-mannered but always had a mischievous gleam in his eyes, slyly asked, “But, Mr Ghatak, who wrote the screenplay for *Madhumati* (1958, Bimal Roy)?” Of course, it was an in-joke and got the expected laughs from an audience who knew the family well, but looking back, I can see an interesting parallel with my own naïve exchange with Ritwik Ghatak in 1974.

I was reminded of these exchanges when I discovered Ritwik Ghatak’s films in my early teens, a few years after his death. It felt like being hit by lightning. There was *Meghe Dhaka Tara* to begin with. I first saw it on Doordarshan in the early 1980s, when regional films would be broadcast on Sundays. On the surface, it is a family drama about the economic struggles of a lower-middle class Bengali family displaced by the partition. The protagonist, Neeta, shoulders the burden of being the sole breadwinner, giving up her dream of pursuing higher studies. She is eventually diagnosed with tuberculosis and sent to a sanatorium in Shillong. The scene at the sanatorium, in which her anguished cry -- of wanting to live -- echoes through the hills, delivers an emotional equivalent to a gut punch. There is a double allegory at play about the literal and metaphorical wasting away of human life: those around Neeta, her family members and the fiancé who ends up marrying her sister, also seem to be afflicted by a wasting syndrome, a moral atrophy caused by their callousness and selfishness. Even the most sympathetic of them, her elder brother

Shankar, who understands what Neeta is going through, chooses to put his own dreams of a musical career above the immediate needs of the family and Neeta's well-being.

The tragic force of the sanatorium scene is foreshadowed in the subversive use of a well-known Tagore song "*Je rate mor duarguli bhanglo jhore*" ("The night when my doors broke down in the storm") in an impromptu duet sung by Shankar and Neeta in the film, with the voices provided by eminent singers Debabrata Biswas and Gita Ghatak (the latter also acted as Neeta's somewhat selfish sister). In this sequence, Ghatak manages to convert a spiritual song which finds comfort in the presence of God in times of crisis, into something more emotionally radical and raw; the fact that there will be no God to save Neeta makes the song more like a dirge for a death foretold.

Many years after my first encounter with the film, the BFI (British Film Institute) organised a Ritwik Ghatak retrospective in 1996. As I happened to be visiting London then, in what turned out to be the beginning of a long association with the London School of Economics, I watched some of his classic films for a second time, and saw audience members who had no direct connection with Bengal, the mythology around Ritwik Ghatak, or the trauma of partition, weeping quietly as the film dragged us through the emotional equivalent of a stormy sea.

This was also when I was struck by the similarities between *Ajantrik* (1958), which is perhaps my most favourite Ghatak film. To me, the popular translation of the film's title, "Pathetic Fallacy," does not quite capture the pithiness of the Bengali title, and the alternative one, "The Mechanical Man", seems more appropriate. The literal translation of the word *ajantrik* is "unmechanical" and that may capture the double irony of the film: a man spends so much time with a machine that others joke that he himself resembles a machine, while viewers see -- through the protagonist's eyes -- a machine that seems almost human, and its connection to a man almost in terms of a human relationship.

The storyline of *Ajantrik* follows the eponymous short story by the distinguished writer Subodh Ghosh fairly faithfully. It focuses on a somewhat washed-out middle-aged taxi driver, Bimal, who is known as Bimal Master in the neighbourhood and played brilliantly by Kali Banerjee. Bimal's rugged, somewhat scruffy appearance matches that of his decrepit Ford car, with which he shares an emotional bond that, for the lack of a better term, is love. Some of the more amusing moments of the film suggest that the "feeling" is reciprocated. For example, a pretty woman dressed as a bride rides the taxi with her companion who appears to be, but eventually turns out not to be, her husband. While shy and awkward, Bimal is clearly intrigued by and somewhat attracted to her and during their brief exchanges while the car is parked, the swivelling headlights of the car that Bimal calls Jagaddal (literally meaning a heavy immovable object, an amusing name given that it is for a big and old car that often breaks down) resemble human expressions, ranging from eye-rolls and sideward glances, suggesting envy at his mate's attention being diverted to others.

The film ends in a way that reminds me of *Meghe Dhaka Tara*: years of heavy use on rough terrains takes a toll on the machine, which breaks down, and Bimal, who is normally quite frugal, tries to overhaul the entire engine to give the car a new lease of life but all his efforts fail. This is like Neeta succumbing to tuberculosis due to hard work and chronic poverty, and Shankar making a last-ditch effort to cure her by sending her to a sanatorium, which too ends in failure. The anguish both Shankar and Bimal feel seems similar – it is grief for a loved one's passing away, tinged with a sense of guilt over not having done enough or having exploited them for selfish gains.

Indeed, the two films have a structural similarity even though the stories and the settings are very different. Both explore the tragic consequences of human or human-like relationships getting tangled up with economic necessities. The tragedy lies not just in the fate of the protagonists who do not survive (Neeta in *Meghe Dhaka Tara* and Jagaddal in *Ajantrik*), but also in the lives of those who loved them and have to carry the burden of loss and guilt. Whether it is Shankar in *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, or Bimal in *Ajantrik*, their losses are final and devastating.

Both the films end with a suggestion that life goes on despite individual tragedies, and that those who have departed leave something behind for their loved ones, whether it is a memento or images that evoke their memories from happier times. In the final scene of *Ajantrik*, a child is seen playing with the horn of the car which has been sold as scrap metal; when he toots it, Bimal rushes out as if expecting that his beloved car has returned and when he sees the child, he smiles, and his eyes fill up with tears. *Meghe Dhaka Tara* ends with Shankar, in a state of grief-stricken numbness right after Neeta's death, staring intently at a young woman walking down the same muddy dirt road Neeta used to take to go to work. Suddenly, the strap of this young woman's *chappal* breaks and she looks back at him, smiling awkwardly; as she walks away, limping slightly, Shankar's stony reserve crumbles, and he breaks down crying. There are similar examples one could give from *Komal Gandhar* and *Subarnarekha*, illustrative of Ghatak's way of capturing how humans are broken by life and yet, turn around. This is not deep philosophy or spiritualism but an almost childlike, instinctive embrace of everyday life with all its love, heartbreak, grimness, and soaring beauty.

There is clearly a critique, in Ghatak's films, of the economic circumstances that subject individuals to such tragedies. Several of his films also share a backdrop of political circumstances that precipitate this economic hardship, namely, partition and displacement. Social norms regarding gender are also shown to play an oppressive role, as in *Meghe Dhaka Tara*.

But if we go beyond these structural parameters that are specific to a particular time and place and look at these films from a more abstract point of view, certain themes emerge to make us reflect on the intertwining of human (or human-like) relationships with economic necessities. When it comes to a relationship with someone or something, can we always unentangle our selfish or instrumental interests (what it can do for me) from intrinsic emotions such as empathy, loyalty and love? Is a conflict between the two inevitable? In a given social and economic context where choices are limited and resources are scarce, is this conflict bound to lead to the chronicle of a tragedy foretold?

From one angle, Shankar is selfish, and he puts his dreams of making the best use of his talents as a classical singer above the needs of the family and the burden of the latter falls on Neeta, eventually sucking the lifeblood out of her, literally and metaphorically. From another angle, Shankar clearly loves his sister, is the only person in the family other than her father who seems sensitive to the struggles she is going through, the only one who ever does anything for her; he gets her admitted to a sanatorium for treatment, and in the end, is clearly stricken by grief when she passes away.

Similarly, Bimal is a selfish man on one level -- he has the reputation of being miserly, strikes a hard bargain with customers who desperately need a ride, and does not seem to mind driving Jagaddal over rough terrains even as the car creaks and splutters like an aging beast of burden. On another level, he shows touches of genuine tenderness (like pouring water in the engine's

cooling system as if giving a glass of water to a loved one who is thirsty) and bristles if anyone appears to criticise Jagaddal's run-down appearance. Moreover, when Jagaddal breaks down, he spares no expenses in trying to repair it, as if a close relative or friend was in urgent need of medical treatment and saving them overrode everything else.

Perhaps it is utopian to imagine a society where human beings do not exploit one another (or human-like beings, from Jagaddal to AI) or nobody is driven by monetary incentives. Given Ghatak's well-known association with leftist political and cultural organizations, we are perhaps justified in seeing a vision of socialism, as a model of an ideal society, in Ghatak's films. We also see glimpses of tribal life as a model of a society that is not corrupted by the logic of the marketplace in some of his films, such as *Ajantrik*, although these remain chimerical. But even if no such ideal society is in the immediate horizon, we know that an economic system where everything can be reduced to a monetary value (like the scrap value at which Jagaddal's carcass is sold) dehumanizes us and destroys everything that is precious and unique in relationships between people, people and nature, and people and inanimate objects (one can think of attempts to protect heritage buildings and sites in the same way).

Is there a way out of this? Ghatak's films seem to point to individual agency, to attempts to defy the oppressive forces that reduce us to becoming an exploiter or an exploited, and to the struggle to protect all that is precious and unique to us from the destructive logic of the market. While such struggles inevitably tend to fail in Ghatak's films, they also point to the possibility of a different kind of trajectory. Therein lies their power to inspire generations of viewers, like the tragic heroes in myths who stand up for something beyond personal survival or the attractions of power or fame (think of Karna in *Mahabharata*).

But this inspiration comes at an emotional cost to the viewer. In Ghatak's films, a childlike wonder at beauty in all forms (music, nature, hopes and dreams of ordinary people) is tinged with an awareness of the grim realities of life. The films are preoccupied with how people cope with losing something precious, whether it is a dream or one's ancestral home, or a decrepit car. That might explain the somewhat surprising posthumous popularity of his films even among viewers who are not necessarily part of a typical arthouse audience or drawn to progressive politics. The Tagore song that Neeta and Shankar sing in that unforgettable sequence in *Meghe Dhaka Tara* serves as a commentary on his films and his life – it breaks us, but it also lifts us up.² That realisation is the electric whip his films torment us with.

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¹ Translated from the original in Bengali (“...আর কেউ নেই যে কড়কাবে / বিদ্যুচ্চাবুকে এই মধ্যবিত্তি, সম্পদ, সন্তোষ / মানুষের, তুমি গেছ, স্পর্ধা গেছে, বিনয় এসেছে”) by the author.

² For those not familiar with the original song, which is reproduced below, this is a translation by me:

The night when my doors broke down in the storm

I didn't know that you had come to visit me

It all turned dark; the lamp went out

I stretched my arms towards the sky but who was it for?

I lay crumpled in the darkness thinking it's a dream

Little did I know that the storm was your flag of victory

In the morning, I looked and saw that you are standing

All over the emptiness of my room.

যে রাতে মোর দুয়ারগুলি ভাঙল ঝড়ে

জানি নাই তো তুমি এলে আমার ঘরে ॥

সব যে হয়ে গেল কালো, নিবে গেল দীপের আলো,

আকাশ-পানে হাত বাড়ালেম কাহার তরে?

অন্ধকারে রইনু পড়ে স্বপন মানি।

ঝড় যে তোমার জয়ধ্বজা তাই কি জানি!

সকালবেলা চেয়ে দেখি, দাঁড়িয়ে আছ তুমি এ কি,

ঘর-ভরা মোর শূন্যতারই বুকের 'পরে ॥