

PARTITION AND THE BETRAYAL OF INDIA'S INDEPENDENCE: AN ANALYSIS OF RITWIK GHATAK'S CINEMA

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ABSTRACT

At Partition the dream of India's independence from British colonial rule transformed itself into the horrific nightmare of communal violence. Ritwik Ghatak, one of the most important film makers of India, served the crucial function of chronicling this mass tragedy. The independence of India resulted not only in the partition of the subcontinent but in the mass migration of people. This inevitably led people to homelessness, unemployment, segregation and abject impoverishment. However, the reduction of the middle class into the lower class was not because of partition alone but also a result of the anti-people model that the Indian government adopted post-independence. This chapter will look at the ongoing trauma of Partition and the way the people experienced it by analysing Ritwik Ghatak's films.

KEYWORDS: Betrayal, Exodus, Ritwik Ghatak, Homelessness, Independence, Partition, refugees.

RESUMEN

La Partición convirtió el sueño de emancipación de India en una pesadilla de violencia religiosa. Ritwik Ghatak, uno de los mejores cineastas indios, hizo de su obra una crónica de aquella tragedia. La Independencia no supuso ya la división del subcontinente en dos países, sino también un trasvase de población sin precedentes, con las consecuencias de personas sin hogar, desempleo, segregación y miseria. Por otra parte, el descenso social de la clase media iniciado con el proceso de independencia se vio agravado por las políticas antipopulares del gobierno indio. Este artículo estudia el trauma de la Partición en la obra de Ritwik Ghatak.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Exilio, Independencia, Partición, Personas sin hogar, Refugiados, Ritwik Ghatak, Traición.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25145/j.recaesin.2018.76.07>

REVISTA CANARIA DE ESTUDIOS INGLESES, 76; April 2018, pp. 91-101; ISSN: e-2530-8335



In South Asia one of the most painful human tragedies took place in 1947, when the Indian subcontinent got divided into India and Pakistan. The dream of India's independence from the British colonial rule transformed itself into the horrific nightmare of partition of its people. Ritwik Ghatak (1925-76), one of the most important film makers of India, served the crucial function of chronicling this mass tragedy in the context of the Partition of Bengal.

I

Born in 1925, a time of political turmoil and subordination, Ghatak grew up amidst political awakening and Marxist uprising. His family atmosphere and the surroundings around charged him with a consciousness that was deeply political. In the Second World War, the Quit India Movement (1942) and the Bengal famine (1943) Ghatak joined active Marxist politics. Beginning as a writer, he published several of his short stories in leading magazines of Bengal. Eventually he joined the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA, 1942) and in 1948 acted in the revised version of Bijon Bhattacharya's *Nabanna* (*New Harvest*, 1944), a play about the Bengal famine. *Nabanna* revolutionized Ghatak's thinking and served as a turning point in his life. It led him to a conviction that in terms of immediate and spontaneous communication theatre is much more effective than literature, and cinema with its mass appeal, he felt, could do wonders. Ghatak passionately participated in theatre but cinema as a singularly powerful means of expressing the agony of the people drove him in the direction of film making.

In 1947, Bengal along with other parts of India, especially Punjab, was partitioned and he along with so many people was exiled from his homeland in the erstwhile East Bengal. In one of his interviews he states "At the start of a creative career, however, when one is beginning to work, if one goes bankrupt of the provision of his past what is he to do? [...] A work which is pastless, unsupported, fairy nothing, is no work at all. But who will give me back my past? [...] But I am a film maker. No one has lost like me: What I have seen I am not able to show" (Rajadhyaksha and Gargan 19). Believing that it was the unconscious dynamics of an artist that determined his art form, Ghatak intensely felt that the *roopkatha* (fantasy) of his childhood had been completely eliminated, for what he had seen in East Bengal he no longer could find in West Bengal. He writes: "I have lost that forever, and without that I have not the ability to create a new *roopkatha* out of my reality... the simple tale that silences argument" (Rajadhyaksha and Gargan 19).

He could neither undo the historicity of this event nor reconcile with it. His films thus are an attempt to understand the dynamics of this event and its impact on the lives of people. Exploring the socio-economic, historical aspects of Partition, his cinema enters deep into the psychic and existential dimensions of Partition and the beingness of exile, especially in films like *Meghe Dhake Tara* (*The Cloud Capped Star*, 1960) and *Subarna Rekha* (1962). Though I do not trace the psychic and existential dimensions of Partition yet I will explore in the first part the formation of the communal psyche as presented in Ghatak's short film *Yieh Kiun*



(*The Question*, 1970). This part also develops the underline discourse related to the desire for unification of the two Bengals in Ghatak's cinema. The second part of the paper is an attempt to explore Ghatak's cinema within the matrix of the socio-historical aftermath of Partition which was perceived by him as a grand betrayal of India's dream for independence.

Like Marxists, Ghatak strongly believed that the independence of India from the British colonial rule was a sham. Though the Britishers had left, yet the model that the Indian government had adopted was no better than that of the Imperialists'. Moreover Independence was made possible through the division of the nation and this he felt was not only unnecessary but absolutely brutal. In one of his interviews he clearly states the futility and the baselessness of the acceptance of the Mountbatten Plan to partition India by the Indian National Liberation Movement in order to attain Independence:

The British Empire in India at that time was finished or totally broken down. The economy had collapsed because of war. They were finished but for the Americans. Churchill, all these heroes had collapsed. From one end came Subash Chander Bose. He created a strong impact on people's mind, his image was working vehemently... the people were so full of anger. Then came the 1942 August Movement. That shook everything, then the Naval Mutiny in Bombay, then the Air force Mutiny in Madras. Nobody knows about these. The Britishers suppressed everything about these Mutinies. They were at that time in a completely shaky condition. If we could have just continued the fight for some few more days, could have continued, sustained our vocal protest for some more days and could have sacrificed a few more lives, we would have compelled them to leave the country. But our leaders made this pact with Lord Mountbatten and the Britishers for power. They betrayed the country's whole National Liberation Movement. Gandhi was against it but our National Liberation Movement got hold of the seats in the name of Independence. That's what I am trying to say, I have earlier also spoken about it and I repeat again, I scream and I will do so everywhere. (Atanu Pal 13)

Ghatak explores the genesis and the possibility of the division of the nation across two significant planes: the signing of the Mountbatten Plan and its acceptance by the people which manifested itself in the communal riots that followed. It is the latter, when the brutal manner in which the Partition was carried out in the nation, that Ghatak explores in his short film *Yieh Kiun*. The film problematizes the notion of communalism, the subtlest form of state violence; wherein the individual through the process of hegemony is convinced that he/she is fighting a personal war. Communalism creates divisions at such a deep-seated level, that people become the instrument of their own destruction and begin to align themselves with forces that basically are victimizing and using them. In *Yieh Kiun*, Ghatak presents two close childhood friends, Ali and Nayak, who meet after a number of years in a very precarious situation amidst communal riots. They nostalgically recall the days when they had struggled for the independence of the nation and now bemoan the futility of this struggle. Amidst communal riots, they try to save each other, until they witness a grotesque death. It is at this moment that Ali and Nayak no longer remain



individuals but become representatives of communal identities. They suddenly feel intimidated and in self defence towards the end of the film kill each other. Ghatak presents the fear psychosis operative during communal riots and depicts how deep-seated the communal hegemonic processes are. The film subtly dissolves the notion of an individual and presents the power of communal hegemony that infiltrates into an individual, and converts him/her into a puppet of a divisive system. Thus it was by using the instrument of communalism that India and Pakistan actually attained statehood and made possible the partition of the nation. State in the form of communalism not only expedited the process but divided a single people. The result was division, which was not merely a geographical division but the division of a culture. It smashed the very roots on which a culture exists and inherently created rootlessness and hence moral degradation. Giving vent to this feeling Ghatak writes, “on the eve of Independence came the Hindu-Muslim riots, and with Independence, the Partition of Bengal, dividing a single people with a common inheritance and leading to a mass migration that was to leave its scar on a whole generation of Bengalese” (Ghatak 77).

Ghatak further states that though so many years have passed, yet one needs to vehemently oppose the division of Bengal as it was absolutely artificial and imposed. The issue of Bengal, he believed, was related to love and culture and a single people despite the fact that all geographical and political boundaries cannot be divided. Hence the division of Bengal he asserted, should not be accepted nor should one pardon or forgive it.

In *Bari Theke Paliye* (Run Away 1959) he explicitly states through one of his characters, that some poet has said that if a child breaks a toy we get angry but here the country had been divided and cut into two and we did nothing about it. While commenting on his play *Dolil*, he writes, “then with my own eyes I saw this ‘*Vasthuhara* (dispossessed)’, who had been compelled to leave everything, and I saw them seeking shelter, they became ‘*Sharannathsi* (refugees).’ I simply could not endure to see this reduction” (Atunu Pal 13). Ghatak reiterates this feeling in *Komal Gandhar* (*E-Flat* 1961) when a character from the first theatre performance within the film states, “I have land and cattle, I am not a refugee.” Throughout his cinema, there is an attempt to demystify this aura of communalism and division and to state that a single people sooner or later will be reunited.

Further he felt that the division of Bengal and Punjab was shocking as it shattered the economic and political life of the people. This politics and economics was the cause of a certain cultural segregation to which he never reconciled. In one of his interviews he says: “I always thought in terms of cultural integration. They played ducks and drakes with this country by causing balkanisation. I have no role in changing the historicity of this event” (Rajadhyaksha and Gangar 92). He restates; “I just kept on watching what was happening, how the behaviour pattern was changing due to this great betrayal of national liberation” (Ghatak 1987: 80). He further states, “Being a Bengali from East Pakistan, I have seen untold miseries inflicted on my people in the name of Independence which is a fake and a sham” (Ghatak 76).



As Ghatak refused to reconcile himself with the political-cultural disintegration of the country, the need for cultural integration forms the basic theme in his works. In *Komal Ghandar*, the soundtrack contrary to the narrative of division sings of Ram and Sita's wedding, signifying the need to reunite the two divided nation states which despite the division constitute a single people. He states: "The central theme for *Komal Gandhar* was the unification of the two Bengals, this accounts for the persistent use of old marriage songs, even during scenes of pain and separation music rings of marriage" (Ghatak 39). Thus while all along in *Komal Gandhar* we witness separation at the visual level, the music theme of the union of Sita and Rama (the legendary characters from the *Ramayana*), is synchronized; on the one hand suggesting reconciliation and, on the other, further mythicizing and hence connecting the contemporary theme of Partition with the myth of exile and abandonment. Similarly through the incorporation of the East Bengali dialect in his cinema, especially in *Subarna Rekha* and in *Jukti Takko Ar Gappo* (*Argument and a Story* 1974), he once again brings to the surface the similarities among the people across the borders of East and West Bengal.

Thus the discourse of 'exile', is embedded not merely in the thematic and structural configurations of his cinema but within the structural discursivities of language itself. The juxtaposition of dialects constitutes the context of exile and division. The domain thus turns dialogic. In almost all his films, Ghatak presents characters speaking altogether different dialects. In the film script of his short film *Yieh Kuin*, Ghatak presents Ali speaking the East Bengali dialect as against Nayak who speaks in West Bengali dialect. Mukherjee, the foreman in *Subarna Rekha*, speaks the Behari Bengali dialect as against Kaushalya, Abhiram's mother who speaks the East Bengali dialect. Kaushalya is juxtaposed with Ishwar, Sita, Abhiram and Hariprasad who, though they are refugees from East Bengal, speak the West Bengali dialect. Similarly in *Jukti Takko Ar Gappo*, Bangabala and Jagannath speak the East Bengali dialect as against Nachiketa and Neelkantha who speak the West Bengali dialect. In *Meghe Dhake Tara*, the mother, as against the other members of her family, speaks the East Bengali dialect. It is by juxtaposing several dialects of Bengali that Ghatak opens up a dialogic arena at the level of discourse; on the one hand the notion of division is further developed while on the other its antinomy, the reunion of characters speaking different dialects reflects Ghatak's bottom-line discourse of the unification of the two Bengals.

Moreover through his films he sets a scathing inquiry into the consequences of the independence of India. In *Jukti Takko Ar Gappo*, which forms the culminating point of Ghatak's oeuvre, he reacts most violently to the untold miseries inflicted on the people in the name of Independence by portraying several different aspects of this new regime.



Independence resulted not only in the partition of the Indian subcontinent but in the mass migration of people. This inevitably led people to homelessness, unemployment, segregation and abject impoverishment. However, the reduction of the middle class into the lower class was not because of Partition alone but also, a result of the anti-people model that the Indian government adopted after Independence. The ongoing trauma of Partition is clearly seen in *Nagarik* (*The Citizen* 1952-53) *Bari Theke Paliye* and *Jukti Takko Ar Gappo* besides *Meghe Dhake Tara* and *Subarna Rekha*. These films in particular are marked by the imprints of the nation's failure and the resultant national trauma. All the above mentioned films focus on the continual and unending search of the refugees for a missing promised homeland.

The space between the new independent states —India and Pakistan— became the space of the refugees, the displaced, the homeless; of people who suddenly were compelled to make sacrifices for the formation of the new nations. Ghatak presents the shadow of the exodus, which exists on the peripheral margins, as doomed to move perpetually in a state of disequilibrium wherein any state of settlement is merely a semblance. It is this notion of the exodus, both literal and metaphoric, that forms the essence of Ghatak's cinema. Literally beginning as a shadow in *Komal Gandhar*, the exodus moves across *Subarna Rekha* where even after twenty years of Independence, the homeless refugees continue to travel in trains in search of a place they can claim as their own. The exodus once again becomes a shadow in *Yeh Kiun* only to culminate into an ultimate state of homelessness, the pavement in *Jukti Takko Ar Gappo*.

In film after film, Ghatak depicts how the people across the two borders were reduced to becoming homeless refugees. But the Indian state, in order to repress the spirit of uprising of the refugees offered the model of legal transaction that involved a contractual type of exchange. As a compensation for the loss of their multiple identities, the displaced refugees were offered a single identity, that of an Indian citizen. The process of offering citizenship was a double-edged sword: on the one hand it justified the partition of the nation and on the other, by offering citizenship to the people, the state apparatus sanctified itself. The displaced refugees became the citizens of free India merely on a legal transaction. But what kind of citizenship did India offer to its citizens? Ghatak explores this question across his cinema, from *Nagarik* where he begins to formulate this question down to *Jukti Takko Ar Gappo* where he directly confronts the Indian state and asks: "What prospects does the Indian state offer its citizens?" Through the delineation of the post independence reality of India, Ghatak brings to the fore the state of unemployment, retrenchment and homelessness.

Beginning his oeuvre with *Nagarik*, Ghatak presents the story of unemployment and homelessness where the search for a job and consequently for a home becomes the ultimate search till the realization dawns on Ramu, the protagonist that 'everyone around is another me.' *Nagarik* in a different form finds its replica in *Meghe Dhaka Tara* where once again the struggle to survive in the face of an extreme crisis marked by unemployment and economic deterioration becomes the main is-



sue. *Subarna Rekha* continuing this state presents characters who are compelled to compromise their convictions because of their post Partition reality and who yet end in a desperate condition. *Bari Theke Paliye* and *Jukti Takko Ar Gappo* both reiterate the theme of unemployment and homelessness and present the eventual economic degradation of an India that can offer nothing to its people. The films end with the realization that the reduction of the people to pavement dwellers is inevitable in a system that survives through class discrimination and economic disparities.

The pavement dweller thus in Ghatak's cinema is a convergence both literal and metaphoric of class as well as of geographical displacement that eventually results in psychic displacement as living with splintered realities the people no longer are in a position to recollect and relocate themselves in their past. In almost all his films Ghatak creates characters who are amnesiac of their past and of their closest relations. The questions that these films pose are: Is not this amnesia the most violent form of displacement? And living with this reality, where one ceases to exist even for one's own self as one has forgotten one's identity, what does a refugee do?

Nagarik, situated in the era of the Telengana uprising (1946-51), is the story of a citizen among other citizens who struggles hopefully to support his family until the realization dawns on him through Jatin babu, a fellow victim, that everyone around is going through the same crisis. The story depicts an incessant deterioration of the middle class. The film formulates the chronotope of the street. It depicts people either as pavement dwellers or as moving towards the pavement under economic circumstances that are constantly being manipulated by the system. Towards the end, *Nagarik* states that all paths will inevitably end in slums and it is only then that the people will have a different a dream, one about building a life along with and not isolated from the ordinary toiling masses.

The film brings to the fore the condition of unemployment, homelessness, retrenchment, inflation and the consequent increase in poverty. The narrative operates at two levels. At the central level is the story of Ramu, the individual, who throughout struggles hopefully for a job and a home. He along with his mother is convinced that they will rise again economically and refuses to believe that life will always be like this. But Ramu's story is constantly subverted through the voice of Jatin babu, as well as that of his old father. They both are convinced that only by accepting the reality can one find a solution. The father warns Ramu to remove his blinkers, to disassociate himself from his false hopes which are a part of the hegemonic process through which a system operates, for only then will he be able to see the world open up before him. "Only through the acceptance of the reality of the impending storm can one gather one's resources and collectively encounter it", he tells Ramu. "It is only by accepting destruction, that one can build something new and that too not alone". The film states through Jatin babu that it is only by teaming up that one can survive. All individual dreams are illusions and will lead the people nowhere and so these dreams must be replaced by new collective dreams about an egalitarian social order. Throughout the film the characters experience the pain of being crushed under a millstone. They only dream, the dream to find employment, but realize that finding a job in the present era is like gambling. And



still it is expected that the poor cannot be lucky in the lottery. They are doomed to miss opportunities. As Jatin babu says, all my life I have only missed chances”. And those who are employed work but on their heads hangs the sword of retrenchment”. The characters feel that they too, like the rich, get tired and deserve rest and security—but unlike them they do not get it. They are crumbling like a sandbank but are unaware and wonder if a new land is being built anywhere. This feeling of being crushed and choked is objectified through the sound of hammer-strokes that persists in the film. It signifies the hard realities of existence, that teaches lessons to people through a thousand and one hammer-strokes” (Ghatak’s Personal Notes on the conception of *Nagarik*). And probably these alone, the film suggests will break their illusions and demand a rebellion from them. The characters know that there is no break, no escaping from the grind that is crushing them unless and until they take some desperate plunge.

Nagarik makes it explicit that the problem of unemployment is related to the anti people economic policies that India adopted after Independence. Even if Ramu gets a job, he knows that he will be depriving others by accepting it. The film brings to the fore the contradictions of the system when through Sagar, another significant character, a scientist who lives as a lodger in Ramu’s house, it states that although India is the richest in the world in mineral resources, yet strangely there is so much poverty here. It ends with the realization that there is no escape. And since everyone is finally going to end in the same place, that is the slums, then why this separation? Further in the process, the film states that the people will inevitably have to leave many things behind including their individual dreams and aspirations. The film towards its end dislodges itself from Ramu’s story by stating, “that is another story.” The main story is the question, ‘What is the journey towards?’ The tale is one of post-Partition Calcutta as the arena of class struggle where for better or for worse, Ramu’s declassment has begun. But the endless march continues and other people, other hopeful dreamers, will probably step into Ramu’s shoes and dream unattainable dreams. Sooner or later their declassment will begin like Ramu’s. They too will end up in the slum, inhabited not by educated dreamers but by simple working people who in spite of their sufferings, are trying remorselessly to build a new life. (Ghatak’s Personal Notes on the conception of *Nagarik*).

Continuing the discourse of *Nagarik*, *Bari Theke Paliye* depicts the worsening conditions of the middle class. Haridas, an erstwhile school teacher, is compelled to leave his home due to the Partition of Bengal. In spite of struggling for ten years, Haridas has failed to secure a job. Unlike Ramu Haridas is no longer on the lookout for a job; he has accepted the reality of unemployment. He is now a vendor selling puffed corns. He is doubled in the several nameless characters of *Bari Theke Paliye* who too are displaced due either to the 1943 famine in Bengal or to Partition. They too live on the pavement and scratch a living by doing odd jobs. Unlike the characters in *Nagarik*, they look neither for a home nor for a job. Jagannath, a school teacher was compelled to leave his home due to Partition. He too is unable to get any job now.

Both *Bari Theke Paliye* and *Meghe Dhaka Tara* continue the discourse of *Nagarik* in a subtle, less overt form. The notion of the pavement dweller and the process of marginalisation that are but suggested in *Nagarik* are developed further



in terms of a class perspective in *Bari Theke Paliye*. Ghatak presents the gradual recession of the people to the margins when he presents their reduction into the pavement dweller and this is further reflected metaphorically in their eventual loss of memory, and hence the self.

If the characters in *Nagarik* struggle to get a lower clerical job, Montu, Nita's younger brother in *Meghe Dhaka Tara* accepts his work in a factory as something significant. Further, Nita, along with Montu, reassures their father, Haran Master, regarding the prospects that a labour job has today. The film with several variations presents the economic displacement of the refugees who once belonged to the middle class directly through Nita but contextualises and universalizes Nita through her unnamed friend. The film presents this class in such a terrible condition that women are now compelled to remain unmarried and support their families by work. *Meghe Dhaka Tara* offers a variation to the theme of economic deterioration as projected in Ghatak's oeuvre. It expresses the agony of women brought up under a patriarchal regime which exalts and romanticizes marriage as the *raison d'être* of one's existence. The economic pressures that compelled women to discharge the role of 'bread earners', and so to remain unmarried was an experience of extreme agony for them. Though the perspective shifts in *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, yet the discourse of the plight of the middle class in post-independence India is developed even more painfully by including a patriarchal perspective. The film problematizes the agony of the middle class, to compromise its values and social norms.

Jukti Takko Ar Gappo revolves around the odyssey of four homeless characters driven away from their homes for several different reasons. All these reasons are highly political. Banglabala, who metaphorically represents the spirit of Bengal, is driven out of her land due to the massacres of 1971. Lost, deserted she walks across the city roaming around in search of her lost father and a shelter, in 'vast worthless Bengal'. Nachiketa, an engineer, like hundreds of other young engineers, moves around in search of a home and a job but soon realizes that the country does not need engineers. He finally reconciles himself to working as a labourer but even that job is not available, for the big industrialists are shifting their factories to other states and are creating artificial lock-outs. As Neelkantha, Nachieteka and Banglabala pass through the streets, Ghatak presents on both sides of the roads, rows of closed factories, depicting the massive problem of unemployment, retrenchment and exploitation. Moreover, being a Bengali from East Bengal it is impossible for Nachiketa to get a job; as he states, he is not a 'son of the soil'. By presenting the model of discrimination that the Indian government followed, Ghatak emphasizes the lack of any prospects for its so-called citizens. Jagannath, a school teacher, has been compelled to leave his village as the situation due to riots is very tense there. He arrives in Calcutta in search of a shelter and a job and finding neither he wanders around but finds no place to rest. Neelkantha, a representative of the irresponsible middle-class intelligentsia, is presented as wasted and degenerated not because he is not willing to do anything but because the times have worsened and very few options are available to him as a revolutionary artist. The film also brings to the fore the plight of the artisans in the form of Panchanan Ustad and their gradual marginalisation as the times and the context are changing.



It is with *Yieh Kiun* that the discourse of *Bari Theke Paliye*, *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, *Komal Gandhar* and *Subarna Rekha* finds a different echo. If all these films deal with the aftermath of the Partition and the Independence of the nation and its grotesque repercussions, then *Yieh Kiun* deals with the genesis of the division of the nation as stated above. It analyses the way the state disseminated itself by making the people imbibe and internalize its politics in the development of the communal psyche. The film was shot in 1970, twenty three years after Partition. The date of its production suggests Ghatak's ongoing trauma related to the Partition and further brings to the fore the situation of India after independence, both in terms of the economic crisis and the communal riots. Thus the production of *Yieh Kiun* even in 1970 does not seem to be out of place, as the issues that the film raises, situated though it is in 1947, are very contemporary still. Though Ghatak throughout had been preoccupied with the theme of Partition, it is for the first time in *Yieh Kiun* that he analyses the issue of communalism in the context of the creation of the communal psyche. By doing so, the film refers to the process through which the state apparatus works in its most hegemonic form by apparently generating a fear psychosis but subtly creating a psyche that imbibes the politics of the state in its totality as already discussed.

This is on going trauma in the form of endless class displacement of people and perennial communal riots and tensions between Hindus, Muslims, and other ethnic communities in India. The riots associated with the Babri Masjid-Ram Janmabhumi debate (1992) and its current resurgence, the Godhra riots in Gujarat (2002), the 1984 atrocities committed against the Sikhs, the Dadri Lynchings (2015); the current "cow vigilantism" since 2014 and the continuing atrocities against Dalits, the peoples of the Northeast, the Kashmiris and other minority groups in India—all these events prove the salience of Ghatak's cinema today, 70 years after the partition of the Indian subcontinent.

Reviews sent to author: 30 November 2017

Revised paper accepted for publication: 20 February 2018



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