

ARTICLE-PARTITION, BENGALI PSYCHE AND CINEMA: NIMAI GHOSH AND RITWIK GHATAK

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ABSTRACT:

This paper is placed in the context of post 1947 period of conjugal existence of independence and partition. While independence was the natural culmination of the visionaries of freedom from British rule, partition created a diaspora. The displacement of such a huge population labelled as ‘refugee’ created impact not only the independent Indian economy but also on the social and cultural psyche of the uprooted populace of Punjab and Bengal. So this paper is an attempt to analyse how partition impacted two most prominent film makers of early independent India namely Nimai Ghosh and Ritwik Ghatak through a discussion of their films from 1950-1965.

Keywords: Partition, refugees, Bengal, communalism, cinema, Ritwik Ghatak, Nemaï Ghosh

INTRODUCTION:

The paper under discussion is placed in the context of post 1947 period of conjugal existence of independence and partition. While independence was the natural culmination of the visionaries of freedom from British rule, partition created a diaspora. The displacement of such a huge population labelled as ‘refugee’ created impact not only the independent Indian economy but also on the social and cultural psyche of the uprooted populace of Punjab and Bengal.

OBJECTIVES :

So this paper is an attempt to analyse how partition impacted two most prominent film makers of early independent India namely Nimai Ghosh and Ritwik Ghatak through a discussion of their films from 1950-1965.

ANALYSIS OF THE CONTEXT:

The Partition of India in 1947 happened along the Punjab(along with parts of modern Rajasthan and Gujarat) in the west and Bengal in the east. Both the provinces possessed a composite culture, distinct identities and diverse population which have evolved over centuries(Salil Misra *Janata Weekly*, Novemembr 6, 2022) However, following the bloody process of dividing the country the two communities, the Punjabis and the Bengalis seemed to have reacted very differently to cope up with the new cauldron in which they were thrust into almost overnight. Bengal was the first region to come directly under colonial rule while Punjab was the last province to be so. Both had religiously diverse population. As per 1941 Census Report, while Punjab comprised of 57% Muslims, 22% Hindus and 13% Sikhs, Bengal had 56% Muslims and a little more than 42% Hindus while the rest were Buddhists, Christians and Animists.(https://censusindia.gov.in/nada/index.php/catalog/28411/download/31593/49044_1941_TAB.pdf. Accessed on 23.08.2024) The Partition of the sub-continent was a direct result of the British and later the Indian National Congress giving into the demands of Mohammed Ali Jinnah’s based on his two-nation theory , (Arousa Aman & Azmat Ullah, *Journal of Positive Psychology*, 2022, Vol 6 No. 7.607-609)

While the Punjabis(Sikhs and Hindus) moved on with their struggles and tried to fight the harsh reality with their unique entrepreneurial skills, the Bengalis on the other hand couldn’t accept the fact that they had to transform their social status from the middle class professionals with at least some farm-land holdings to refugees living under open skies. This shock, hopelessness and extreme agony of getting declassed couldn’t just sink into the minds of the Bengalis of East Bengal. The double

deprivation, one of losing homes and two of carrying the humiliation of becoming refugees huddled in ghettos or colonies in local parlance particularly in the city of Calcutta, had a profound impact on these East Bengali Hindus. They found it increasingly difficult to salvage their lost pride and prestige which were more valued than money or wealth. Kolkata, or Calcutta as it was known then, had already seen massacres since the launching of 'Direct Action' in 1946, by the erstwhile Muslim League provincial government. The travails for a dignified existence of these uprooted East Bengali Hindus involved more in their attempts towards social integration into the newly adopted homes. They were met with prejudice and resistance. The refugees had to navigate complex social dynamics and establish newer relationships in unfamiliar environment. Over the years after the Partition the impact was felt on several fields through literatures, social and cultural transitions and even cinema. Infact several cinemas were made which churned the deep mourning and the yearnings of the past that was lost for ever.

Thus partition came to have a profound impact on Bengali cinema, influencing both its thematic content and its narrative style. The division of Bengal in 1947, which led to the creation of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and West Bengal (part of India), left an indelible mark on the cultural and artistic expressions of the region. The partition provided Bengali filmmakers with rich material to explore themes of loss, displacement, and identity. It led to a surge in films that were not only socially relevant but also artistically innovative. Bengali cinema became a medium to reflect on and process the collective trauma of Partition. It played a crucial role in preserving the memories and stories of those affected by the upheaval.

The films often served as a critique of the socio-political conditions resulting from partition, contributing to a broader dialogue about the impacts of such large-scale events on individuals and societies. Overall, the influence of partition on Bengali cinema is significant, and it remains a poignant theme in the works of many filmmakers from the region. The exploration of partition through cinema has helped in understanding and preserving the complex legacy of this historical event. Independent India according to Ritwik Ghatak, one of the earliest directors of post-colonial India is a 'pseudo' concept 'which further subjugated and betrayed the people'.(Diamond Oberoi Vahali,2020,Introduction p2). *Chinnamul*: 1950(The saga of the Uprooted) is perhaps the first film to portray the pain of partition in the history of Bengali cinema.

CHINNAMUL AND NIMAI GHOSH :

It revolves around the shock and utter incredulity of the whole process of partition which affected the otherwise peaceful simple lives of rural Bengal. Srikanta, the main protagonist of the film is a farmer who lives with his newly wedded wife in Naldanaga, a village in Dhaka district. He along with his wife dreams of building a family. Srikanta also a very conscious individual would attend meetings and tried to keep in touch with the current state of affairs. When famine hit Bengal in 1943, he took the initiative to expose the smuggling activities of two crooks namely Madhu Ganguly and Muzaffar Khan. Hence these two crooks, symbolically a Hindu and a Muslim, took their chances for their retribution and had Srikanta arrested on false charges. Meanwhile the ominous clouds of partition which were looming large in the horizon had spread across the sky. Very reluctantly the Hindu neighbours of Srikanta along with his pregnant wife headed for Calcutta. The group reached Sealdah railway station in Calcutta where the authorities allotted them a temporary space on a railway platform. The group led by an elderly farmer Bishu tried his best to arrange some accommodation for them but all in vain. The male members in desperation tried to seek jobs. They were faced with rejections and rude comportment from the people of Calcutta. No one seemed to care or even listen to their woes as if they were aliens who were creating extra burden for the city already vexed with communal strife and riots. Meanwhile, Srikanta, who was detained under false charges was released found, that his wife and neighbours have fled to Calcutta. He reached Calcutta only to find that the group has moved on to some other place, and presumably had found some place to live. However, the property where the group had moved in was not done legitimately and it was more of a forceful

occupation which was arranged by some tout. Hence when the landlord arrived with his men to evict the refugee squatters from his property, there was a standoff. Almost at the same time Srikanta's wife went into labour. Amidst these commotions Srikanta arrived in the scene only to find that his wife dead after delivering a baby.

The film starts with a disclaimer that it isn't aimed at building up a political narrative, rather it highlights the plight of the victims of partition. Thus it is evident that while the partition itself was the reality film makers had to be extra cautious not to stir up communal sentiments. The wounds of communal violence, which included indiscriminate killing of humans of both Hindus and Muslims belonging to all age and sex, arson and rape of women, were still fresh in 1950.

The film, as described by Amitava Akash Nag, was the first attempt at neo-realism ('Chinnamul: The First Indian Attempt at Neo-Realism' -Amitava Akash Nag, <https://imagineindiafestival.com/2020/04/24/chinnamul-the-first-indian-attempt-at-neo-realism/>, Accessed on 25.08.2024). Nemai Ghosh, the director, had to overcome great difficulties while making this film. He was denied permission on the grounds that such a venture might lead to communal flare ups. Ghosh shot the film in what can be described as 'guerrilla mode'. He used shots of real refugees who were still squatting on the Sealdah railway platform. He made a real old refugee lady act in the film where she was stubbornly refusing to leave her home. Ghosh used documentary shots and merged them with the structure of a feature film. Despite the hurdles put up by the authority, Ghosh continued to film his project secretly since he was surrounded by people who continuously motivated and encouraged him. While Satyajit Ray whole heartedly supported his work, Ritwik Ghatak ended up in acting in the film. Jean Renoir, who was in Calcutta to shoot for his film 'River', had words of motivation for Ghosh.

Sayandeb Chowdhury in his article 'The Partition and the Making of New Scopic Regime in Bengali Cinema quotes Moinak Biswas who observes:

'Nemai Ghosh considered it [Chinnamul] an 'experiment', a film that would not fit into the conventional framework of cinema of that time at all, a film deliberately aimed at breaking the logic of entertainment, and consequently, that of dramatic organisation. He point[ed] out six principles of the 'experiment': not to use professional actors, not to use make-up, to shoot at a low cost within 10,000 feet of film, not to use song sequences, using candid camera and using dialectical, natural speech.'

(Sayandeb Chowdhury in European Journal of English Studies, September 2015, DOI:10.1080/13825577.2015109120)

Obviously, *Chinnamul* did not do well commercially. It was rejected by the people of Calcutta since the film lacked the entertainment value. As Amitava Akash Nag believe that even the refugees did not like the idea of their struggle get documented in a film. However, Russian film maker V I Pudovkin and actor Nikolay Cherkasov, who were visiting India as a part of a cultural delegate in 1951, saw the film and expressed their great admiration for the film. Pudokov and Cherkasov not only appreciated Ghosh's work but they ensured that the Soviet government bought the film and was shown in as many as 181 centres with Russian sub titles. Ghosh too was invited to Russia and spent quite a few months there fine tuning his art. However, upon his return, Ghosh was faced with unemployment. His political leanings were suspected and he had to move to Madras(Chennai) to survive where he stayed there till his death.

Almost all films of Ritwik Ghatak is placed on the conviction that the partition had betrayed the people. He was somehow convinced that the 'anti-people' system would be annihilated. As Oberoi comments that his cinema 'reflects the political odyssey of an artist revolutionary' (Diamond Oberoi Vahali, 2020, Introduction p2). In an interview Ritwik observed that 'Being a Bengali from east Pakistan. I have seen the untold miseries inflicted on my people in the name of independence—which is a fake and a sham. I have reacted violently to this...'. (Ritwik Ghatak, 1987, p76). For Ritwik, the refugee problem was not the problem par se but '... was the division of a culture ...' He

went to say 'During the partition period I hated these pretentious people who clamoured about our independence, our freedom.'(Ghatak,1987,p80)

RITWIK GHATAK :

The frustrations and the extreme trauma of displacement got reflected more in Bengali films than in any other forms of art in Bengal. Any discourse on partition and its reflection in cinema should begin and end with Ritwik Ghatak. Ritwik Ghatak's 'lifelong insistence on returning to the ugly facts surrounding Indian Independence - particularly the cynical and disastrous partition of Bengal - was as embarrassing to South Asia's cultural gatekeepers and official hagiographers as it was mystifying to the Western variety'.(Jacob Levich, 1997, Vol. 33, No. 2 pp. 30-33, 35). His major films, starting with his partition trilogy *Meghe Dhaka Tara* 1960(The Cloud Capped Star), *Komal Gandhar* 1961(The Flat Note on a Sharp Scale) and *Subarnarekha*1965, and *Nagarik* 1977(The Citizen) have made Ghatak the forerunner in documenting the uprooted Bengali mass. According to Bani Basu, the acclaimed author and essayist the partition seldom featured in our literature. She talks about Samaresh Basu's *Adaab* which dealt with the hackneyed Hindu-Muslim brotherhood, whereas, according to her the problem lied elsewhere. The problem dwelled not in communal or other human diversity, rather in the unforgivable act of political breach of trust and the making pawns out of human life, eventually completely uprooting them. ('Subarnarekha: Angarrekha' by Bani Basu,2018 pp162-163). Ritwik with his passionate attachment to the topic of partition wanted to bring out the dealings and trading that happened behind the partition. Ritwik deliberately invokes anger and his characters seemingly possessing above average intellect get bludgeoned by events on which they had no control whatsoever. According to Sajedul Awwal, Ritwik while expressing his sense of loss stated that the open vast meadows, paddy fields, blue expanse of skies and above all the river Padma has always overwhelmed him. His love for Bengal stems from his love for East Bengal. Later the deceit triggered by self-interest has made people like him lose their roots. This affliction stayed with him throughout his life. This was the basis of his creation.(Sajedul Awwal, 'Ritwik Ghatak Birachita Komal Gandhar er Bishoy o Angik Bichar',in Bibhas Mukhopadhyay edited,2018,p192,). Ritwik's deep empathy and understanding of human conditions coupled with his personal experiences added authenticity and emotional depth to the central theme of partition.

Ghatak's film *Subarnarekha* mourns the irreparable loss of the lives before partition and the declassed middle class Bengali society as well as the struggles of the artists which is the continuum of the 'discourse' in *Komal Gandhar*. The portrayal of class displacement is as Oberoi remarks, 'associated with the political and cultural displacement of the people caused by the division of the country' (Oberoi,2020,p69)

The revolutionary conscience of Ghatak comes out through his first film *Nagarik* made in 1952 although it was released in 1977. *Nagarik* or citizen to Ritwik is the lower middle class citizen of Kolkata who loses almost every battle of survival.(Article- 'Nagarik, Samajbiplob Ebong Maar Khawa Manusher Durmor Jijibisha' by Amiya Kumar Bagchi, 2018, p 311). The film *Nagarik* focuses on issues like unemployment or the prevailing political condition

Films like *Subarnarekha* and *Meghe Dhaka Tara* are related in the sense that both the films brings out the pain endured due to the exodus from erstwhile east Bengal to India. The feeling of being a refugee gave Ghatak immense pain. So most of Ghatak's films brings out the relentless 'angst of exile'. As Oberoi comments that the film *Meghe Dhaka Tara* 'depicts the various aspects of the disintegrating refugee psyche without directly delving into the trauma or the direct violence of partition'.(Oberoi, 2020p-79)

CONCLUSION :

The trauma of partition seems to be a never ending saga. The deceit and breach of trust have led to the sub-continent to wars. The constant attempts at bridging the minds of the three separate nations resulting from the partition seem to have failed miserably. Invoking common human values, history,

culture, tastes created complexities haven't succeeded as of now to foster the sense of peaceful coexistence in the sub-continent. The angst and pain which plagued the minds and souls of Ghatak and Ghosh need a more thorough evaluation keeping the present scenario in the backdrop. The intense emotional attachment to their erstwhile motherland led them to create such thought provoking films. Amidst all the despondency and frustrations these film makers had kept a faint hint of optimism within themselves and that optimism stemmed from their experience of communal harmony between Hindus and Muslims which existed locally. Hence, at the least these film makers felt that the hatred and resulting riots between the two communities were engineered by outside provocateurs. Therefore, the undercurrent of fellow feeling between the two communities could be excavated in future. Hence when liberation of Bangladesh happened high hopes were expressed by those who lost their homes during Partition. Nevertheless, this was short lived, very soon Bangladesh reverted itself to the East Pakistan era.

Now when today Bangladesh is trying to establish its exclusive Islamic identity and trying to wipe out the remnants of minorities who survived the onslaught of both partition and Islamization, the assumed undercurrent of communal harmony seems to have completely dried up.

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