

# The Indian Partition and the Making of a New Scopic Regime in Bengali Cinema

Sayandeb Chowdhury

To cite this article: Sayandeb Chowdhury (2015) The Indian Partition and the Making of a New Scopic Regime in Bengali Cinema, *European Journal of English Studies*, 19:3, 255-270, DOI: [10.1080/13825577.2015.1091220](https://doi.org/10.1080/13825577.2015.1091220)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13825577.2015.1091220>



Published online: 30 Mar 2016.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

# Sayandeb Chowdhury

## THE INDIAN PARTITION AND THE MAKING OF A NEW SCOPIC REGIME IN BENGALI CINEMA

*Invested in a mimetic approach, scholarship on Partition narratives in Indian cinema rarely addresses the films in terms of the body of culture memory they produce. In addition, it often disregards popular cinema. Thus, while the films of Ritwik Ghatak have been widely discussed, they have rarely been considered alongside popular Bengali cinema of that decade, films which often refer to Partition within the broader framework of popular melodrama. This article will read the two 'rival' bodies of work for their potent engagement with the production of memory within the cinematic poetics of partition. In relation to images of the city as a cinematic trope, this essay aims to offer fresh insights into Partition within the broader scopic regime of visual modernity.*

**Keywords:** Partition; Calcutta; Bengali popular cinema; Ritwik Ghatak; cinematic city; postcolonial; cine-poetics

The article examines a series of film narratives produced during the early years of postcolonial India with the aim of understanding: first, if the act of Partition, which created the postcolonial Indian federation and, more particularly, the fragmented state of Bengal, gave rise to a specific cine-poetics that extended from art-house cinema to popular melodrama; second, if that cine-poetics betrays any crisis of representation and memory, especially in trying to artistically engage with something as obviously traumatic as Partition; third, how the metropolitan space of postcolonial Calcutta came to operate as the primary locus of both kinds of work, thereby producing a liminal and critical space of narrative; and fourth, whether metropolitan narratives of Partition provide any new understanding of cinematic memory that might serve to subvert conventional film genres and classificatory codes.

### I. The cinematicity of modernity

Before I proceed to discuss how the Indian Partition had spatialised Bengali cinema, I want to locate a certain moment in European modernity when the metropolis began to emerge as the spacio-visual centre of the moving image. Much recent

work in critical cultural studies has drawn on a range of theorists (Bachelard, 1969; Benjamin, 1999; de Certeau, 1992; Lefebvre, 1991; Soja, 1989) to re-organise the debate around city space. The effort has been primarily to understand why production of the image-form in modernity's self-fashioning as essentially metropolitan in its ideas. Thanks to this 'spatial turn', not only has spacialisation become *the* intellectual category for understanding the composite nature of 'how relations of power and discipline are inscribed into the apparently innocent spatiality of social life' (Soja, 1989: 12), but also for how cinema has come to share a complex, often indiscernible and unconscious proclivity for formal intervention in the possible spatial denomination of the real. Mark Shiel and Tony Fitzmaurice (2011: 5) explain the relevance of the turn as follows:

Cinema is a peculiarly spatial form of culture, of course, because (of all cultural forms) cinema operates and is best understood in terms of the organisation of space: both *space in films* – the space of the shot, the space of the narrative setting; the geographical relationship of various settings in sequence of a film, the mapping of a lived environment on film; and *films in space* – the shaping of lived urban spaces by cinema as a cultural practice; the spatial organisation of its industry at the levels of production, distribution, and exhibition; the role of cinema in globalization.

Also recent historiography of early cinema theorises the limits and powers of cinema as a cultural technology that can represent metropolitan reality with unprecedented imminence, while at the same time making the nature of that reality somewhat suspect. Though treating city-space as foundational to the moving image is comparatively new, historically cinema has demonstrated a metropolitan consciousness, thanks to its dependency on advanced technology, labour-intensive production, proclivity towards mass appeal and inclination towards exploiting an increasingly industrialised society in the West. Cinematicity is hence both a theoretical and a historical factor in the modern metropolis. But how is the cinematicity of moving images produced? Is it a work of narrative? Of technology-induced subjectivity? Or was it the cultural economy of European modernity itself that produced the cinematicity of city space?

Cinema has indeed been defined by modernist urban space but, as Shiel and Fitzmaurice (2011) point out, cinema has also re-imagined urbanity, virtually producing a new urbanism which they, like others (Barber, 2004; Clarke, 1997; Menel, 2008; Webber & Wilson, 2007) have termed the 'cinematic city'. And it is in the production of this cinematic city that cinema's spatial claims are revealed at their most complex and rewarding. How, then, is urban space, already steeped in cultural meaning and memory, re-created within the narrative space of cinema? A number of films readily lend themselves to such an inquiry – from the early avant-garde experimental docufeatures of Walter Ruttmann (*Berlin: Symphony of a City*, 1927) and Dziga Vertov (*Man with a Movie Camera*, 1929); to Charles Chaplin's city comedies (*City Lights*, 1931; *Modern Times*, 1936); classic Hollywood noir like Carol Reed's *The Third Man* (1949); Italian neo-realism of Roberto Rossellini (*Rome Open City*, 1945) and Vittorio de Sica (*Bicycle Thieves*, 1948); the French New Wave of Jean-Luc Godard (*Breathless*, 1960) and Jacques Tati (*Playtime*, 1967); Woody Allen

(*Manhattan*, 1979) and Ridley Scott (*Blade Runner*, 1982). In each case and in a wide range of genres, the city – whether Berlin or New York, Venice or Los Angeles, Paris or Rome – is re-invigorated within the spatial dynamic of the narrative itself, imbued with an original spatio-cultural meaning which either amplifies or subverts the city's reception within a larger productive capacity of what Martin Jay has called 'the scopic regimes of modernity' (1988). The dramatic possibility of each film is unlocked within the specific meaning that space in that city reproduces, both outside and within the narrative scope of the film. In the films above, the re-imagined city is not the backdrop but the primary logic of the film itself. Consequently, the city space emerges not just as a habitation but as a space of encounter.

The relationship between cityscape and cinemascap can also be understood as fulfilling an original principle of modernity itself: the mobility of life and representational images. As Giuliana Bruno (2002: 17) observes:

On the eve of cinema's invention, a network of architectural forms produced new spaciovisuality. Such ventures as arcades, railways, department stores, the pavilions of exhibition halls, glasshouses and winter gardens incarnated the new geography of modernity. They were all sites of transit. Mobility – a form of cinematics – was the essence of these new architectures. By changing the relation between spatial perception and bodily motion, the new architectures of transit and travel culture prepared the ground for the invention of the moving image, the very epitome of modernity.

With its perpetually changing dynamic of encounter and mobility, the crepuscular alteration of strangeness and familiarity, of imminence and transience, of utility and reflection, the city space becomes the source of the original language for the experience of modernity. So it is important to understand the centrality of mobility, both as a lived experience of modernity and as a transient conceptual category that defines modernity itself. We need, then, to continuously interrogate the spatio-visual relationship between mobility in the modern metropolis and the narrative architectonics of cinema as a practice both of and within that spatio-visibility. As modernity globalised across former colonies of Empires, the same impetus of cinematicity travelled inter-culturally and across the divide of colonised and colonial governance. In India, for example, two colonial cities had the historical will to receive the emergent modernity of the western metropolitan centres: Calcutta and Bombay. Their fortunes were tied to global circuits of commerce, industry, militarism and culture in complicated, historically sustained ways. It was hence no accident that the two cities of Indian modernity had the historical opportunity to lend themselves to a visibility specific to the moving images – a visual regime that could prospectively transform the civic into the haptic and the built environment into what Pierre Nora (1989) has famously defined as sites of memory.

Drawing from the case of European cinema and the globalisation of cinematic modernity, this article will argue that the Indian Partition was the moment that actually specialised and metropolised Bengali cinema, with an attendant scopic regime that produced a recognisable cinematicity out of the embattled space of the actual city of Calcutta. Through a spatial taxonomy of two important but unsung

films, the article will also ask whether this metropolitan moment is also the decisive moment of transition from colonial to postcolonial cinema, with the full weight and consciousness of both Partition and postcoloniality defining this momentous change of scene, while informing what Jacques Rancière (2013) calls the ‘scene of change’.

## II. The European avant-garde and the cinematics of dispossession in Bengal

The scene of change in this case obviously concerns the Indian Partition. And when it comes to Partition, Ritwik Ghatak’s work is considered seminal. We will come to look closely at this claim. But before we do so, it might be instructive to take note of the years leading up to Partition – the decade of the 1940s – which were seminal to the cultural climate of Partition cinema. As Chidananda Dasgupta, once the foremost critic of Bengali cinema, writes in his essay on Ghatak:

As he came of age the Bengal that Ritwik inherited was in a state of turmoil. The country as a whole had been hit by the shortages of World War II and bloodied by the battles of political independence. But Bengal had its special share of misfortune. The 1943 famine was engineered by the British in aid of their war effort; in a year of very good harvest, five million people died because their food had been sent away to the armed forces of the Empire. On the eve of independence came the Hindu-Muslim riots, and with it, the partition of Bengal, causing one of the largest and most traumatic migrations in history. (Dasgupta, 1985: 253)

The succession of events, increasingly graphic and violent – the mutinous ‘Quit India’ movement in 1942, the Bengal famine in 1943, the threats of Axis bombing in 1943–44, the communal violence in 1946, the Partition of 1947 – turned the 1940s into an unremitting nightmare for Calcutta. Hardly another decade before or after in the crowded annals of Calcutta’s chequered history had unleashed itself on the city with such ferocity.

Historically, Calcutta was not unaccustomed to scenes of mass mobilisation and disruption. Since the early years of the twentieth century, the city had accommodated a range of oppositional movements and voices, some of which bordered on active violence against the Colonial government. But the 1940s unleashed unprecedented spectres of desolation, dismemberment and death on the streets of Calcutta. The city was soon to become an ungainly site of primal, visceral and scopophilic disorder. A strong sense of dispossession, both physical and ontological, seems to have characterised the wretched condition of much of Bengal’s middle and lower classes in that decade. From the Bengal famine, which displaced thousands of farmers from the rural hinterland, to the violence between communities and the momentous tragedy of Partition, which permanently de-territorialised millions of East Bengali refugees, dispossession – or more specifically an unremitting sense of *un-belonging* – was *the* tragic motif that informed the cultural economy. Artistically, the disquiet of the decade had no precedent. This scale of

mass mobility, enforced by the decade in general and the Partition in particular, clearly necessitated a new poetics of mobility. It was no time for artists and critics to pontificate on technique, and yet there was no artistic precedent in traditional Bengali cultural praxis which could satisfactorily embody the scope of the massive scale of disruption.

In some form or other, critical realism had been the dominant framework since at least the mid-1930s. Artists, writers and intellectuals in Bengal were by the 1930s coming under the heavy influence of the Comintern imaginary. It was during this time that the Bengali intelligentsia started to decisively move away from a broadly romantic-liberal ethos of which Rabindranath Tagore had been the archetype. There was never a more critical time to measure art through its political outreach. As the vehemence of the 1940s unveiled itself, there was an even greater need to reinvigorate and extend the new poetics, and the vanguard Bengali intelligentsia was keen to put together a cultural manifesto that would unambiguously outline its political programme. The most prominent group with a distinct artistic programme and manifesto to emerge during this time was the Progressive Writers' Association (PWA). The Association, formed in 1936, was the direct predecessor of the more inclusive and influential Indian Peoples' Theatre Association (IPTA), which came into being in 1943. The PWA not only brought together some of the most committed young artists under its banner, it also systematically sought to develop a new poetics for literature and stage that would reflect the spirit of the times. Culturally, this would be a poetics of both representation and participation that would also establish a meeting point between the popular-colloquial and the artistic-formalist to achieve its desired reach and credibility. What was still at stake, however, was the real nature of representation, i.e. whether the poetics of realism was enough to make cultural sense of the desperation and dispossession all around.

It was hence no surprise that the IPTA soon turned to cinema; only in the visual space of celluloid, it was felt, could the real scale of the massive and enforced mass movement be comprehended. The particular power of moving images to convert the veracity of embattled social space, especially in the beleaguered big city, into an appropriate and appreciative cinematic rhetoric was certainly not lost on the members of IPTA. Soon Ritwik Ghatak and his peers, who were IPTA's most restless young members, made the crucial turn to cinema's distinctive claims of realism. Ashish Rajadyyaksha has detailed the formative influences of the realist tradition vis-à-vis Ghatak in what remains the most insightful monograph on him to date. Rajadyyaksha writes:

The amazing ability of cinema to capture real images in motion formed the basis of cinematic aesthetics; but while on the one hand this was used by the great Soviet masters as a means of stylisation, on the other it also gave rise to the myth of the photographic image. The myth of the autonomy of the photographic image comes through its ability to portray reality so convincingly that all formal considerations appear irrelevant. For some filmmakers this characteristic is seen as the genius of cinema, its verisimilitude in capturing images; and so we have John Grierson making a passionate case for use of the documentary qualities of cinema, since only in them is the medium vindicated. This position finds its main theoretician in Siegfried Kracauer, whose *Theory of Film* makes a strong case for a

‘redemption of physical reality’ through cinema, by making use of its unique qualities of capturing nature ‘in the raw’. (Rajadyaksha, 1982: 29)

It is in this reflection on cinematic form that one can draw the first direct link between a certain kind of European visual avant-gardism and the Bengali cinema of Partition. Rajadyaksha’s assertion can be further explored if one looks at the early years of cinema when its distinctive visual appeal of engaging the real had carried a whiff of determinism – a determinism that was historicised within Soviet cinema of the time, especially in the iconic repertoire of Sergei Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin and, before them, Dziga Vertov. The Soviet influence is particularly important as the IPTA, like other outfits of the Indian left, had a steady and willing ear for processes of cultural mobilisation in Bolshevik Russia. But as we move into the early 1950s, we also see a strong Italian neo-realist influence among the cultural avant-garde in Bengal, most notably in Nemaï Ghosh and Ritwik Ghatak. Both were bona fide intellectual protégés of the political-aesthetics of IPTA (see O’Donnell, 2011) and both branched out in the early 1950s to particularise in cinema what was handed to them as a general cultural necessity. Ghosh and then Ghatak were emboldened by the cinematic languages of the two European avant-gardes and their ambitious re-imagination of city space (Moscow, Kiev, Rome). On the other hand, they were witnesses to the sheer and momentous visuality of dispossession that was around them, as Calcutta was seething with the dislocated. It was only a matter of time before the city would inevitably become the locus of their scopical drive.

The film that successfully brought these concerns together was Nemaï Ghosh’s only Bengali film *Chhinnamul* (‘The Rootless’, 1950), a film in which Ghatak assisted him closely. In an incisive article on the film, Moinak Biswas writes:

Nemaï Ghosh considered it [*Chhinnamul*] 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. Similarities with what Cesare Zavattini later outlined as characteristic of Italian neo-realism are apparent. The neo-realist films were not seen in India before the International Film Festival of 1952. But Ghosh, with [Satyajit] Ray and others, was part of the Calcutta Film Society which did give him and some of his associates exposure to the European realist films, besides the Soviet avant-garde. He said in an interview that he had read about the Italian films in *Film Review*, seen stills of them and had got deeply interested in the style. (Biswas, 2007: 47)

*Chhinnamul* was predominantly influenced by European cinema but one must also make note of significant precedents in Bengali cinema itself and not all of them within the precincts of IPTA. Both Biswas and Bhaskar Sarkar have discussed a number of films, all made between the mid-1940s and the early 1950s, which together create a veritable emporium of cinematic structures, practices, meaning-

making processes and uses of the photographic/moving image that would later mediate cultural memory for the breakthrough works of both Ghosh and Ghatak (Biswas, 2007: 46; Sarkar, 2010: 142–145). Films such as *Udayer Pathe* (1944), *Dharti Ke Lal* (1946), *Neecha Nagar* (1946), *Diner Pore Din* (1949), *Babla* (1951) and *Beyallish* (1951) clearly show a movement away from the studio-produced dramas of the earlier decade. These films are significant urtexts in mapping an emerging metropolitan consciousness in Bengali cinema. They may not be individually seminal in ushering in a new poetics of representation but, individually and collectively, they evoke the problems of nationhood, the anger and outrage of the disenfranchised, a determinant if simplistic consciousness of class, sparing uses of the realist forms, and location-specific ideation of narrative.

In short, the cinematic material and resources available, first to Ghosh and then to Ghatak, were not just Soviet and Italian but also a kind of derivative, indigenous realism of the years preceding them. Ghosh and Ghatak developed the artistically invigorating resources available to them. For example, by deftly mixing dramatic sequences with montage, documentary footage of actual crowds streaming into the streets of Calcutta after Partition, voice-over and a range of iconographic, inter-textual references to the Famine and Partition, Ghosh's *Chhinnamul* manages to construct what Biswas (2007: 51) calls a 'strange cohabitation of documentary impulse and theatre'. The film makes use of city space by shooting in areas of Calcutta where the dispossessed refugees congregated (such as the Sealdah Station, a major rail terminus). Ghosh either clandestinely shot on the streets or in some cases convinced actual refugees to be part of the film. This was classic Italian neo-realist influence. These parts of the movie, Biswas says, stand out in their affect, an affect produced by situating the film in the real time of the 'activity of the film' itself:

The arrival at the Sealdah Station in Calcutta – the top angle shot of the maze of tracks and the low angle shot of the platform roofs – has almost a dreamlike quality as a new reality dawns on the characters, invades the film's frame... They (the refugees) have neither come to marvel at the big city as peasants, nor to climb the ladder of individual success we find in countless popular plots. They are here to take part in a reconstruction of the city. (52)

The scene in question reveals, first, a supreme awareness of the narrative technology (cinema) and its intimate participation in redefining the spacio-visibility of the city. The scene also reveals – at the same time – the socio-legal emergencies of citizenship of the fictional protagonists who would participate in that present scene of reconstructing that very beleaguered city. The city sequences in *Chhinnamul* could thus be interpreted as the moment when Calcutta *becomes* a cinematic city, a city which finds intertwined in its real and imagined selves a multiplicity of contemporary projections. If *Chhinnamul* was the source text for this visibility, then it can be comfortably said that the same impetus continues to engage a number of other films made in the wake of the city's emergence into full visual consciousness – Ghatak's *Nagarik* (*The Citizen*, 1952) being the most evident art-house film in this group.

For Sarkar (2010: 133–134), this group of films from the mid-1940s to the early 1950s is characterised by two impulses: first, the general recognition of a national imperative to ‘develop a vital cultural field, including a representative cinema, as part of wider attempts to consolidate nationhood’; second, the attempt, through cinema, at cultural healing, healing of the ‘composite wound of [the] forties’, a process which meant that the ‘generic fantasies of love, unity and plenitude emerged as overarching concern[s]’. To these, I would propose a third impulse: the reconfiguration of the city as a space of mobility and encounter, not unlike Europe of the decades before. Without the third impetus, I will argue, the foundations of a new poetics of Partition remain inadequate and under-theorised.

In the films discussed in the next part of the essay, all three symptoms are apparent and interconnected. They come together in interesting ways in spite of the tendency to confine the films to specific generic nomenclatures. The better-known of the two is Ghatak’s first film *Nagarik* while the other is *Ora Thake Odhare* (‘They Live That Side’), by Sukumar Dasgupta. Ghatak’s film did not have a theatrical release during his lifetime while Dasgupta’s film had a modest run. Ghatak’s next three films are part of cinematic lore while Dasgupta has largely been overlooked, his films having no historic claim to artistic genius. Nonetheless, both films manage to put across similar issues with almost equal deftness and eloquence, sharing an identifiable scopic gaze of the unpropitious, post-Partition city of Calcutta. Together, but unconscious of each other, the two directors build on the legacy of various intellectual and political movements of their immediate past while between them they foreground an unprecedented spatial appreciation of the Partitioned city.

### III. The citizen in search of a city

Ghatak completed only eight full-length films, three of which – *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (*The Cloud-Capped Star*, 1960), *Komal Gandhar* (*E-Flat*, 1961) and *Subarnarekha* (*The Golden Thread*, 1965) – deal directly with Partition and together constitute the basis of Ghatak’s international fame as a filmmaker. It has been almost impossible to see his cinema without its socio-political triggers, dominated by his Marxist leanings, his artist-activist image and his unparalleled reputation as a chronicler of Partition. *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, for example, invests Partition with the moral weight and irretrievability of the apocalypse, in its intense exploration of the internal divisions and convictions of an average ‘Partitioned’ family. *Komal Gandhar* is the story of a theatre group under the embittering signifier of Partition. If *Meghe Dhaka Tara* tested Partition within the moral universe of a family, *Komal Gandhar* tested it within the self-imposed boundaries of social contract and conflict within a community of artists. *Subarnarekha*, somewhere in between, is about a family which splinters into two, one half leaving the secure shelter of the province to scratch out a hard living in the city, only to find their past tragically catch up with them. In this film too, every event is marked by Partition. Ghatak’s trilogy, in sum, is as much triggered by Partition as it is haunted by it. It is hence helpful to begin with this received paradigm and work backwards to see if his aesthetic could ever hope to subvert the critical framework that has been imposed on him. This is not to question Ghatak as a deterministic chronicler of Partition but rather to draw attention to a

Ghatak beyond the trilogy, where he is as keenly invested in cinematic space and as critically observant of social conditions. *Nagarik* anticipated some of the cinematic language of his later films, which is no surprise. But little attention has been paid to how it reconstructs metropolitan mobility and space. Moreover, *Nagarik*'s real-time proximity to the actual years of Partition (compared to the Partition trilogy) makes it a valuable cinematic document for understanding the complex interplay of actual and imagined urban sites of meaning-making that the Partition had enforced.

*Nagarik* begins with the camera panning over the city of Calcutta through a series of montage shots while a distant voice-over narrates how recent events have overwhelmed the teeming metropolis. Then the camera zeroes in on the protagonist, Ramu, helping an old woman cross a busy city street. The narrative clearly identifies the young man as one among the crowd whose story we are now going to see unfold. Hence in the first few minutes, the film shifts from the amorphous entity of the metropolitan mass to the critical subjectivity of the individual, archetype of the mass, as he makes his way through city streets and then walks through the narrow, easily detectable film-set passageway that leads to his dwelling quarters.

Ramu is from a family of two siblings and parents who have just moved to an impoverished part of the city after having been forced to abandon a larger home in a better neighbourhood. The father is a retired man whose meagre pension is all that supports the family, as he mourns the decline of Bengal, seeing it turn into a state of divided, stifled dysfunction. He is losing his eyesight, a symbol of the hopelessness he feels, while his son, Ramu, hopes that a job, which he thinks his education entitles him to, will put an end to the family's temporary state of poverty. Ramu's sister is still unwed and is hence one of the many so-called middle-class embarrassments that the family has recently learnt to live with. Ramu is also in a relationship with a woman from his former neighbourhood and hopes to someday start a family of his own. In other words, Ramu is the average middle-class man on the verge of building his future on the basis of his middle-class values and certificates; except that Partition has undermined all such accessible claims to aspirations and financial stability.

As the narrative unfolds, we witness the decline in economic opportunities that has gripped a country in the midst of intense change. Ramu refuses to give in and seems to be the only one to entertain hope in a climate of deep misery. But nothing materialises, and Ramu, after trying all possible sources of employment, gradually internalises a condition that his father had predicted. Finally, not only Ramu fails to reclaim their old house but the family is forced to slide even lower and rent accommodation in the slums. In the last scene, as Ramu prepares to leave, another family is seen to have entered the lower middle-class dwelling which Ramu's family were forced to vacate, with the declared hope of exiting soon. Ramu feels a sense of amused déjà vu: he had entered the same space with similar hope months back, only to fall further down the economic hierarchy. In the din of displacement, one hears the itinerant violinist, the mysterious figure in the film whose roving appearance seems to affect only Ramu, who goes searching for him but never finds him playing. Only in the end, when Ramu's realisation of his conditions of existence is complete, does he hear him play as the music the violinist is

playing increasingly assumes the tune of the *Internationale*. Most commentators see here a replay of Ritwik's IPTA concerns and Marxist leanings. Malini Bhattacharya, for example, writes:

This technique of repeating an almost identical situation to give the experience embodied in the film certain universality, is a favourite one with Ritwik. Here too it makes the telling point that Ramu in the film is not just one person, but represents the entire Bengali lower middle class which dreams of prosperity, but is moving slowly but surely towards either annihilation or proletarianization. In this context, the political jargon uttered by Ramu's trade unionist friend and the sight of marching feet in a procession, while the tune of the *Internationale* is heard in the background, assumes a direct authenticity. (Bhattacharya, 1979: 62)

The whole film evokes an acute and unflinching sense of dispossession felt by a 'typical' family in the restive days of post-Partition. As Sibaji Bandyopadhyay (2012: 233) comments: 'It is undeniable that *Nagarik*'s characters, like those of the trilogy, try to grapple with the problem of instantaneous switch in the substantive meaning of belonging'. This would be expected in a Partition narrative. But, contrary to what one would expect from Ghatak, Ramu's family is *not* a partitioned family, they are resident 'citizens' of the city. There is no reprisal of loss of territory, of filial longing for a country that has suddenly become foreign to half of its people, as had been the case with Ghatak's Partition trilogy. Ramu yearns for picturesque sylvan acres complete with a red-roofed country house, as portrayed in a picture on the calendar that hangs on the wall of his stark little room. He keeps going back to it in times of melancholy and to rekindle his hope in finding relief from acute crisis. As he grudgingly accepts his full membership of the new proletariat at the end, Ramu tears the calendar apart.

Ghatak's trilogy without exception deals with families traumatised directly by Partition. But *Nagarik* does not. What Ramu has lost is his future, not his past. Ghatak seems to be hinting at two related circumstances pathologised by Partition. First, the condition of impoverishment was to be seen as an overarching signifier, not one characterising only a certain displaced population but one that pertained also to those who had legal claims to the city through long-term contracts of residency and were apparently beyond the ravages of Partition. Second, instead of creating the usual binary of the lost idyll of the country and the enforced habitation in the big city – a staple of most Partition narratives – Ghatak creates the effects of de-territorialisation within the body of the city itself. That not only sets the *Nagarik* substantially apart from Ghatak's later films but also brings to the fore a crisis of unbelonging that can only be realised within the metropolitan regulation of space. Although *Nagarik* inherits the aesthetics of *Chhinnamul*, it should hence also be seen as operating on a different axis from it. The latter film visualises the encounter of city space through the new crowd, displaced and disposed, through real-life footage of their arrival *into* the city, while *Nagarik* splits the city itself into various neighbourhoods and chronicles the enforced mobility of the average *citizen* within that very space. Ghatak is internalising what is external in Ghosh, reinforcing his claims of the general impoverishment of the middle classes in an

unrelenting climate of economic hardship. In *Nagarik*, Ghatak creates a seamless sharing of fate by all the characters within the narrative: the aspiring chemist who comes to rent the space of Ramu's living room, Ramu's circle of friends, the family of his betrothed and their comically troubled neighbour Jatinbabu, whose fantasies of exotic meals betray his desperation to survive his plight. Unlike Ghosh, Ghatak makes limited use of the actual city. Instead, he puts his theatre background to good use by creating sets that make up both the inside of the living quarters and streets just outside (Bhattacharya, 1979; Dasgupta, 1985). The camera leaves this constricted theatrical space only to give an omniscient gaze of the city in turmoil, stock shots that particularise the city, but not the essential narrative space. This serves to highlight the relative absence of a real space in the city reeling from the after-effects of Partition, by evoking a sense of the void showing the actual absence. The insistent logic of dispossession has been so internalised and strained that the real city, in its documentary immediacy, can now be securely absented. One can read this film as re-distributing the city space into theatres of individual refuge where melodramatic moments are juxtaposed with real conditions of existence. The city is behind the curtains, so to speak, its subterfuge only too apparent.

Ghatak's use of melodrama to create heightened moments of realism has been much written about, but I will come back in the concluding section of the essay to comment on how this film forces us to rethink melodrama in terms of space while also broadening its implications outside the imminent rhetoric of Partition. But first I want to examine another film, almost contemporary of *Nagarik*, *Ora Thake Odhare*.

#### IV. Comedy as cultural critique

As in all other spheres of Bengali cultural activity in the early 1950s, popular cinema was going through a phase of major transition, moving away from earlier eras dominated by large studios which had sustained the popular genre for more than two decades. The system was considerably weakened but it nevertheless survived Partition. The film I have selected for discussion, Sukumar Dasgupta's *Ora Thake Odhare* (1953), is testimony to a distinguished studio's efforts to produce cinematic content out of the climate of poverty and dislocation without tampering in any obvious way with the entrenched appeal of the popular genres. The film was also among several that cleared the ground for the rise of Bengali matinee idol Uttam Kumar in the following years, while cementing his legendary pairing with actor Suchitra Sen, the two foremost stars to have shaped the cinematic imaginary of Bengali romantic melodrama between the mid-1950s and the 1960s (see Biswas, 2000).

*Ora Thake Odhare*, says Sibaji Bandyopadhyay (2012: 235), is a 'romantic comedy that furnishes a light-hearted instance of displacement of the trauma attending the division of Bengal by tapping libidinal resources in tandem with the release of provocative yet harmless laughter'. The film starts with actual footage of Calcutta (like *Nagarik*, but without the voice-over) with the camera panning over the Sealdah Station (the site of heightened realism in *Chhinnamul*) and then moving through the busy streets of Calcutta for the entire time of the film's title sequence, before halting at one of Calcutta's principal neighbourhoods where the camera climbs the

stairs and halts at the landing where the drama is to unfold. The sequence has the effect of starting at the foundational site of encounter (the station), and then having the actual city flow into the inner space of domesticity, hinting that the city virtually metamorphoses into domestic space while the tensions without are played out within.

The main narrative chronicles the daily life of two families who come from moderately differing Bengali ethnicities though both belong to the broader *bhadralok*: a class of well-educated Bengali Hindus marked by distinction of taste rather than birth, wealth or profession. Of the two resident families, one evidently has been displaced by Partition and is now forced to share close quarters with another family, which has not been displaced. The economic and cultural status of the two families is more or less similar. The family displaced from the eastern part of Bengal carries with it the linguistic, culinary and other attendant signifiers that constantly threaten to subvert peaceful coexistence with the other, resident, family, who carries its own ingrained practices. But they also share a broad range of interdependence. The middle-aged men share their insecurities around financial loans and employment; the younger share promises of friendship and romance; the women share their daily household chores, even sharing carrying baskets, irons, sewing machines and other symbols of day-to-day utility. But peace is often threatened by this quirk or that, when a family wants to hold too tightly onto their loosely intrusive, respective identities. A range of hardships from time to time overwhelm them enough to make an obligatory, if fragile, peace, which is threatened the next moment. Ethnic quibbles, however, never breach a certain self-imposed, middle-class, public sense of civility. The 'provocative yet harmless laughter' that Bandyopadhyay (235) talks about largely arises from this constant tension between them in spite of their hapless dependency, between the warnings of ethnic one-upmanship on the one hand and the pulls of middle-class courtesy on the other. The younger family members and women remain comparatively underwhelmed by the differences, although they shy away from making any defiant effort to bridge them.

One would expect the film's drama to unfold around the family that has fled to the city. But, contrary to expectations, like *Nagarik*, the family that reaches the brink of catastrophe is not the one affected by the division of their past territory. It is the one that is resident of the city. Unable to find any release from their hardship and after some meandering and reflection, punctuated by tensions with neighbours, the family decides to vacate the quarters for good and take up residence in a slum (again, like *Nagarik*). However, on the night they plan to 'escape' from their house (to avoid destroying the façade of middle-class respectability), the other family intervenes and prevents their imminent proletarianisation. Like a Shakespearean comedy, the misunderstandings are resolved and order restored, even if with the realisation that there will still be hardships. This is also the moment when both families realise their social and pecuniary limits, share their secrets and make a collective gesture to live next to each other. There are the obligatory escapes into music and melodrama, though they are not entirely contrary to the film's overall climate of despondency. In fact, the 'libidinal resources' that Bandyopadhyay (235) refers to are an acknowledgement of the resolute nature of life itself, its essential plenitude, filling the gaps left by the daily business of survival which is marked by unsparing financial anguish.

Like *Nagarik*, the film re-imagines Partition within the living quarters of Calcutta and divides one home into two ethnic spaces with full consciousness of the forced circumstances that have brought the two families together. In both films the families are deeply aware of their class moorings and deeply unsettled by displacement, real or imagined. Both films share the condition of hardship, which is also unremitting. But while in Ghatak's universe, the agency of hope, if any, is in resolutely accepting the new status of the proletariat, in Dasgupta's *Ora Thake Odhare*, it is in stubbornly resisting the same through understanding the values of co-habitation.

## V. Towards a rethinking of postcolonial cine-poetics

When categorised separately by conventional scholarship, *Nagarik* joins Ghatak's much better-known Partition films while Dasgupta's *Ora Thake Odhare* slips into the ignominy reserved for popular melodrama. But the two films together can not only question partisan theorisations of Bengali cinema but also offer a new poetics that reproduces a very particular scopic regime to respond to an immutable historical event. The threat of losing out on the middle space is real in *Nagarik*, but effective compromises towards developing a new understanding of a performative space save the two families from a similar fate in *Ora Thake Odhare*. In the last scene of *Nagarik*, then, Ramu's family literally *exits the stage*, slipping out of both middle-class space and memory. In the last scene of *Ora Thake Odhare*, the staircase landing, where the narrative originated and was the in-between site of most nimble quibbles, is finally neutralised. It is this space that comes to be occupied by both families together, paving the way for an appropriation of space that could be considered as the same one vacated by Ramu's family in *Nagarik*.

Reading the films together hence can draw our attention to a scopic realignment of foundational space that was unimaginable if not for the climate of dislocation that had been ushered in by Partition. We can locate a poetics developing around the city in both films, the location of class and the threat of actual, real displacement within the city's denominated spaces of the middle class and poor. This kind of spatial rereading should lead us to reflect on the cinematicity of Calcutta as it rendered its built environment, its multiple spaces vulnerable to the civic and scopic effects of Partition. The whole schema of Partition-induced mobility and displacement seems to have produced a certain moving imagery and a cultural memory that cinematised the city space like never before. In both films, while in measure of narrative time the closed form of the studio-set prevails over sequences of real footage, yet there is a palpable sense of the city throughout, lurking just behind the narrative space. Melodrama functions in both films as a cinematic technique that reinforces the use of this (city) space, both actual and within the studio, to accentuate individual moments of deeply felt emotion.

The 1950s is also the moment which culturally signifies the birth of a postcolonial cinema in Bengal, when the emergent economy of the moving picture was shifting away from the colonial era with the growth of a new cultural economy of distribution, movie holdings, spectatorship and new censorship laws that were soon to come. But in the films discussed, one can note an overarching postcoloniality of form foregrounded in their spatial interrogation, a consciousness of space and city

that was to be seen within the larger ontological field of interrogating the new nationhood, the new spatiality that the demise of empire had rendered visible. One can read *Nagarik* and *Ora Thake Odhare* as the initial, fledgling steps of appropriation of the newly revealed spaces in the metropolis, spaces that were invisible before. To that end, the films point our attention towards a new germination and management of space and their possible appropriations in an archetypal post-colony. To a new generation of cinephiles and general viewers, the films should carry the memory of a different scopic aesthetic defined by the cinematics of mobility, while appropriating the postcolonial moment for the construction of a new cinematic city.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## References

### Films

- Son of the Soil [Dharti Ke Lal]*. Dir. Khwaja Ahmad Abbas. IPTA Pictures, 1946. Film.
- Babla [Babla]*. Dir. Agradoot. 1951 Film.
- Manhattan*. Dir. Woody Allen. Jack Rollins & Charles H. Joffe Productions, 1979. Film
- The City Below [Neecha Nagar]*. Dir. Chetan Anand. India Pictures, 1946. Film.
- City Lights*. Dir. Charles Chaplin. Charles Chaplin Productions, 1931. Film
- Modern Times*. Dir. Charles Chaplin. Charles Chaplin Productions, 1936. Film
- They Live That Side [Ora Thake Odhare]*. Dir. Sukumar Dasgupta. SM Productions, 1954. Film.
- The Citizen [Nagarik]*. Dir. Ritwik Ghatak. Film Guild, 1952. Film.
- Meghe Dhaka Tara [The Cloud-Capped Star]* Dir. Ritwik Ghatak. Chitrakalpa, 1960. Film.
- E-Flat [Komal Gandhar]* Dir. Ritwik Ghatak. Chitrakalpa, 1961. Film.
- The Golden Thread [Subarnarekha]*. Dir. Ritwik Ghatak, JJ Films, 1965. Film.
- The Rootless [Chhinnamul]*. Dir. Nemaï Ghosh. 1951. Film.
- Breathless*. Dir. Jean-Luc Godard. Les Films Impéria et al. 1960. Film
- '42 [Beyallish]* Dir. Hemen Gupta. Film Trust of India, 1949. Film.
- Day After Day [Diner Pore Din]* Dir. Jyotirmoy Ray. Lokbani Chitra Pratisthan, 1949. Film
- The Third Man*. Dir. Carol Reed. Carol Reed's Production, 1949. Film
- Rome Open City*. Dir. Roberto Rossellini. Excelsa Film, 1945. Film
- Towards the Light [Udayar Pathe]*. Dir. Bimal Roy. New Theatres, 1944. Film.
- Berlin: Symphony of a City*. Dir. Walter Ruttmann. Deutsche Vereins-Film, 1927. Film
- Blade Runner*. Dir. Ridley Scott. Warner Bros et al, 1982. Film
- Bicycle Thieves*. Dir. Vittorio de Sica. Produzioni De Sica, 1948. Film
- Playtime*. Dir. Jacques Tati. Jolly Film & Specta Films, 1967. Film
- Man with a Movie Camera*. Dir. Dziga Vertov. VUFKU. 1929. Film

## Texts

- Bachelard, Gaston (1969). *The Poetics of Space*. Trans. Maria Jolas. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Bandyopadhyay, Sibaji (2012). *Sibaji Bandyopadhyay Reader*. New Delhi: Worldview Publications.
- Barber, Stephen (2004). *Projected Cities: Cinema and Urban Space*. London: Reaktion Books.
- Bhattacharya, Malini (1979). 'Nagarik: Ritwik Ghatak's First Film.' *Social Scientist* 8.3: 60–3.
- Benjamin, Walter (1999). *The Arcades Project*. Trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Boston, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Biswas, Moinak (2000). 'The Couple and Their Spaces, *Harano Sur* as Melodrama Now.' *Meaning Making in Indian Cinema*. Ed. Ravi Vasudevan. New Delhi: OUP.
- Biswas, Moinak (2007). 'The City and the Real: *Chhinnamul* and the Left Cultural Movement in the 1990s.' *City Flicks: Indian Cinema and the Urban Experience*. Ed. Preben Kaarsholm. Calcutta: Seagull Books. 40–59.
- Bruno, Giuliana (2002). *Atlas of Emotion*. London: Verso.
- Clarke, David, ed. (1997). *The Cinematic City*. London: Routledge.
- Dasgupta, Chidananda (1985). 'Cinema, Marxism, and the Mother Goddess.' *India International Centre Quarterly* 12.3: 249–64.
- de Certeau, Michel (1992). *The Writing of History*. Trans. Tom Conley. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Martin, Jay (1988). 'Scopic Regimes of Modernity.' *Vision and Visuality* Ed. Hal Wallis. Seattle, WA: Bay Press. 3–23.
- Lefebvre, Henry (1991). *The Production of Space*. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. London: Blackwell.
- Mennel, Barbara (2008). *Cities and Cinema*. London: Routledge.
- Nora, Pierre (1989). 'Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*.' Trans. Marc Roudebush. *Representations* 26: 7–24.
- Rajadyyaksha, Ashish (1982). *A Return to the Epic*. Bombay: Screen Unit.
- Rancière, Jacques (2013). *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*. Trans. Zakir Paul. London: Verso.
- O' Donnell, Erin (2011). 'The IPTA on Film: Contesting memory and history in the Bengali theaterscapes of Ritwik Ghatak's *Komal Gandhar* (E Flat, 1961).' *South Asian Cinemas: Widening the Lens*. Eds Sara Dickey and Rajinder Dudrah. London: Routledge. 54–68.
- Sarkar, Bhaskar (2010). *Mourning the Nation: Indian Cinema in the Wake of Partition*. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan.
- Shiel, Mark, and Fitzmaurice, Tony, eds (2011). *Cinema and the City: Film and Urban Societies in a Global Context*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Soja, Edward (1989). *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*. London: Verso.
- Webber, Andrew, and Wilson, Emma, eds (2007). *Cities in Transition: The Moving Image and the Modern Metropolis*. New York, NY: Wallflower Press.

**Sayandeb Chowdhury** is Assistant Professor, School of Liberal Studies, Ambedkar University, Delhi. He is also a PhD Fellow at the Department of Film Studies, Jadavpur University, Calcutta. He was UKNA Research Fellow at the International Institute of Asian Studies, Leiden between April–July 2015. His research and teaching interests are in colonial and postcolonial visual forms, modernism and postmodernism in Europe, literary theory and the idea of the City. He has contributed essays to *Film International*, *Journal of South Asian History and Culture*, *South Asia Review* and to forthcoming books by Amsterdam University Press, Palgrave Macmillan and Karnac Books. E-mail: [sayandeb@aud.ac.in](mailto:sayandeb@aud.ac.in)

---