

Ganga Padma Titas: The River Trilogy of Bengali Cinema

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The nostalgic effect of river, the main life source of Bengal always obsessed the Great Master Ritwik Ghatak to use it as an accolade of life in most of his films. Two of his very famous films *Subarnarekha* (The Golden Line, 1962) and *Titash Ekti Nadir Nam* (A River Called Titash, 1973) were structured on two famous rivers: 'Subarnarekha' in West Bengal and 'Titash' in East Bengal. He also made a documentary *Durbar Gati Padma* (The Turbulent Padma, 1971) on his most favourite river 'Padma'. Ritwik remembered the lost magic of his earlier days with intense nostalgia on this particular river: 'My days were spent on the banks of the Padma, the days of an unruly and wild child. The people on the passenger boats looked like dwellers of some distant planet. The large merchant ships coming from Patna, Bankipore, Monghyr, carried sailors speaking a strange tongue, with a mixture of dialect in it. I saw the fishermen. In the drizzling rain a joyful tune would float in the village air, pulling at one's heartstrings with the sudden gusts of wind. I have rocked in the steamer on the turbulent river after dark, and listened to the rhythmic sound of the engines, the bell of the sareng, the cry of the boatman measuring the depths.'

Ritwik offered his tribute to the 'river' and to his homeland in *Titash Ekti Nadir Nam* where he portrayed life through a fishing community living on the bank of the river 'Titash'. After independence of Bangladesh in 1971, Habibur Rahaman Khan, a young man of his early twenties, a hard-core admirer of Ghatak, invited him to make the film for him at the newly born Nation 'Bangladesh'. Ritwik instantly accepted the invitation and for near about two years he was there to complete his 'Odyssey to River'. Based on the epic novel of the same title by the famous Bengali novelist Advaita Mallabarman, the film reflected the seal of Ghatak's whole approach of filmmaking. It's huge landscape, complicated range of characters, parallel building of events, folk culture helped him to re-search his lost root in East Bengal. He remarked: 'My childhood and my early youth were spent in East Bengal. The memories of those days, the nostalgia maddened me and drew me towards Titash, to make a film on it. The period covered in the novel, Titash, is forty years old, a time I was familiar with Consequently Titash has become a kind of commemoration of the past that I felt behind long ago ...'.

Ghatak's deepest personal account of partition, poverty and disillusionment was portrayed in a most provocative expression in *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (The Cloud-Capped Star, 1960). In the title sequence of *Meghe Dhaka Tara* the transformation between the river and the heroine was presented in a unique

manner. Running water of the river was sparkling like delicately formed twinkling stars. Soft light of the moon reflecting off the river strained across the protagonist Neeta's (magnificently played by Supriya Chowdhury) face in the duskiess of her bedroom suggesting the passing clouds over the night sky. Brilliant reflection of the twinkling stars from the very initial source, the riverbed, not the sky, was surrounding Neeta on her most critical moments when her face was clouded in distress. In another shot later, a train passed across the background overpowering the soundtrack totally with the heavy noise of the running wheels and shrilling whistle when Neeta was sitting with Sanat by the river.

Rajen Tarafdar's *Ganga* (The Ganges, 1959) – an adaptation of the novel by the famous author Samaresh Basu is one of the most successful films based on river. It's a powerful and sensitive statement of the poor fisherman community whose lives are intertwined with the flux of the great river 'Ganga'. Life & struggle of the fishermen, the magnanimous brilliance of their milieu 'Ganga' have sincerely been depicted in the film. The fishermen accept the river as 'our nurturing mother and also our prophet of doom'. In several occasions the film goes beyond the narrative framework. Long and strenuous expedition of the fishermen to their traditional fishing grounds and the sequence preceding this journey down the river consisting of shots capturing the preparation of the trek is a unique dossier of the fishermen's life. Negotiations with the native moneylender, healing of the nets, fixing of the boats, praying rituals by the women with folk song in sound-track is an perfect and honest chronicle of the river and its people. Dinen Gupta's b&w cinematography elegantly portrays the panoramic excellence of the river Ganga and its ever-changing moods. Brilliant close-ups of the silvery 'hilsa' fish, oars plying on the river, the sweat-soaked muscular bodies of the fishermen, the ornaments worn by the women and many other details simply hypnotize the viewers. Sound-track also endorse the perfection of the ambience with the sound of the soft river breeze, haunting call of sea-gull, booming horn of ferry, moaning of the ripples, bang of crashing waves, yowl of the cyclone and so many other accuracies. *Ganga* was awarded a special prize at the International Film Festival, New Delhi, 1960. It was an official entry in the competition section of the Venice International Film Festival 1961.

Set in undivided Bengal before partition in 1947, *Padma Nadir Majhi* (Boatman of the River Padma, 1993) by Gautam Ghosh is based on famous classic by novelist Manik Bandyopadhyay. Here also the story revolves round the life, love, passion, hopes, aspirations, despair, grief and struggle of the boatmen living besides the mighty river 'Padma'. Narrative of the film is structured on the miserable poverty of these circumvented people. Initial episodes narrate the exploitation of these misfortunate people. Fish they catch after tremendous

struggle hardly earns money and even the heartless people frequently take away fishes from them without paying. Here also the boatman says 'Padma gives us a lot, but in return it also takes a lot from us'. Gautam, a cinematographer par excellence, fantastically captures the changing moods of the river, keeping it as the central character of the film. Especially the portrayal of the stormy sequences is an epic on celluloid.

These three films could loosely be considered as the *River Trilogy of Bengali Cinema*. All the three films are based on three famous Bengali novels based on the life & struggle of the people living at the banks of three very famous rivers of undivided Bengal. Interestingly, *Titash Ekti Nadir Nam* was produced by the new-born Bangladesh, i.e. earlier East Bengal, while *Ganga* was an Indian production of West Bengal and the *Padma Nadir Majhi* was an Indo-Bangladesh joint production, made simultaneously in Eastern and Western part of Bengal with the cast & crew from two countries. Though there should not be any comparison between these great works as all of these three films carry the unique signatures of their own masters, still the films have several similarities particularly documenting the life & struggle of the people living with the rivers as an inseparable entity of their own existence.