

Tribute to Buddhadeb Dasgupta
Amrit Gangar

**The Spatial Poesy of Buddhadeb Dasgupta's
 Cinematography: An Inference**



Ākāsa: This is cinema!
 Akashbhora surjo-tara bishwabhora praan...

A scene from Ritwik Ghatak's film *Komal Gandhar* (1961), the question is: could we name a film just by looking at an image of the sky / space, without the face of an actor? Ghatak filled ākāsa with a rekindling urja (energy).

The idea of inheritance is my inference, a hypothesis, an anumāna albeit based on an anubhāva.

Increasingly, cinematography is losing its cosmic *chhanda* (meter), the *laya* (rhythm) and it is getting dangerously subterranean day by day (with the so-called OTT platforms where the fascist market (as defined and controlled by neo-liberal economy credo) gives you no other option of your choice, it cleverly suffocates you to surrender to it, but nevertheless we keep extolling the virtues of democracy! Cinematography is an endangered species constantly threatened by market-led technological obsolescence, and we desperately fathom its history to grab its organically integral sky / ākāsa / space back. Large parts of the cinematographic past has been destroyed or rendered unusable and this process is unstoppable.

Ghatak's cinematographic conscience (his inward eye) often looked up to the ether-eal within the panchamāhābhuta (five great elements). India, through her deeper intuition, had added ether / space as the fifth great element to the four: air, earth, fire and water. The mere thought

of an elemental addition of ether was revolutionary. True cinematography, to me, attempts to carry that legacy of the revolutionary thought forward. It recurs in Ghatak's cinematography almost in a poetic punctuation, and in view, Buddhadeb Dasgupta's cinematography too imbuing space / ākāsa in its conscience, visible and yet intuitive, and in there i feel a continuing sense of inheritance – of space! Does space have a face? Infinite! In its virāta swarūpa, it has the ability to envelope many faces, human and non-human to signify them. [Jaina philosophy comprehends ether quite uniquely – as an element that causes the states of motion and of rest. (*Permanence & Change: Jaina View of Time*, Amrit Gangar, *The Speaking Tree, The Times of India*, 15 May 1999)].



Ākāsa: This is cinema!

In his poetic punctuations, Dasgupta, invites ākāsa to evoke joys and sorrows, hopes and despairs, reassuring his cinematography with its marvelous moments; this is ākāsa from *Uttara* (2000).

These are 'gifts of the infinite' as Rabindranath Tagore wrote a song that Ritwik Ghatak immortalized in his film *Komal Gandhar* (1961), the ākāsa that Buddhadeb Dasgupta evoked with recurrence and resuscitation, filling life (*prāna*) in the void (*shunya*). And all that is the expanse of the *vismaya* (wonder) – the *vismaya vistāra*. Tagore sang -

That the gifts of the infinite are strewn in the dust
Wakens my song in wonder

But

Void is Mind itself, and Mind Itself is Void

as a Chinese saying goes

Buddhadeb Dasgupta: The spatial inheritor of Ritwik Ghatak

Ākāsa keeps returning to both these filmmakers' cinematographic innards, as an enveloping meta-narrative, and to my mind, *ākāsa* (along with *kāla* or *time*) becoming the main dramatis personae. In their figurative cinematographic (the figurative film is the one which uses human actors, the term i borrow from the fine arts) art, Ritwik Ghatak celebrated space in the way that inhabited his characters, e.g. this scene from *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960) as Shankar does his *riyaaz* (practice) of the Hindustani music.

It is the way Ghatak situates the physical volumes of his characters' presences in the spatial expanse of the frame, which is significant; eminence of which, to my mind, is unprecedented in the history of Indian cinema. It, in a way, defies the arrogance of the human-centric world, creating a different spatial gravity. Ghatak was aware of the properties of the lens and hence his employment of the wide angle remains extraordinary. He was a lensing philosopher, i would like to call him; perhaps, another was his disciple, Mani Kaul.



Ākāsa: This is cinema!

Human body in the bottom axis corner leaving the spatial expanse around him enveloping his being, in a non-naturalistic, non-realistic cinematographic immanence; image downloaded from Youtube, cropped; Shankar in *Meghe Dhaka Tara*.

In all of Ghatak's films, *ākāsa* becomes a sort of *ālāp*, a recurring poetic *chhanda* instilling vital energy into his cinematography, it is integral and organic and not just a beautiful prop. The same spatial dynamics you find in the last 180-degree scene of *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, when Nita raises her existential wail to her brother Shankar in Ritwik Ghatak's spatial expanse.

Just to reiterate, it would be interesting to see how Ghatak places the human actor in his spatial distribution in the frame. In this last scene what we see is only Nita's partial head on the bottom axis leaving the *ākāsa* in the rest of the frame. i find such spatial distribution in Dasgupta's films too but instilling different *urja* as his narratives have their own individual *svabhāva* (temperament).

However, looking at and feeling the *ākāsa* / space in Buddhadeb Dasgupta's films, i increasingly feel there is an affinity to Ritwik Ghatak's cinematographic conscience, in its recurrence and resuscitation. For Ghatak, *ākāsa* was *abhed*, uncloven and undivided and that evoked his dream of a unified Bengal. In Dasgupta's cinematography, *ākāsa* too seem to be unifying joys and sorrows into a new poetic spatial expanse, a pastoral landscape!

Essentially and at its core, cinematography's two crucial actors at play are *Space* and *Time*, the human gestural bodies move within them, in their different volumes of bodies and textures of their vocal chords. Jean-Luc Godard would call them *figures*, while Robert Bresson, *human models* that moved from interior to the exterior, while cinematography is essentially the movement from the exterior to the interior.



Spatial dynamics and Ritwik Ghatak's cinematography: from top, clockwise: *Subarnarekha* (The Golden Thread, 1962), *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam* (A River called Titas, 1973), *Ajantrik* (The Pathetic Fallacy, 1958) and *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (The Cloud-Capped Star, 1960), collage by AG; images downloaded from Youtube, cropped. These images are only for illustrating my point of view. For comprehending their spatial significance, it would be advisable to see the respective films in 35mm, the gauge in which they were originally shot.

Almost two decades ago, Buddhadeb Dasgupta and i were in Copenhagen at the invitation of the Danish Film Institute, and i recall our evening conversations about *time* and *space* and he would, with a glow in his eyes, talk about Andrei Tarkovsky and his own increasing inclination to spatialize / temporalize his cinematography, which he was, indeed, already engaged with. It is in this spatial zone i find Ghatak getting enlivened in Dasgupta's cinematography, consciously or unconsciously. Dasgupta was also worried about the role of capital (money) in filmmaking and the returns with which the producer could be repaid.

Ideally, i would dream of a *sahridaya* (kindred heart) or even a *rasika* (connoisseur) to recognize a film just by looking at its *ākāsa*, the sky, the empty space with no identifiable actor's presence on screen. Like perhaps you recognize a vocalist (without actually seeing her or him) the moment you hear her / him launching her *alaap*.

This reminds me of an experience. Some years ago, i was invited by the National Centre for the Performing Arts (NCPA) in Mumbai to present a seven-month long (one every month) long programme around my concept of *Cinema of Prayoga* which i had titled *Saat Sarjak. Saat Samvaad*. (Seven Creators. Seven Dialogues.). One month i was presenting Kumar Shahani's film *Birah Bharyo Ghar Aangan Kone* (The Bamboo Flute, 2000) at the Little Theatre, when Shahani was also present.

At one scene in the film, looking at a beautiful, evocative pan of the camera (by K.K. Mahajan), a young girl sitting beside me responded to it expansively, exclaiming loudly "kya baat hai" as if she was responding to a *taan* in a musical composition. She was instantaneously intuitive, i thought, looking at her exalted face in the darkness of the Little Theatre. The question is could we have such *sahridaya* for films too? Or in our context, how could *space* become such a dynamic force in cinematography? i wish Buddha was alive to enlighten us with his answers with a glow in his eyes. (All filmmakers were present during their respective session, including Mani Kaul).



Spatial dynamics and Buddhadeb Dasgupta's cinematography: from top, clockwise: *Lal Darja* (The Red Door, 1997), *Mondo Meyer Upakhyam* (A Tale of a Naughty Girl, 2002), *Bagh Bahadur* (The Tiger Dancer, 1989), *Tope* (The Bait, 2016); collage by AG; images downloaded from Youtube, cropped (originally in color) These images are only for illustrating my point of view. For comprehending their spatial significance, it would be advisable to see the films in 35mm, the gauge in which they were originally shot.

In his cinematographic engagement, Dasgupta constantly and consciously emancipated space, the *lila* of enslavement and emancipation manifests itself from *Dooratva* (1981) on to *Charachar* (1994). The emancipation of *space* forms the significant dynamics of Dasgupta's cinematography, to my mind.



Emancipation of space becoming dynamic in Dasgupta's cinematographic oeuvre, images downloaded from Youtube, cropped; collage AG.

Vāmana dwarf and his Virāta dream

Maybe, in *Uttara*, Dasgupta's dwarf was aware of the mythical story of Lord Vishnu getting reincarnated as Vāmana Avatāra to protect Indra's kingdom. This was the first *avatāra* of Lord Vishnu in a human form, a dwarf priest. Vishnu in this *avatāra* was known as Vāmana because he was dwarf in form at the beginning; he was known as Trivikrama because he was the one who had conquered the three worlds, Earth, Upper worlds and Nether worlds. He grew to be a gigantic while suppressing the King Bali and conquered the Universe with just three paces of his foot. This three-world concept, to my mind, is so much couched in a vertical space imagination. The dreamscape of Dasgupta's films had its own mystery as the *ākasa* that he evoked so much in its poesy, creating its own utopic *lilā*!



Such spatial foregrounding and backgrounding, creating a certain dooratva-in-dreams, the vāmana (dwarf) in *Uttara*, evoking his own utopia, in the vertical normal space that he finds engaged with, looking up. It is in this pastoral space breathe both real and the magical; image downloaded from Youtube, cropped (originally in colour). This image is only for illustrating my point of view. For comprehending its spatial significance, it would be advisable to see the film in 35mm, the gauge in which they were originally shot.

What remains is the sense of *vismaya*, the wonder and Tagore would sing again through Rishi in Ghatak's *Komal Gandhar*:

জানার মাঝে অজানারে করেছি সন্ধান,
বিস্ময়ে তাই জাগে আমার গান।।

The truth that exceeds all knowledge
Which fills my heart with wonder and I sing.

[Tagore's translation, *Geetiban*, the song was written in 1924]

Epilogue:

The idealistic, sacrificial space shrinking, degenerating: In search of Neelkanth Bagchi

As it seems, the transformation process was swift, just in six years, from 1974, Ghatak's *Jukti Takko Aar Gappo* to Dasgupta's *Grihajuddha* in 1982, space apparently shrunk from an open forest to the city's narrow lane, turning more grotesque.

Where have those drunken, idealist spaces gone? Innocent Neelkanth Bagchi (Ritwik Ghatak) was shot dead not by the young idealist Naxalite boys but by the army man's bullet. Death lurked in those lush forests away from the city, those boulders under the open skies turned into the city's narrow brick lanes. Idealism turned increasingly corrupt and self-centered. It is the woman who finally fills the despairing space with hope. Nirupama of Dasgupta's *Grihajuddha* was as *nirupam* (incomparable) as Durga, Neelkantha (blue-necked Siva)'s spouse in Ritwik Ghatak's *Jukti Takko Aar Gappo*! The cinematographic *space* is waiting to be emancipated, where are you Buddha?



Death lurks between boulders and bricks, between shrinking spaces
Scenes from Ritwik Ghatak's film *Jukti Takko Aar Gappo* (Reason, Debate and a Story, 1974) and Buddhadeb Dasgupta's *Grihajuddha* (Crossroads, 1982); collage by AG, images downloaded from Youtube, cropped.

Notes: Inference as *anumāna*, as one of the *pramānas* or sources of valid knowledge. *Anumāna* employs observation, previous truths and reason to reach a new conclusion or truth. Interestingly, Jainism also recognizes memory as *pramāna*. The Jainas accept that *pramana* is that valid knowledge which illumines itself as well as others, like the sun does. It maintains that the sensuous *pratyaksha* is really *paroksha* or that the direct perception is actually indirect. (*Inner Light of the Lamp of Knowledge*, Amrit Gangar, *The Speaking Tree*, *The Times of India*, 6 April 2000)

The term ‘cinematography’ not to be confused with the work of a cameraman but in a Bressonian sense; ‘cinematography’ for Robert Bresson had the special meaning of creative filmmaking, which thoroughly exploited the nature of film as such. (*Notes on Cinematography*, originally published by Gallimard in 1975, translated from French into English by Jonathan Griffin, published by Urizen Books, New York)

Saata Sarjak, *Saat Samvaad*, the *Cinema of Prayoga* programme at the NCPA, Mumbai, DNA, 30 May 2008, <https://www.dnaindia.com/lifestyle/salon-a-reel-experiment-1167496>

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