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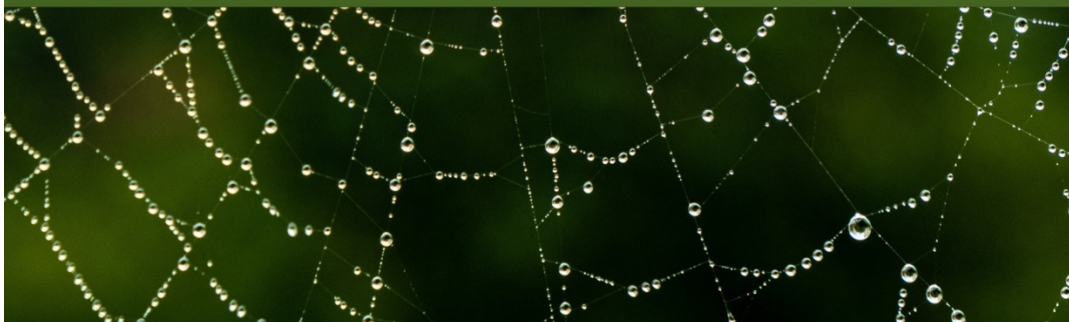
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Rivers as the Site of Fear: Flood and Drought Through the Lens of Ritwik Ghatak's *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam*

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Abstract

India and Bangladesh since the very advent of their formation have been known to be heavily dependent on their rivers for resources of livelihood. The rivers, of both East and West Bengal are often addressed as 'mother', providing for everything necessary to live on. At times however, these very rivers acquire frightful shape wreaking havoc on and causing absolute jeopardy to the lives of the people depending on them. This frightful state of the rivers may occur both in forms of flood as well as drying up of river beds, causing drought. Bengal has been through some of the most severe droughts in history and in this paper, I shall try to look back at the catastrophes that they were. In this context, I would also like to discuss Ritwik Ghatak's film *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam (A River Called Titas)* for its portrayal of people's dependence on the river with their fates tied up with that of the river. Ghatak, in his movie, uses heavy symbolism to denote the role the river played in the characters' lives and how it influenced the sustenance of civilization around it.

Keywords: Disaster, fear, Ritwik Ghatak, River Titas

Bengal, both east and west, have been almost entirely dependent on their rivers for their livelihood. So deep has been the impact of the rivers on the lives of the people in these regions that Bengal prides itself in being called 'nadimatrik,' meaning, "a land that is cradled by the rivers as a mother." It is the abundance of water that the rivers carry, along with the rich alluvium tract and the bright sunlight that rendered Bengal ecologically productive and agriculturally prosperous. The Ganga-Brahmaputra-Meghna river system constitutes an intricate drainage network which is one of the most dynamic hydro-geomorphological units of the world. The rivers often moves to and fro in this vast alluvium tract, creating new ridges and waterways. This dynamism naturally causes destruction and devastation. The Ganga, in Bangladesh, in fact, changes its course so frequently that it is called 'Kirtinasha,' meaning "the destroyer of creations." This phenomenon of avulsion of the rivers causes catastrophic floods submerging hundreds of acres of land—destroying thousands of lives. Almost every monsoon, the water limit exceeds critical level. Vast acres of agricultural land along with villages and colonies are inundated and the local embankments prove to be little effective in preventing them. The rivers of Bengal, therefore, impact the lives of its people in immensely diverse ways.

Ritwik Ghatak's 1973 film *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam*, focuses on river Titas¹, a tributary of river Meghna, and narrates how it creates this impact on the lives of the fisher community inhabiting its banks. Ghatak seems to echo the idea of R. Michael Fisher, who in his essay,

“Ecocriticism, Ecophobia and Indigenous Criticism”, suggests that humans, in the contemporary world, share a “conflictual love-hate” relationship with the “natural” or the “wild”. He referred to Simon C. Estok in pointing out that the fear of Nature has been present in human history for a very long time which influences the relationship we share with Nature.

This conflict of perception towards the river emerges effectively in Ghatak’s portrayal of the fisher community and their relationship with the river as it induces a fear among the people of the fisher community who perceive the river as a formidable force of nature; its ways are arbitrary. Humans are subject to its whims and can only accept what the rivers bestow on them—prosperity or destruction. The havoc caused by the rivers has become a part of the lives of the communities on the banks who have hence learnt to live with the fear and anxiety of the frequently raging fluvial forces.

While the abundance of water in the rivers brings about destruction through flood, drying up of the rivers probably causes greater calamity. Scarcity of water in place of bulging tides strip people who are depended on the rivers for their resources of their chief occupation, their identity and wipe out entire civilizations. It therefore, becomes a figure of both reverence because the river provides them with their livelihood and dread, because it can bring about destruction at any moment. Ghatak also uses the river metaphorically to depict degenerating human relationships and the power politics that gradually seep into the lives of people. They generate fear and uncertainty as much as the wild untamed river does which hence becomes the appropriate metaphor for their portrayal. The river also becomes a symbol of the wretched subaltern life that especially the women are subjected to. In a way, therefore, the aspect of ecofeminism can also be traced in Ghatak’s brilliant method of storytelling. Titas becomes a character in the story interacting with and directly acting upon the fates of the people.

Ghatak’s film is one of the earliest examples of hyperlink cinema where the style of storytelling follows an unconventional pattern. It is an epic style of narrative where several characters with seemingly unrelated stories appear within the narrative, crudely hopping from the story of one character to another. The only factor that unites the characters throughout the film is the river Titas, to which all their fates are tied. The film, based on the autobiographical novel by Bangladeshi author Advaita Malla Barman, depicts the tale of the Malo tribe living on the bank of the River Titas in Brahmanbaria, Bangladesh. The film begins with Kishor, a young fisherman who embarks on a fishing trip with his friend Subol. During their short visit to another village, Kishor is married off to Rajar Jhi. The first incident of horror happens on the following day when Kishor and Rajar Jhi leave for the former’s home and Rajar Jhi is abducted by bandits on the way. She escapes, but they are separated and Kishor, believing that his wife is killed, loses his sanity.

Although the film does not feature the Sunderbans, one of the largest deltaic forests in Asia formed by the confluence of Ganga, Brahmaputra and Meghna, the short yet significant appearance of the rural pirates point us towards the same. The Sunderbans is a curious space. It is a space where earth submerges into and re-emerges from the water, where numerous rivers intermingle and meet the sea. The wilderness is in constant conflict with inhabited areas. Such places beget their own beings. The water pirates are a product of this conflicted space. The tales of these pirates are legendary and told throughout these regions, from Hingalganj in the east to Satjelia in the west. They used to be armed with daggers, knives and later even guns. They would take fishers hostage

and capture their boats along with everything that they had procured—fishes, crabs, stocks of honey and wood. The pirates were mysterious men and were shrouded with mythical tales. The local people claimed that they came from the other side of the borders as if to completely dissociate themselves from these bandits. They were persons of an alien kind. Yet, attacks by these pirates were common for the fishers of the Sunderbans who perceived them as matter-of-fact occurrences. The pirates treated their captives whimsically; at times they would give in to their pleadings and let them go after looting them and at times kill them mercilessly. Consequently, they created an ambience of fear and trauma in the minds of the local people who shared a strange relationship with them.

The appearance of the pirates thus marks the first incident in the film that reveals that river Titas that is so endearing to the villagers also contains certain factors that terrifies them and puts their lives in jeopardy. Although, it is understandable that it is not actually the river that is harming the people, the identity of the pirates can hardly be separated from it and hence they become an inevitable part of the river. The “love-hate” relationship of the Malos with the river is hence established where they are forced to live in conformity to fear, intimidation and mistrust, as Fisher states, while staying connected to the river.

In Ghatak’s film, the pirates appear for a glimpse but their action turns the trail of the story. Kishor assumes that he shall not see his newly married wife ever again; a woman whose face he could barely recall because one fleeting night of intimacy is all they had had. He returns to his village a deranged man living amidst but secluded from society. Parallel to this, runs the tale of Basanti, the second protagonist of the film, who has also lost her husband to the sea. Basanti, who, as a child, yearned to be married to Kishor when she grew up, was married off to Subol instead, because Kishor had lost his sanity. But Subol, also a fisherman, died the day following their marriage. It is unclear as to what caused his death, but the common assumption follows that he drowned in the water of Titas. Basanti, therefore, wanders through the woods adjacent to the river silently pining for her loss. The river thus becomes an agent of sundering and loss for the people of the Malo community.

“...it is for the ones who watch the film to comprehend the undertone of fear.”

Their helpless dependence on the river hence acts in their disfavour. While the characters are all deeply connected with the river and cannot survive without its resources, a constant ominous fear that it destroys lives as much as it provides for runs undercurrent to the narrative. The fear and distress stem out from the loss of agency and control to Nature. The Malos are recurrently made aware of their vulnerability and helplessness to the environment they dwell in that is vast and formidable. They have absolutely no power over it, whereas the river, the entire ecology around them controls their lives thoroughly.

The inhabitants of the bank of Titas, nevertheless, do not consciously perceive the river as fearful or malicious. The dangers it poses have become a part of their fate, hence, reminding us of Augustine’s notion that nature can never be evil, because evil is a human construct, one relative to our imagination. Instead, it is for the ones who watch the film to comprehend the undertone of fear. Ghatak, in this end, artfully situates every event of devastation in his film somewhere on the

bank of the river. Rajar Jhi meets with her long lost husband years later by the bank of the river, but neither of them recognises each other. While Rajar Jhi still pines for her husband, the deranged Kishor is however, once again able to gather her affection. There is, however, hardly any room for romance in Ghatak's world. Just as we are drawn into believing that their relationship might at last subsist into happiness, Ghatak shatters the illusion. Kishor is beaten to death by a mob of angry men for touching Rajar Jhi in public. Malla Barman's narrative reaches the heights of irony with this scene where the mob beats up Kishor for touching a woman who is not his wife while being unaware that Rajar Jhi is actually Kishor's wife. In the moment prior to his death, Kishor is able to recognise Rajar Jhi, his young wife whom he had lost to the river pirates, years ago. Losing her husband for the second time, Rajar Jhi dies next to him. The breath-taking poignancy of the scene reverberates through our minds as the two lie dead on the bank of the river, its mellow waves touching their lifeless bodies. The large frame with a vast sky and the expansive river spread around them indicating a nonchalant and ruthless nature indifferent of the people's fate.

It is impossible to ignore Titas whose passive presence prevails at the backdrop of this catastrophe since the river bank is virtually the only place brimming with public presence at all time. John Burroughs in his article, "Is Nature Cruel?" reflects upon this matter and arrives at the conclusion that "Nature as seen in animal life is only *sanguinary*, but only man is *cruel*." (Burroughs 559). He further states that nature "in the action of her mechanical and chemical forces as they go their way about us, is apparently as indifferent to man as to all other forms of life" (Burroughs 560) and it is this indifference that Ghatak captures through his lens. It is Nature's seeming indifference to life which causes us to charge her with cruelty. Burroughs elaborates on this idea:

Our minds can take in but a fraction of the total scheme of things, and what we do take in we make a personal application of to ourselves. We humanise when we should generalise. The love of the Eternal for man appears not to be that of a father for his son; or of a mother for her child; it is more like that of a general for his army; he is going to lead that army through toil, agony and death, but he is going to lead it to victory. (561)

This indifference that Burroughs talks about, acts in contrary to our expectation of our environment. Nature functions according to its own course that is unaffected by our individual troubles and despairs. However, our embittered hearts seek consolation and the nonchalant flow around us instigates a certain hatred of Nature. Since ecophobia grows from an irrational hatred of nature, it becomes clear why the vast sky and the river propel an uncanny sense in our mind. As audience, we are made aware of the triviality of our lives. The unperturbed course of nature around us irrationally vexes us.

The river's association with the people dwelling on its bank is so personal that it becomes difficult to visualize it on a larger and a rather general level. Malla Barman humanises Titas in his tale because it is a tale of its relation with the people of the Malo community; their per diem life intricately associated with it. Ghatak, through his rendition, refuses to let us forget of the broader scheme of nature as she silently watches the Malos live, die and go mad on the whelmed up waves of Titas.

Simon C. Estok in his essay “Theorizing in a Space of Ambivalent Openness: Ecocriticism and Ecophobia,” pointed out that “historically things have been thought to be right when they have allowed us to flourish and wrong when they have hindered, threatened, or hurt us” (7). This is exactly what Ghatak portrays in his film. The Malos’ dependence on Titas and its resources appear perfectly wanted, but the disruption caused by the same river in their lives seems extraordinary. It seems unfair that they have to suffer through such perils which causes us, as the audience, to vilify nature.

Yet, Estok’s view does not completely correspond to how people respond to the calamities of the river in Bengal. As discussed already, people of Bengal have always been subjected to destructions propelled by the rivers and accepted them. Hence, the presence of the crowd on the river bank becomes significant. The miseries brought about by natural forces are received with compliance. Miseries inflicted by humans are the ones that cause much vexation. It is the actions of the people within the community and outside that ultimately represent cruelty and malevolence in various ways that give rise to the fear of destruction. These destructions and perils are mostly inflicted on women and here is where Ghatak blends in the aspects of ecofeminism in his film through this approach because rivers in Bengal are traditionally conceived as feminine, thus putting the fate of Titas in sync with the shattered fate of the women of the Malo tribe.

Rivers in India are as abused as the women are. Ghatak highlights the abuse of women and the river subsequently suffers accretion and death. The interconnection of nature and women is apparent. As ecofeminism argues, in order to realize the causes of the destruction of nature the oppression and subordination of women is to be realized because the image of a society is also the image of the nature surrounding it. The film begins with Ramproshad, an elderly fisherman, who watches a young Basanti and utters that both Basanti and Titas are in their youth now and soon they will decay as nothing stays the same forever. This actually turns out right. Although the Malo tribe seems to be mostly governed by women, it is later revealed that it is the upper-class Thakurs who dominate the villagers. The women are also dominated within the tribe by a patriarchal system. The women are deprived of several fundamental rights. Rajar Jhi could not go in search of her husband or his village out of the fear of ignominy because she was abducted by pirates. While she verbally articulates her sexual desires to Basanti (who is also forced to lead a celibate life), the forceful repression of her urges become evident. Basanti, an otherwise headstrong woman, is also denied reproductive rights because of her widowhood. She craves for a child throughout her life and desperately tries to find a sense of motherhood in caring for Ananta, Rajar Jhi’s son. The gradual yet subsequent accretion of the river that happens as the women face humiliation symbolically relates the river with the women (Basanti and Rajar Jhi). The deprivation and humiliation of the women are apparent and shown in the film, but the ecological degradation of the most important aspect of the place—Titas—goes unnoticed by the people until it is too late.

Ghatak takes a considerable length of the reel-time to depict the gradual degradation of the society. The Malo community, despite all its flaws, was still an accommodating and harmonious society in the beginning. The people were kind and a natural sense of amity flowed among everyone. As the plot advances, the innocent cordiality of the people is polluted by the arrival of the Thakurs and their exploitative means who begin to collect loans from the villagers. The people of the tribe were always destitute, struggling hard to meet their ends, but there was peace. Gradually, they decline into a quarrelsome, chaotic and violent lot. As times, it become harder and

poverty escalates; they are unable to identify the root of the problem instead become increasingly unsympathetic to each other. Intolerance and hostility seep in making the previously sympathetic souls belligerent. Ananta is loathed by Basanti's family for being a burden on them and Basanti drives Ananta away from her home. Parallely, the river starts to decay and degrade. This degradation of the river also goes unnoticed by the villagers until it is too late. Thus the moral degradation of the Malos symbolically presents the natural destruction resulting from human exploitation of the nature.

“The defilement of the ecology of Bengal was a part of the same colonial programme.”

The themes of separation—of being uprooted and alienated from one's original homeland is recurrent in Ghatak's cinema. The Partition of Bengal in 1947 had such a profound effect on him that he could never really abandon it as the pivotal theme of his films. Although *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam* does not directly deal with the Partition, the themes of alienation and bereavement are constant. The destruction of ecology in semblance with the disintegration of communal harmony wherein the ever-familiar habitat of one's life changes drastically also seems to be the reflection of the same psychological trauma that Ghatak suffered through the Partition. He captures this sense of alienation and helplessness in *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam* as well. It is reflected in the film through a fear of changing surroundings. The ecophobia emerges from the horror of having to lose all the natural resources that the people knew as their own and being forced to vacate their own lands. The entire ecology they were so thoroughly accustomed to changes which brings about an alarming sense of fright, distress and agony.

The Partition was a colonial gift to the Indian sub-continent that ruined millions of lives on both sides of the newly imposed border. As a massive exodus of people followed from the Eastern to Western Bengal and vice versa, the horror of being uprooted from one's own country and having to think of it as a foreign land devastated the masses. The railway tracks that were once viewed as a symbol of union between loved ones now became the symbol of severance. The defilement of the ecology of Bengal was a part of the same colonial programme.

The colonial programmes of modernity that sought to make the administration simpler to govern and promised an easier life for us, in fact, worked to destroy our ecology. The reason might be that the widely diverse and intense ecological design of this country was beyond the capacity of foreign powers to understand. Kalyan Rudra in his book, *Rivers of Ganga-Brahmaputra-Meghna Delta* explains this predicament that the colonial rule engendered. The more they tried to control it, the more perilous situations emerged. The aim was to control the destruction caused by the floods every year in the adjoining plains of the river that overflowed during the monsoon. The colonial river management plan, however, propelled serious damage. The colonial venture to control their effusion only resulted in severe damage of the drainage tracts and caused the many channels to decay. The plan to manage them with earthen embankments aggravated the peril. The construction of linear embankments to prevent regular floods proved to be futile and breaches in the embankments became usual. The environmental jeopardy caused due to these embankments were manifold but most significantly, the agricultural lands became deprived of the fertilizing silts. Conditions were further aggravated when roads and railway tracks were built on these embankments so that communication remained uninterrupted even during the floods. They dried

up the water channels which eventually turned into swamps, breeding malarial mosquitoes. Malaria and several other diseases spread following the tracks of railway and the highways. These railway tracks and highway roads were often built on narrow culverts and ran across the river ways in both north and south Bengal which created congestions in the drainage systems and consequently degraded the agricultural productivity of the lands. The rivers and canals connected to them suffered accretion and several of them dried up entirely. Quite evidently, it affected agriculture and fishing across Bengal. People lost their only source of income and more importantly, they silently watched their precious environment, full of rich assets gradually die.

In *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam* as well, the people of the Malo clan have to migrate to other places in search for livelihood. The story of migration, therefore, does not end bringing a shadow of the horror of Partition. The story of the Malo community, hence, can be viewed as a microcosmic version of the story of the refugees of Partition who had to migrate to foreign lands, leaving behind their own country in search of home and identity. Like the refugees of Partition, the Malos lose their identities because it was the water of Titas that provided them with the same. Now that it is gone, they find themselves strangers in their own village. In fact, for the people of Bengal, the rivers provide a significant part of their identity. Naturally, their omnipresence seeped into the art of the region as well. Everything from myths and legends; from poetry to paintings, Bengal carries the presence of its rivers. In the words of Advaita Malla Barman as quoted by Parineeta Dandekar in her article for South Asia Network on Dams, Rivers and People titled “Titas Ekti Nadir Naam: Swan Song of a River”:

The bosom of Bengal is draped with rivers and their tributaries, twisted and intertwined with tangled locks, streaked with white foamy waves. The verdant land is like a maiden in the embrace of an ancient sage, held to its immense chest, locked in his wet kiss, his dense hair and beards tumbling in sinuous complexity over her youthful body and flowing on beyond. All these tangled grey locks are river. (Dandekar)

This level of intimacy with the rivers is habitual for the people of Bengal because of their perpetual presence and influence in their lives. This influence is directly reflected in the cultural fabric of the region as well.

An estimated number of seventy-one novels have been written concentrating on the rivers of Bengal and Bangladesh. Bangladesh’s obsession with rivers can also be fathomed from the number of “riverine” movies produced there, with *Chitra Nodir Pare* (On the banks of River Chitra), *Nodir Naam Madhumati* (River’s Name is Madhumati) and *Dhire Bohe Meghna* (Quiet flows Meghna) to name a few.

“...historical consciousness and vision combined [and marked]...an epoch in Indian filmmaking.”

Ghatak’s movie stands out in its postcolonial approach of storytelling and rendition of ecological catastrophe. He creates a sharp contrast in the landscape of the film which turns into a desert towards the end. While the village of the Malos on the bank of Titas had a perpetually moist

climate from the beginning, it gradually turn dry, emerges into a desert and the river vanishes away. The people watch in terror, despair and confusion as the water of the river diminishes and disappears at the horizon. As intense scarcity of water and food takes over, the ones who can fly to other places leave the village. The most destitute ones, including Basanti are left behind to starve and perish. The final ground of fear thus takes shape not because of the river's presence in the Malos's lives but because of its absence that vanquishes the last hope of life for them.

This throttling of rivers and canals still continue and along with that continues the extinction of the fisherfolks of India. Each time a dam comes up, the conditions turn detrimental for the people who have lived with the rivers for hundreds of years. Riverine fish species are also declining rapidly which many of them suffering complete collapse. Regions that once brimmed with fishes are now forced to import them from other states. The fishers oppose, protest and finally give up. They are soon forgotten. A fragment of their tales of deprivation is accounted in Ghatak's film.

Ghatak, thus, through his unique style of narrative sets forth an ecocriticism which was unprecedented in Indian cinema. Mani Kaul, in his 2016 interview with Chanel 4 TV called it an epic form of storytelling where the narrative is thin and spread out. At every stage it develops and acquires a wider perspective. Indeed, Ghatak's chief motive behind making this movie was the depiction of the Malo life; their struggle for existence through various odds. It might be difficult to follow the narrative at times but on looking discreetly, the shots of boats, the rain, nature and archetypes of mother, all add up to the representation of the different facets of the Malos' lives.

Ghatak's historical consciousness and vision combined with an exceptionally complex style of presentation marked an epoch in Indian filmmaking. His eco-critical sensibility too, perhaps emerged from the same concern of the troubles and sorrows of the people who were displaced from their homeland. The aspects of the river that bring about disaster and propel fear among the villagers of Brahmanbaria come in various shapes and forms. While the river pirates separates the lovers forever, the vast, lush nature around them remain nonchalant and indifferent to their shattered fates. Although the Malos share an almost intimate and cherished relationship with the river, the formidability of the vast environment haunts them with its silent presence at all times. The accretion and slow death of Titas is ignored by the people until there is nothing left to be done. The horror of having to witness a place nurtured by a river turn into a desert has to be suffered by the Malos as they perish on its swathe. Ghatak's dissent against the partition of Bengal along with the dread and affliction caused by it is captured by him, wrapped in the metaphor of environmental disaster. His film, thus, makes us aware of a lost time and a way of life that helps us comprehend our history better. People of Bengal have faced adverse conditions and atrocities both in the forms of natural disasters and political distress. Ghatak's narrative points towards a legacy of dissent and resilience in the face of catastrophes along with the hope of redemption and rejuvenation. Like the swaying field of rice plants that Basanti hallucinates at the end, the ecosphere as well as the subaltern communities shall keep envisioning a bright future devoid of conflicts and desolation.

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Notes

¹ Titas originates in the hills of Tripura and flows through Bangladesh as one of its trans-boundary rivers. It falls into the Meghna at the south of Ashugang.
