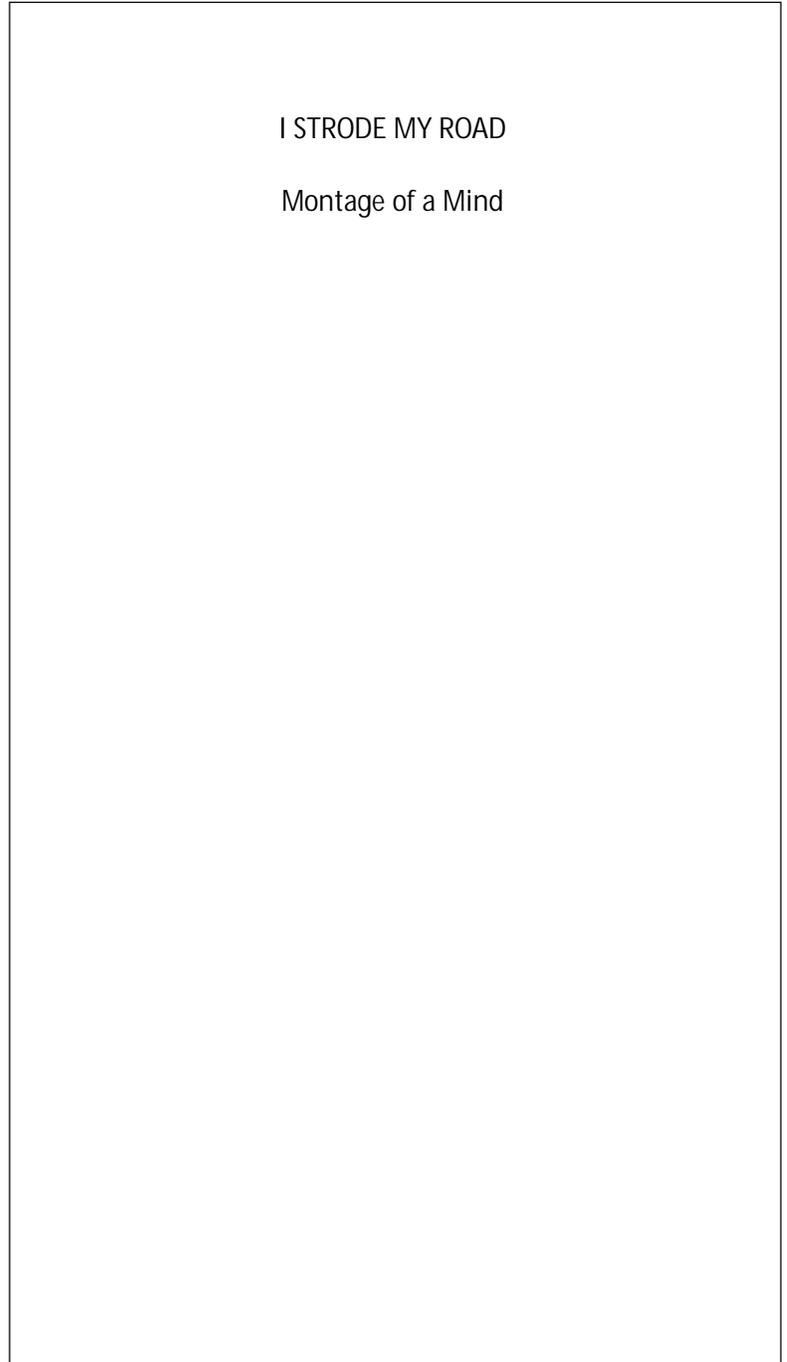


I STRODE MY ROAD

Montage of a Mind





RITWIKKUMAR GHATAK

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Translated by
Sudipto Chakraborty

Monfakira
www.monfakira.com

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I STRODE MY ROAD: Montage of A Mind
Translated by Sudipto Chakraborty
First published: November 2013
ISBN: 978-93-80542-53-9
Published by Monfakira
2283 Nayabad, House 8 Lane 1 Nabodit,
Mukundapur, Kolkata 700 099
at College Street Boipara: 16 Kanai Dhar Lane, Kolkata 700 012
& 29/3 Sreegpoal Mullick Lane, Kolkata 700 012
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website: www.monfakira.com
blogspot: <http://monfakira.blogspot.com>
find us on facebook:
<https://www.facebook.com/monfakira2013/>
on Google+: plus.google.com/u/0/111119619973026469315/posts
INR 195.00

from the Publisher

This montage of a mind has been compiled and composed as a collage of words collected from as many as fifteen interviews of Ritwik Ghatak. Arranged under topics, correlated with phases of his life and career, here are exclusively his words, the essential nectar of his talks.

Of course this does not boast of containing the entire data, all life events or the full range of feelings of the man; it contains precisely the extent documented in those particular extempore interviews. For example, here are some discussions about Nagarik and Bari Theke Paliye, but really nothing much on Ajantrik, Subarna-rekha, Komal Gandhar or Meghe Dhaka Tara. Again this contains much on Titas Ekti Nodir Naam and Jukti Takko aar Gappo. To fill up such blanks the reader has to have recourse to reading additional literature on Ritwik and by Ritwik. It is a matter of good luck that those invaluable materials are prolific and available too.

Here we have utilized interviews published only in Bengali. Those interviews were once published in Chalacchitra (Sept.-Oct. 1962/ 1965), Movie Montage (Vol. 1 Issue 2, 1967, Interviewer Suneet Sengupta), Dhvani (Vol. 3 Issue 47, Feb. 1969, Interviewer Jagat Bandyopadhyay), Abhinay (May 1970, Interviewer Ajay Basu), Antarjatic Angik (1970-71, Interviewer Ajay Basu), Chitrabhash (July 1970), Chitrapat (Issue 10, 1973, Interviewer Tulu Das), Chitrabeekshan (Aug. 1973/ Aug.-Sept. 1974, Interviewer Sadhan Chakraborty, Deepak De & others) Dhruvadi (April 1977, Interviewer Mohammad Khusro), Jalim Singh-er Journal (1976-77, Interviewer Prabir Sen),

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Swarbarna (1976, Interviewer Basab Dasgupta), F (March 1986, Interviewer Vijay Sony and Netra Singh Rawat, trans. to Bangla by Somen Ghosh) and the Sharadiya Amrita (1967, Interviewer Satyabrata De).

Eighteen uncompiled interviews, three of those in English, and the writings of twentyone people on Ritwik, was published around a decade back under the name of Sakshat Ritwik. That book is no longer available. Only the interviews contained therein were afterwards seen as an English version of it, which too has been exhausted long ago. This book is being published not as a mere reiteration of those but as a rather fresh account.

This collage of words is dedicated to all those who had taken those interviews of their own accord and had published the same in various journals.

Some of the lost material could once be found through the graciousness of Ritwik Memorial Library, Natyashodh Sansthan and the Little Magazine Library, to whom goes our sincere gratitude.

In fact Ritwik is our Guru. It is our duty to hear, retain and perpetuate the teachings of the Guru. This work, and work of this nature, germinate recurringly out of that sense of duty.

Translator's take

Ritwik Kumar Ghatak is much more than what we percieve him to be. An accomplished Sarod player, he never performed in public; a deeply and widely read intellectual, he never bragged about his academic depth, a veritable scholar of world cinema, he hardly bothered to gather his thoughts in writing; a discerning connoisseur and compassionate curator of world music, he never boasted of his acumen; a born romantic, he never expressed the true splendour or the whole gamut of his emotions; a highly skilled cine technician, he never flaunted his faculty, and finally as an obstinate lover of humanity, he never paraded void dramatics. He was even more, a gifted actor, a magnetic teacher and an attractive talker. Ritwik, as a phenomenal comet of a talent, flashed past across our sullen social sky. He passed away before we could perceive him, and he remained underdiscussed because we cringe to respect the prodigal son.

As we permeate the crust and delve deeper into the man, we marvel at the volcano that broils within. It is a gorgeous display of dazzling talent, studded with sweeping wisdom rising from values and tradition, extending into the future vision of cinema. Honesty, unrest, earnestness and creative vigour dance in unison within the mind of this fiery genius.

It was a pity that our regimented society failed to honour his brilliant potency in true measure while he was alive and willing to serve. We had also failed to recognize the lofty level of utopian moral dream in the mind of this haywire genius. We presume that the

intense inferno raving within had finally scorched him down in the absence of its true fuel which the society denied to offer him.

Monfakira here does the laudable work of compiling some of Ritwik's candid interviews in his inimitable passionate and piercing style. Through the brilliance of his reckless dialogue, the core message of the maestro shines forth as an unwavering love for mankind and a determined diligence to urge the society for a change to the better. We are enthralled by the exposure and experience of the man, by his unflickering attachment to classic goodness amid passing decadence, by his brazen preference for his own truth, by the width of his scholarship and depth of his wisdom, and by the softness of his feelings and the firmness of his commitment. He is battered but not bitter, he is deprived but not depressed; a classic elegance finally radiates in diehard optimism through his cutting observations on life and cinema. We gratefully collect and preserve the gems and jewels he carelessly throw at us— the gist of his quest of life, the nectar distilled from the venom he handled in and out. We feel his persona is even larger than his remarkable art, his own life an epic tragedy reminding us of van Gogh.

And thus this thin volume contributes thickly to the body of effort to understand and appreciate the unexplored treasures of the talent named Ritwik Kumar Ghatak.

This book elevates his position in our minds one more big notch higher.

Sudipto Chakraborty

March 2013, Ranchi

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I saw my first sunrise in Dhaka.

My father, Roybahadur Sureshchandra Ghatak, the District Magistrate, was at his thumping prime then. My life is influenced by my childhood and a great lot so. My art would endorse it. Though I had to leave East Bengal very early, the memories remained deeply dug into my mind. Magnanimous open fields, oceans of golden paddy, an azure sky above and the greatest of all, the vast stretch of the river Padma— I am still in the stupor of the thought of these all. East Bengal is the origin of my love for the entire Bengal. Lot many a Bengalee like me were uprooted due to the deceitful division of the country at a later date to satiate some people's greed. This is an unshakeable grief. My art is based on that.

My first lessons were taken at the Mission School of Mymensingh. Later I studied in Ballygunge Government School in Calcutta from class three till Matriculation. Then I shifted to Rajshahi College with science. It proved a wrong choice, so I moved over to Arts and finally graduated with a BA from Berhampore Krishnath College. Here also my luck clicked and it was a first class honours that I pulled. Next was taking up an MA course in the Calcutta University but I quit just before the finals to enter the Communist Party. Forsaken studies to embrace party work.

In the beginning I used to write, I mean literature. Prose and poetry was thereafter found too remote, too inadequate to affect people sufficiently. So I went on

to the theatre stage. The ambition was to instigate thousands towards immediate reaction through direct display. Later I realized that cinema was even more powerful, I could hit a still large audience. There is an urge, urgency and immediacy in what I wish to convey. From this angle, cinema is the ideal medium.

From my initial ventures in poetry, I shifted later to the world of prose— stories and novels. But, against the wickedness all around, I still had too many stifled screams pressured within. Next I thought of presenting the facts directly to a lot of people through theatre and worked aggressively with dramas. Again a revelation came that theatre roams within a very small periphery. Now I remembered cinema. The singular reason behind my coming to cinema is here I can voice my thoughts more vividly. Nothing more than that.

I had a faint inclination towards the RSP in my first year class, but was sucked soon into the IPTA movement. I veered completely towards a deep study of Marxism. Studying Marx, writing and acting were my chief obsession then. It was around 1944, I miss the exact details. Since then I was with the Ganantya group, becoming its secretary in '48 and then left it in '53, just before the group was banned.

During my Ganantya period, I directed all my dramas— among the ones I remember are 'Jwala', 'Dalil'— it was the first— then 'Officer', 'Bhanga Bandar'... then yes, 'Sanko'... I do not remember the rest.

Regarding 'Dalil'? In 1948 I had to bring my mother from Rajshahi to Calcutta. Anyway, it is a different anecdote. I was directly exposed to all those pangs of the partition— the word 'Bastuhara' meaning the 'evicted homeless' seemed intolerable to me. Terms like 'Refugee' and 'Bastuhara' churned nausea. It was a most... affair. Anyway, I composed 'Dalil' while I was the secretary of Ganantya Sangha, and the director of its Central Squad. Theatre was my wholtime work then. 'Dalil' could be staged and it fetched the all-India first prize. I was also an actor then. Then in 1951, when I was staying with my third elder brother at Harish Mukherjee Street, P C Joshi wrote to me from Allahabad where he was the editor of the 'Indian Way'. You know that Joshi was the General Secretary of the Party before that. Meanwhile B T Ranadive had taken over for a stint and as a consequence I and my wife were doomed. Anyway... damn it, those are stale stories now, the present generation will neither know nor comprehend. So cut that out. P C the secretary of the Communist Party asked me to 'Take over the charge of Bengal,' that meant, become the correspondent. Having had to cover 31 suicide cases as a journalist, I had sent a feature 'Suicide wave in Calcutta.' It was published and fetched me abundant recognition. But I felt that it was not at all enough catharsis; I had to vent more anguish. Not having encroached the film world till then, I selected six true characters from my feature and created the docu-drama called 'Jwala' and arraged to stage it at places, introducing some new generation young actors. After that it gained privilege at certain places. But to remember the Calcutta of those times... it has de-

generated into a more horrible entity now... at that time it was more or less a much better city.

In 'Jwala', my co-actors were Kali Banerjee, Geeta Dey, Mumtaz, a girl named Mamata (Chattopadhyay),... and a child... that's all,... yes, Gyanesh too and others.

Bijon Babu was not there. That is all about the year '51 you know— works of '51-'52. Then I did not appear in anything. After a long time, Tiny Chatterjee— now Director General, Radio— was the Director here, had caught hold of me. I had to direct 'Jwala' then, but did not appear, I mean, did not lend my voice.

Thereafter my nephew Falgu did it in Hindi in Patna. Phaniswar Renu, that chap who bagged the Rabindra Puraskar, translated it into Hindi. His wife is again a Bengalee. The bloke is from Munger, means a full Bengalee, knowing good Bangla. My nephew and Phaniswar are neighbours. They had a theatre group. The drama was broadcast in Hindi first from Patna then from Delhi. Leave it. It is acceptable now; but then it was not taken in. Was very difficult to accept. But things now have become much more...

There were a lot of causal connections behind my coming to cinema. My late middle brother was the first television expert of our country. He returned to India in 1935 after working as documentary cameraman in Great Britain for six years and joined New Theatres in 1936. He was the cameraman of the Saigal-Kananbala starrer 'Street Singer'. He had worked for many such movies.

In connection with my brother, Since childhood, I had seen many stalwarts including Mr Barua who

frequently visited our home. So an atmosphere of contemporary film world prevailed there. I used to watch their films like others did. My special attraction was to watch them chat with my brother. So the climate was formed early enough.

Even then it was not in my scheme of things to venture into films. I did many things including fleeing home a few times. Worked in the bill department of a textile mill in Kanpur. Cinema did not possess me even then. In '42 they deported me by force from Kanpur back to home. Two inbetween years I missed academics. Had left home at age fourteen.

Father ordained that only the matric exams could lead me to the career of an engineer or so, otherwise I would have to be content languishing as a mechanic only. Suddenly my mind veered to studies and stayed there. And the fixed inclination of all Bengalee youth, like the French as I am told, towards penning poetry, germinated inevitably in me at the first sprouting of creative urge. Thus my literary foray started with a few miserable poems which I soon found as an unsuitable career option for me; I would never ever be able to arrive near a million miles of poetry.

What next, I slid into politics. The knowledgable know that time; '43-'44-'45 was a period of rapid transitions in the political scenario.

Anti-Fascist campaigns were followed in very quick succession by the Japanese attack, British retreat, bombing and sundry. Life was placid during '40-'41, but in '44-'45 some happenings took place one after the other. The price of rice shot up, the famine... those

successive events jolted the thought process of all people. I then...

I then was much inclined to Marxism, not only inclined, I was an active worker; though not a cardholder, but a close sympathizer; fellow traveller you may call it.

And I started composing stories then. The urge to write stories was not like that cloudy, artificial impulse for poetry. Even at that young age, an inner push to vent my protest against the rampant wickedness and torture all around us, goaded me to write stories. My acumen for story-writing was passable. I still remember the magazine 'Agrani' carrying first ever printed stories of Samaresh and me, followed by Sajani Babu's 'Shanibarar Chithi', 'Galpa Bharati'— edited then by Nripendrakrishna Babu, then 'Desh'— I had around fifty stories published in all.

Meanwhile as a 3rd year student, I launched a magazine too, one with a rather Marxist intonations, from the suburban town of Rajshahi. Printed magazines were a rarity in those places at that time. It ran for a few months out of our own pockets and as usual met its untimely demise. Then I felt that storytelling is a still inadequate medium that may stir a few people at the best, and it takes time as it needs to travel deeper. In those years of boiling blood I was seeking immediate reaction. At this juncture appeared 'Nabanna' and 'Nabanna' transformed my entire way of life.

I had still not joined the Ganangatya Sangha but was nibbling at the possibility. Shambhuda, Bijon Babu, Sudhir Babu, Digin Babu, Gangada, the venerable Gopal Halder, Manik Babu, Tarashankarda. Ganangatya Sangha

was then a part of the Progressive Writers' Association and not a separate entity. Tarashankarda was the president of PWA, I was acquainted with all of them. My eldest brother, Manish Ghatak alias Jubanashwa, was a prominent poet of the Kallol Era, and that connection had opened our ways into the world of literature to some extent. Thus I was familiar with both the cine world and the literary realm of that time.

And this 'Nabanna' from them... was like a sudden impact for me. Later I came to know that first it was Bijan Bhattacharya's 'Aagun', then it was expanded to a one-act play 'Jabanbandi' and after its success it was finally transformed to the full-fledged 'Nabanna'. It changed my whole outlook; I fell for theatre. Became a member of IPTA. I had also performed in the revised 'Nabanna' in '47-end. Then I was fully with Ganangatya, was the leader of its central squad, composed dramas too.

It was a great feeling to observe the immediate reaction created by dramas, but even that waned after some time, I started feeling that it was inadequate. Our open performances could arouse four to five thousand people at the best at one go, but when I considered cinema, it had the potential to completely mould and modulate lakhs of people simultaneously. I have come to make films through this process, and not with a fixed notion for making films. If they find a medium better than cinema tomorrow, I shall kick cinema and go for it. I don't love film.

The medium is not a question at all. It has no value for me. The content, the message, the matter I wish to

convey, has the value. Why I have changed all these media? Because the message is of benevolence to man. Efforts to convey the message, knowledge and experience about the world's ways, compassion for the life and living of people, that is all, and not the love of movies. That might be the forte of the aesthetes who profess art for art's sake. All art expressions should be geared towards the betterment of man— for man. I wrote stories, it did not click as it had a small readership. Dramas could achieve immediate hit— can convert more people. So cinema is important. Cinema as such, is not that valuable. I don't think it has any value. Those who say otherwise, love themselves and not cinema. That is why I shall abandon cinema and go for any better medium, if I ever get one. But in our country, so far, the best medium to reach people is cinema, tomorrow it might be the TV. In India, cinema is the only medium that could reach maximum people. So I have chosen this as the vehicle of my message.

Politics is the greatest part of life, nothing happens without politics, everybody is in it, including people who claim to remain out of it. There is nothing called apolitical. You are always a partisan, for or against something. So let us leave all those talks, for that will lead only to other polemic. I have contemplated earlier, I still think about philosophy, Indian traditions along with politics. we are highly neglecting the great issue of the ancient ways of India while making our new films, as if studying these is not progressive enough. I am dwelling in this domain more or less and will continue to do so as long as I live.

Film, as such, cinema, as such, film as film, gives you the daily bread, stark and true. Films are viewed by people. As long as the scope for showing films will be there, I shall make films to earn my bread. If tomorrow or after ten years some medium better than cinema emerges, I if I am alive at that time, I shall simply kick cinema and go for that. Cinema, my dear sir, is not my love.

During 1949-'50 I launched a venture to make a film on 'Bedeni' by Tarashankar Babu, but unfortunately could not lead it to a finish. Then I completed 'Nagarik' with my own funds. It was 1950. But that film was never screened because of commercial complications. In 1955, I made three documentary films for Bihar Government out of which the one on the Oraons bagged the first prize in the Phillipines. Many do not know all these. Anyway, a few years after this, and after some decadent hibernation, I filmed 'Ajantrik' and it was shown to the public as my first film.

The script of 'Nagaraik' was composed in 1950-'51 and the filming was concluded in early 1953. In those days realistic movies were not at all made in Bengal. From that angle, I tried to film a good subject. This was the very first artistic expression of the post-second-world-war pangs and spasms of middle-class Bengali life through cinema. Its subject matter covered the travails of a determined citizen in search of a 'piece of peace' in life.

As for technique, the film is not at all superior. On the contrary, some of its aspects might highly dis-

appoint today's mature audience. For example, its soundtrack and make-up are very frustrating, but the message is still very valid to me.

A young man dreaming of high success gets refused in one interview after another. His hopes get suppressed temporarily but refuse to get doused. He thinks his lucky turn awaits just round the corner. Gradually he found that there is no good turn waiting for him. Because it is not possible within our extant social structure, we the middle class will ever remain in our slot and can never claw up. The story ends with this note.

Here the young man is shown to be in love with a girl, their affair is running for years on end without any positive conclusion, at a time they started throwing venom at each other— that is only natural as the boy could not secure a job and become marriageworthy even after seven or eight years. But even within such a situation, based on hope that four hands are better than two, he takes the girl along. Through this story I tried to describe the decadent structure of the lower middle class society of the then Bengal. The message is still valid to me.

'Nagarik' should not be much discussed in the sense that it was more or less a co-operative venture; nobody asked for remunerations, neither the laboratory nor the studio, even I got the rare commodity, raw film stock, fully free of cost. Apart from that the small money it needed we collected from among ourselves. But such fools we were, we fell for a crooked guy near the end, regarding its commercial dealing and the whole thing

fell apart. We were heartbroken, crestfallen. We could see no way it could be released, and we concluded that it will ever evade the public eye.

The film, roughly contemporary to the Telengana uprising, was completed by money that trickled in like tiny seepages, was even ready with censoring. Anyway, it is a historical tragedy with many layers of anecdotes. Let us not talk about it, the main point is, my career started with this terrible trouncing. A start with a good thrashing; I felt it in my stomach and over my back; the meager fund remaining after father's death was all exhausted.

Apart from that, we had an intense wish to do and say something politically. A friend of mine, a famed filmmaker of this country, commented that my film was too much politically oriented. I myself am of the same opinion. It was the era of BTR, I mean B T Ranadive, that meant the Communist Party pervaded Leftism, much like the Naxalite wave of today.

My friend was just right, the film was political, people would think that Ritwik Ghatak makes films for political reasons. Politics was too prominent there. Some childish excesses too. But maybe, just maybe, there was something more too. Leave it. There is no way to recover that film. The prints used to be nitrate-based at that time, if you don't preserve carefully, those become sticky after a little time in the vault. The reels are in lumps now.

Next is 'Ajantrik', made in 1956, released 1957. After that I made films regularly for a few years.