

Ritwik Ghatak's *Jwalanta* (Ablaze):
A Post-Partition Drama of Violence,
Lawlessness and Identity Crisis.

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ABSTRACT:

Ritwik Ghatak is best known as an individual committed to the art of cinema, as a film-maker, director and scriptwriter of extraordinary talent and rare genius. Much less known however is his contribution to the world of theatre, as an actor, playwright and dramaturge. What is distinctive about Ghatak's plays is then emphasis on social issues. The two historical events which affected him most deeply and contributed most significantly to his worldview was the partition of India and the forced displacement of millions of Bengalis from their homes in the erstwhile East Pakistan which later became Bangladesh. Displacement and the trauma of upheaval and alienation were feelings and concerns which he confronted squarely. And coupled with this was his disillusionment with post-Independence governments which he saw as having failed to provide for the most basic needs of people. As a socially committed thinker and as an acute observer of society, Ghatak depicted in his plays the lives and the actions of common people, most often middle-class educated Bengalis who had been affected by sociopolitical forces beyond their control. An attempt will be made here at an examination of one of Ghatak's later dramatic compositions, the play called *Jwalanta* (*Ablaze* in English translation) which was first performed in the famous Academy of Fine Arts hall in Kolkata on 24th August 1975. It is well to remember that *Jwalanta* is a

call to action, for while Ghatak wrote this play in the 1970s, the issues it raises remain relevant even today as the rape and murder of women are everyday occurrences in our nation.

Key words: Ritwik Ghatak, cinema, theatre, alienation, displacement, lawlessness, *Jwalanta*, post-Independence India.

Ritwik Ghatak (1925-1976) is best known as an individual committed to the art of cinema, as a film-maker, director and scriptwriter of extraordinary talent and rare genius. Much less known however is his contribution to the world of theatre, as an actor, playwright and dramaturge. Ghatak himself is on record as having said that his first love had always been the stage (Biswas, 198), and it is reported that he started out in theatre while still in his teens as an actor in such plays as Dwijendralal Ray's *Chandragupta* and Rabindranath Tagore's *Achalayatan*. A few years later, he wrote his first play named *Kalo Sayar* (*Black Lake*) in 1947 when he was about twenty years old. Even if the script of the play is no longer extant, there still exist several other examples of his essays in playwriting including the five of his plays which have been translated into English. These are *Charter* (originally *Dalil*), *Communication* (originally *Sanko*), *Agony* (originally *Jwala*), *That Woman* (originally *Shei Meye*), and *Ablaze* (originally *Jwalanta*). What is distinctive about Ghatak's plays is then emphasis on social issues. The two historical events which affected him most deeply and contributed most significantly to his worldview was the partition of India and the forced displacement of millions of Bengalis from their homes in the erstwhile East Pakistan which later became Bangladesh. Displacement and the trauma of upheaval and alienation were feelings and concerns which he confronted squarely. And coupled with this was his disillusionment with post-Independence governments which he saw as having failed to provide for the most basic needs of people. As a socially committed thinker and as an acute observer of society, Ghatak depicted in his plays the lives and the actions of common

people, most often middle-class educated Bengalis who had been affected by sociopolitical forces beyond their control. An attempt will be made here at an examination of one of Ghatak's later dramatic compositions, the play called *Jwalanta* (*Ablaze* in English translation) which was first performed in the famous Academy of Fine Arts hall in Kolkata on 24th August 1975.

Ghatak's inspiration for writing this play came from an incident that had taken place around the early 1970s in the district town of Krishnanagar in the state of West Bengal. A young woman, the daughter of a learned Sanskrit pundit, had been brutally raped and burnt to death by a group of antisocials. Four years had passed since Ghatak had written his previous play *That Girl* (*Sei Meye*), and from around 1973 onwards he had been feeling the urge to compose a new play. (*Natyakatha*, 262) The opportunity to stage *Jwalanta* however came only in 1975. At this time, the theatre producer Ranjitmal Kankaria, owner of the Star Theatre in Kolkata had an ongoing play entitled *Parichay* being staged in his theatre hall. Ghatak had been invited by Kankaria to watch a performance of this one day, to see the acting of Satindra Chattopadhyay, a member of the cast who was close to Ghatak. (Parthasarathi Chattopadhyay, 201) In an article titled "Jwalanta Nataka Abhinoy", which was originally published in the theatre journal *Natyakatha*, Parthasarathy Chattopadhyay reminisced that Ghatak had watched the performance of the play but had not liked it. Subsequently, he asked Kankaria if he would allow him (Ghatak) to stage a play written by him.

This play, *Jwalanta*, had been composed by Ghatak over a two-years period from 1973-74. Upon receiving Kankaria's consent, rehearsals were started for *Jwalanta* in Kankaria's house. It was initially planned that the first show would be held on 1st May, 1975. But this date could not be maintained as Ghatak had to go to Mumbai (Bombay) around this time. When Ghatak came back towards the end of the month, it was decided that *Jwalanta* would be staged on the 29th of June. Unfortunately, a few days prior to the mounting of the play, Indira

Gandhi the then Prime Minister of India declared the imposition of Emergency rule all over the country on 25th June 1975. Ghatak was told by the then Minister of Housing Affairs, Government of West Bengal, not to stage the play on the planned date over fears that its performance could create tensions in the society. Ultimately, *Jwalanta* was performed on stage in the Academy of Fine Arts in Kolkata, but only on 24th August 1975.

Jwalanta depicts a corrupted and shattered society and paints a compelling picture of degenerating values after the partition of Bengal. The play is centered around the story of a Brahmin family consisting of a learned Sanskrit scholar named Taracharan, his wife Sachimata and his daughter Bishnupriya, all of whom had been forced to leave their own land in the newly formed nation of Bangladesh and to find refuge in their broken-down ancestral village home due to the lawlessness and the insecurity of women folk in the new country. The play has four scenes. The stage setting and atmosphere of the first scene sets the tone of the play. When curtain rises against a black cyclorama, lights come on and a poster descends from above on which it is written: “The task of this drama is to break drama.” This inscription clearly indicates that *Jwalanta* was not to be thought of or experienced as a conventional play. Ghatak inserted at this point a song sung in a female voice in the background: “Sachimatago ami charjuge ei janam dukhini” (O mother Sachi, I am that Unfortunate who was born in all four eras), a traditional Bengali popular devotional folk song, memorializing the pain of the legendary saint Chaitanya Mahaprabhu upon parting from his mother. Taking a cue from this song, in the play itself, the idea of separation figures as a leit-motif from the very beginning till the end, as it is shown first that Taracharan and his family had been compelled to leave their homeland, then second that Bishnupriya was abducted from her family, and finally that she was forcibly taken away from this beautiful world when the antisocials ultimately kill her by burning her alive.

The play opens with Taracharan, Sachi and Bishnupriya entering the stage, and looking around hopelessly with broken hearts and despondent eyes. They have returned to their ancestral property where a small dwelling is seen to be standing. Taracharan becomes excited and feels a deep emotional connect with his own land. However, he immediately comes back to reality and expresses a feeling of disgust at the shattered condition of Bengal. He says: "This Bengal is finished. I saw in Jalpaiguri in North Bengal too that people are destroying themselves. I should start the *tole*, the school, again in my ancestral place – I should stick to the *tole* – I have to find a meaning in life, at least!" (*Natyakatha*, 263, trans. by author) His wife Sachi however refuses to share in his optimism and expresses doubts about whether they can even regain a meaningful life. Their young daughter Bishnupriya however is incapable of appreciating the sentiments of her parents. She instead dances with joy in response to the beauty of the world and the sky around her. Her youthful innocence makes her think that human beings are lovely, and that she does not want anything else. She is incapable of realizing that her innocence will soon be ravaged. As a counter to the naïve opinion of the girl, we are offered a different perspective by Sushovan, a visiting journalist who is a friend of Taracharan. Sushovan comments about the rampant social degeneration that has overtaken the country:

Sushovan: Wagon breaking is taking place around us, and goods are being smuggled from Bangladesh. The newspaper's sent me here to write a report about all this. But tell me, why did you have to return?

Taracharan: In the new Bangladesh there's only rampant smuggling, lawlessness, mugging and the big problem of safeguarding the safety and dignity of women. They have no respect for women. My daughter Bishnupriya - but why my daughter only? All women face the same problem. (*Natyakatha*, 264, trans. by author)

In Ghatak's dramatic envisioning, Bishnupriya is not only the daughter of Taracharan but also a symbol of all suffering women,

and in a broader sense, a symbol of the motherland itself. Henry Louis Vivian Derozio in his poem “To India - My Native Land” had celebrated the past glory of our motherland, writing that it had been “worshipped as a deity” in the past, and that it had held her head high like an eagle before losing her freedom and being “chained down at last.” (35) But while Derozio had written about India’s past, Ghatak in his play shows how in Post-Independence times too the motherland was being devastated. Even as an impression of peace and tranquility is represented in the play through the actions and dialogues by Bishnupriya, this evocation of a peaceful and happy atmosphere is shattered by the sudden arrival of three anti-socials named Raja, Rana and Feku Mian. These three men pursue Bishnupriya even as she is singing alone on the stage. They start by insulting her with vulgar sexist comments like “Bendaboner Lila”, “Khasa Mal”, and similar filthy remarks. Next, the trio is joined by Raicharan, the local corrupt Police Inspector who takes money from them illegally in exchange of giving them protection and information. Raicharan’s dialogues reveal the extent of his corruption as a colluder with these criminal elements:

Raicharan: I have come. Raicharan, Raicharan Khanra, the Police Inspector in this place, your friend, philosopher and guide. Raja, Rana and Feku Mian – today at night 2 pm, the rail wagon will arrive from North Bengal. If you break open the wagon, you can unload fifty thousands worth of goods. How much will you give me? (*Natyakatha*, 265, trans. by author)

If the above dialogue indicates rampant societal lawlessness and a complete void in morality, another picture is evoked towards the end of the first scene of the play in which three learned men, Durgacharan Nayratna, Raghudeb Sarbobhauma and Utpal Vidyabhusan, are shown to be engaged in a deep but completely irrelevant conversation about political events taking place in foreign countries. These three educated individuals also converse about various issues and perspectives in Indian Philosophy, all the while being completely unregarding and even apathetic about everything going on in their own society and

locality. For instance, they animatedly talk about Argentina, America, and South Africa, but completely ignore India, show concern about what Ian Smith was doing in Rhodesia, but are oblivious of the realities around them. Their turning of a blind eye to the prevalent lawlessness all around them does not however save them, as it is shown in the second scene that the antisocials Raja, Rana, and Feku Mian target Raghudeb's daughter with vulgarities even as the policeman Raicharan refuses to intervene. Indeed, when Raghudeb appeals for help to Raicharan, saying: "You are the law. This torture and injustice is happening in front of you", the Inspector reprimands him sharply and retorts: "You are doing wrong Raghudeb Sarbobhauma. There is no law in this country. Law has been demolished long ago. Here is one law, and that is the law of the jungle. You will not get the essence of life here in reading Sanskrit, the *Gita*, the Veda and the Upanishadas. The law of this country is to dismantle everything by looting – this is the law which is now going on here." (*Natyakatha*, 270, trans. by author)

It is only then that Raghudeb who had earlier been indifferent to the moral degeneration present all around him, begins to realize that he too cannot escape the contemporary social ugliness and has been in fact trapped in a web of lawlessness in which his own daughter has been molested and made to give up self-respect.

Scene three of the play begins with a *Bharatnatyam* dance performance at which all the major characters are shown to be present. Then, after the programme gives over, Raja, Rana and Feku Mia again attack Bishnupriya who complains to the police inspector Raicharan about their misbehavior and requests him to accompany her home for her safety. To her frantic pleas, Raicharan however reacts with an entirely evasive response: "No one has come in this world with anyone, no one will go with someone. I came alone and will go alone. God will think about my last days," he says before leaving. (*Natyakatha*, 274, trans. by author) When Taracharan enters and asks his daughter the reason behind her melancholic appearance, Bishnupriya cries out: "Father, we should go somewhere else." (*Natyakatha*, 275, trans. by

author) Upon hearing these words from his daughter, Taracharan becomes frightened. Yet through all these, Bishnupriya remains optimistic and hopeful that the present condition of societal decay and degeneration would come to an end one day, and that what was needed was for everyone to work together for a transformation. Her words however fail to inspire her father and mother, both of whom remain much less optimistic, even as they resign themselves to staying back in their own place as they can manage to get two handfuls of food here at least. Through such dialogues, Ghatak clearly highlights the reality that personal safety and dignity were not the only challenges facing ordinary people, but also the spectres of poverty and unemployment. This is also brought out in a subsequent dialogue shared between the father, daughter and mother:

Bishnupriya: See father, I think this world will become beautiful one day. That may be two hundred, or five hundred or one thousand hundred years later – but it shall be. Father, I have learnt this from my own life. We have to work hard for that day. Father, let's go.

Taracharan: My dear child, you don't know that I also believe in what you are thinking. But where shall we go? We have no place to go. We have at least been able to get two handful of food here. What will we do in a distant land? But why are you saying these words?

Bishnupriya: Please stop, you will not understand. Its ok.

Taracharan: What?

Bishnupriya: Everything is all right. Let's go.

(Sachimata enters from the left. She comes to a halt upon looking at her daughter's face. Then approaching Bishnupriya, Sachimata places her hand over Bishnupriya's head.)

Taracharan: What has happened?

Sachi: I think something has happened. Please go away from here. You do not need to bother yourself in these matters. You have read the scriptures all your life. You don't understand anything else.

All you have in your nose is the smell of the dust of orthodoxy.
Don't talk to us.

Taracharan: What type of behaviour is this? All right, I am going.
(Taracharan leaves the stage from the left. Bishnupriya embraces her mother and breaks down in tears. The Mother looks up at the face of her daughter.)

Sachi: What will happen?

Bishnupriya: Mother, everything here is ...

Sachi: I know. But we have to live amidst all this.

Bishnupriya: We cannot live mother, we cannot live like this. This living is not real life.

(Curtain falls with Bishnupriya's cry. Before this, a board descends from above on which it is written: "Lives can be lived in many ways.")
(*Natyakatha*, 275-6, trans. by author)

The play reaches its climax in the last scene when the mother Sachimata enters in a state of panic, and grabbing hold of the Inspector cries out: "What you have done! What have you all done? You have taken away the honour and respect of mothers and women. Sushma has gone mad." (*Natyakatha*, 278, trans. by author) Sushma, the daughter of Raghudeb Sarbhauma had descended into insanity because of the physical and mental torture that had been inflicted on her by Raja, Rana and Feku Mian. Then, as Bishnupriya enters the stage alone, she is set upon by the same three ruffians who threaten her to surrender herself to them or else they would kill her and her parents. Bishnupriya pleads with them think of her as their sister, but her words fall on deaf ears as they have lost all their good senses in the heat of their passion. In a desperate attempt to save herself, Bishnupriya appeals to them to allow her to dress up before surrendering her body. She goes into her house and tries to escape by the back door, but the hooligans chase her and gang rape her. Noises of her shrieks can be heard from the back of the stage, and these sounds gradually turn into sounds

of groaning. The Police Inspector Raicharan enters the stage at this point, but instead of arresting the criminals, he wonders why they had left their profession of breaking wagons and had turned to indulging in sexual violence against women. In a coldblooded response, Raja, one of the scoundrels tell the Inspector not to worry, and he then instructs another goon Rana to get a tin of kerosine from a nearby slum. As they wait for Rana to come back, they break into a macabre dance which they describe as a “green tarantula dance”. They force the policeman to join them in the dance which ends only when Rana comes back with the tin of kerosine. The bleeding and brutalized Bishnupriya is brought out by them and kerosine is splashed on her body before she is set alight.

At this point, the journalist Sushovan enters the stage even as the Inspector whips out his notebook and a pen, and crouching down before Bishnupriya asks her who she would name as her violator. Then as Sushovan tries to take dying Bishnupriya’s hand onto his lap, a cinema screen on the stage shows a close up of Bishnupriya’s face. From the screen the girl looks directly at the audience and spits at them. Then, as the body of the girl is lowered down a stage trapdoor, Sushovan advances upstage and directly addresses the audience. Finally, the stage turns dark with only Sushovan’s face being illuminated by a spotlight as he utters the concluding words in the play.

For how long, how long will the people of the country put up with this? It’s no longer tolerable. You who have come to watch this play, will go home, have your dinner, and go to bed. Tomorrow you go to your office and work as usual. And such oppression will continue to persist. Isn’t there any way out of this? Can’t we all join together to stop this oppression? Can’t we get infuriated? (*Natyakatha*, 281, trans. by author)

Then at this point, a banner is seen to descend from the flies above reading:

People have to become furious if they wish to live.

Brothers and sisters burst out in anger and change everything.

Otherwise, nothing will happen. (*Natyakatha*, 281, trans. by author)

Finally at the conclusion of the play is heard a chorus of many voices joining in a song calling upon million of brothers and sisters to join together and to fight. "Does anyone fear to die," runs the couplet of this song in Hindi, "Since we will all die of hunger anyway!" (*Natyakatha*, 281, trans. by author)

Through his play *Jwalanta*, Ritwik Ghatak portrayed a grim picture of a society in which women were devoid of dignity, safety and liberty. The actor Anandarup Biswas who played the role of Raja in the first production of the play recalled Ritwik Ghatak telling him that "Anti-socials are not born in mother's womb. Some people create them for their own interest. Women are presented in modern society as commodities. By casting Bishnupriya into the fire, they are destroying Indian culture and society." Ghatak is also on record as having said that "Anti-socials not only come from slums but also from the elite who wear ties, coats and hats. We can see the deeds of ruffians, but we do not notice the devilry of people who are like gentlemen. It is those who create war, divide countries and kill people with nuclear weapons, loot lands and rape countless Bishnupriyas." (Author's translation, *Natyakatha*, 198) True to his progressive idealism and fierce iconoclastic personality, Ritwik Ghatak in this play expressed his concern, anger and disgust at the way in which Indian village societies in particular had become corrupted in post-Partition India. His anger in *Jwalanta* is directed against not only evil men overtaken by greed and lust, but also aroused by at the apathy of men who refused to be concerned and preferred to ignore and to remain ignorant of the corruption that surrounded them. His fury above all is directed against the people in power and particularly the representatives of the state establishment like the Police Inspector Raicharan who should have served as purveyors of justice but had been corrupted to the most degenerated level possible. It is well to remember that *Jwalanta* is a call to action, for while Ghatak wrote this play in the 1970s, the issues it

raises remain relevant even today as the rape and murder of women are everyday occurrences in our nation. Hence even as Sushma and Bishnupriya represent the pathetic vulnerability of Indian women, the play as a whole is an unyielding depiction of the corruption, lawlessness, ignorance and apathy that characterizes the lives of our countrymen even today.

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