

An exploratory study of the portrayal of environmental issues in films Analysis of Ritwik Ghatak's soul earching film *Titash Ekti Nadir Naam*

Communication & Journalism Research
7 (2) pp 7-14
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masscomhod@uoc. ac. in
ISSN 2348 – 5663

Lakshmi Pradeep *

Assistant Professor, Department of Journalism, Farook College, Kozhikkode

Abstract

In our present day global village the mass media plays an important and powerful role in highlighting environmental issues and creating awareness among the public. Today several important environmental concerns demand our attention worldwide. In the multimedia scenario, film is an audio visual medium which has a powerful influence and transformative power on the audience. Films can be categorized into documentaries, feature films and short films. Documentaries have focused on diverse issues, ranging from pollution, global warming, droughts, famine to mass species extinctions and resulting social issues. They lay out how these issues could pan out in future to spell disaster. Bengali feature film maker Ritwik Ghatak stands out for his soul searching cinema. In his film *Titash Ekti Nadir Naam*, (A river called Titash,1973) he portrays the angst and agony of the ordinary fisherfolk as they grapple with the water crisis for no fault of theirs. Ghatak uses the river itself as a character, a metaphor, and a vehicle for the storytelling .. We can see all around us it is the common people, '*the aam aadmi*', like the fishermen, who have paid a heavy price. Their livelihood threatened by the huge dams, toxic wastes and pollutants littering water bodies, sand mining, untenable water extractions and diversions leading to falling water tables, drought, floods even as they are unable to come to terms with this so called 'Development', which has suddenly uprooted them from the rivers, the water bodies and a way of life they had lived from generations.

Ghatak said "Civilisation never dies. It may change, but it is eternal. Where the paddy field is born on the dry river bed of Titash, there begins another civilisation." So, for Ghatak, civilisation is eternal. Many of his protagonists in the film were in the depths of disillusionment, despair and a sense of failure, yet they had a ring of truth around them. Perhaps he is ending on a slightly hopeful note, that all is not lost, and there is yet hope for mankind if we mend our ways to not only improve the physical environment, but also the socio cultural and political environment. The message is for sustainable development and the need for preservation and protection of our water resources as they are being increasingly threatened by man. It is in this milieu that films like *Titash Ekti Nadir Naam* are close to our heart. They remind us of the haunting stories behind the greed of man and the subsequent ecosystem collapse.

Key words

Water crisis, Malo fishing community, Mother nature, Transformative power

In our present day global village the mass media plays an important and powerful role in highlighting environmental issues and creating awareness

* **Correspondence:** lakshmipradeep@gmail.com

among the public. Today several important environmental concerns demand our attention worldwide. But at times media has been criticized for not giving adequate coverage to environment news and adopting a sensational approach to several environmental issues reflecting a lack of an in depth analytical reporting. However of late media has focused more attention on environment related matters.

All the different types of media such as newspapers, magazines, television, radio, films and internet have featured issues related to environment, and brought them to the attention of the common man. In the multimedia scenario, film is an audio visual medium which has a powerful influence and transformative power on the audience. A single picture is worth a thousand words. Films can be categorized into documentaries, feature films and short films. Documentaries are the portrayal of reality and an interesting, and informative tool to educate the masses about environmental issues. The dawn of the 21st century has seen several memorable documentaries and some documentary filmmakers are using films as a tool for raising environmental consciousness and social change and instilling in people a sense of responsibility. These are the makers of the new age documentary films. Early documentary films such as those by the Lumiere brothers were single-shot moments captured on film: a train entering a station, a boat docking or factory workers leaving for work. But today this medium is used to send social messages across.

Documentaries: A look at a few memorable documentaries in recent years that have put across a powerful message of environmental conservation will enhance our awareness of the problems plaguing our society. Documentaries have focused on diverse issues, ranging from pollution, global warming, droughts, famine to mass species extinctions and resulting social issues. These documentaries lay out how these issues could pan out in future to spell disaster.

The 11th hour (2007), featuring actor and environmentalist Leonardo Di Caprio, looks at the ways in which we have impacted the planet through global warming, climate change, deforestation, species extinction and the depletion of the oceans' habitats. The documentary features former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev and physicist Stephen Hawking, among many other politicians, scientists, and environmental activists. This haunting documentary puts forth a powerful message of sustainable development. Another thought provoking documentary is about the honey bees that have been dying at an alarming rate around the world. In *More Than Honey* (2013), Markus Imhoof searches for the answers as to why the little creatures are suddenly dying, looking from industrial agricultural practices to crop pesticides.

Blue 2017 is an attempt to peep into the world's quickly-depleting marine life, and how preservation efforts are attempting to save the oceans from pollution, among other threats. The depleting marine life is the focus of *Artifishal* 2019. Here the focus is on the global fisheries industry, as they investigate the impacts of over fishing and how our taste for seafood is devastating wildlife below the surface everywhere.

Chasing Ice 2012, This film beautifully captures the problem of the planet's melting glaciers over multiple years with National Geographic photographer James Balog. The scenes are extremely powerful and they leave little to the imagination. *Ice on fire* 2019 by Leonardo Di Caprio considers the potential for mass extinction as a result of Arctic methane gases seeping into the air as the icecaps melt. It's a beginners' guide to the scale of the potential catastrophe, setting out on the hunt for technologies that might reverse the damage caused by Carbon dioxide leaking into the atmosphere.

Cowspiracy: The Sustainability Secret (2014) by Kip Andersen, delves deep into the impact of animal farming on the planet's greenhouse gas emissions, the damage to our oceans and deforestation. In *Climate Change: The Facts*, passionate environmentalist David Attenborough presented stunning facts about the planet's descent into climate change and how humanity could attempt to rectify it. It originally aired in 2019, after one of the hottest years ever recorded, and caused quite a storm amongst viewers. *Climate Refugees* 2010 is another interesting documentary. Considering that climate change is unlikely to affect all countries equally, this feature asks who will be hit the hardest? And when that time comes, what will the ramifications be? From droughts and famine to rioting and issues of national security, *Climate Refugees* lays out how overpopulation and climate change could meet to spell disaster. *Tapped*, 2009 dives into the water bottle industry's impact on climate change, pollution, and our health, and looks at how dependant we are on oil.

A notable documentary from India, *Seeds Of Plenty, Seeds Of Sorrow* is directed by Manjira Datta, and talks about the highly touted Green Revolution in India. The much hyped Green Revolution is credited with ensuring that countries like India do not suffer from the scourge of hunger and famine anymore. Through this film, the director asks thought provoking questions that are in dire need of strategic answers. Who has been the principal beneficiary of the biotech package? The poor peasant? The big farmer? The multinational corporation? And what damage has the Green Revolution done to the social structure and ecologies of Third World countries? The film attempts to show the darker side of a supposed development strategy that was deemed to be successful. It reveals a darker, more problematic side to the Green Revolution.

In India it has helped create a new serf class and the dramatic crop yields of the early years have fallen away in the wake of pesticide poisoning, depleting water table and short-lived miracle wheat strains.

Anand Patwardhan chronicles the stories of anguish of the ordinary citizens, and tribals in their own words in *Narmada Diary* 1997; the well known documentary portrays the resistance to big dams, and globalization by regional and environmental groups.(Pradeep,2015).

Ritwik Ghatak : the iconic film maker - While many documentaries have explored various dimensions of ecological issues, a few feature films too have dealt with related problems in a creative and subtle way sending across a powerful message of committed cinema. It is the need of the hour to gain a better understanding of such narratives too. While several filmmakers have contributed their mite, yet Bengali film maker Ritwik Ghatak stands out for his soul searching cinema. His films are often synonymous with the angst and agony of the common man. Passionate, wildly talented and an alcoholic the ‘enfant terrible’ of Indian cinema, Ghatak remains an enigma for many. Ritwik Ghatak’s career was one of constant struggle—against a public that, (in Satyajit Ray’s words) , ‘largely ignored’ his films; against a society that had lost its way amid rampant modernization; and against a national cinema whose conventions he broke time and again. His films reflect an intense political awareness and are discomfiting. Film critic Adrian Martin has remarked rather poetically that Ghatak is the spirit that haunts world cinema with his seismographic rendering of trauma (Pradeep,2019)

His contemporary relevance stems from his commitment to speaking truth to power in exploring this agony and poverty. Deeply influenced by Rabindranath Tagore who believed, ”Art has to be beautiful, but before that it has to be truthful”, for Ghatak his films were a vehicle to share his own private truth. (Ghatak,2000). The musicality of melodrama structured his narratives and plumbed the depths of our experience. Each one of his films was a landmark achievement. The emotionally haunting and ambitious masterpiece *Meghe Dhaka Taara* tells the story of Neeta, a woman who sacrifices her life to rebuild her family shattered by the effects of partition. The film opens with a wide angle image of a huge tree from below which Neeta emerges. Two dominant images are associated with her throughout the film: the tree and waters, both symbols of fertility and creation in Hindu mythology.(Pradeep,2019). Environment and mother nature are intrinsic in his films. Like many Bengali film makers such as Satyajit Ray, All Ghatak’s films portray strong female characters subtly hinting at the universal mother, mother nature or mother Bengal. (Chatterjee, 2009).

Titash Ekti Nadir Naam : Ritwik Ghatak's soul searching cinema elevated Indian parallel cinema to new heights. In his film *Titash Ekti Nadir Naam* , (A river called Titash,1973) he portrays the angst and agony of the ordinary fisherfolk as they grapple with the water crisis for no fault of theirs. Yet for all its tragedy and melodrama, *Titash Ekti Nadir Naam* is a celebration of a river and its people. We can see all around us it is the common people, 'the aam aadmi', like the fishermen, who have paid a heavy price. Their livelihood threatened by the huge dams, toxic wastes and pollutants littering water bodies, sand mining, untenable water extractions and diversions leading to falling water tables, drought, floods even as they are unable to come to terms with this so called 'Development', which has suddenly uprooted them from the rivers, the water bodies and a way of life they had lived from generations.

This film portrays the life of the poor fishermen living near the Titash river in Bangladesh. It won acclaim around the world and in 2007, the British Film Institute honoured it as the best Bangladeshi film ever made. The film is a portrait of a fishing town, where three storylines interweave over the course of a generation to depict the mundane joys and anguishes of a struggling village; the river Titash itself, by the end of the film, dries up. Ghatak uses the river itself as a character, a metaphor, and a vehicle for the storytelling. Deepa Mehta, film maker opines that this film is a work of pure genius. "A passionate elegy for a dying culture, it moved me profoundly, and continues to haunt me to this day." The structure of the film was also refreshingly ahead of its times. It was a pioneering film which explored the immense possibilities of non linear narratives and a mosaic pattern of storytelling where several characters appear in a string of myriad, interconnected stories set in a hyperlink format.

The film is an adaptation of a Bengali novel by Adwaita Mallabarman. His novel *Titash Ekti Nadir Naam* was published in 1956, five years after his death. It is regarded as a commendable, intrinsic part of Bengali literature. Mallabarman's novel builds a pen picture of the Malo fishing village of bygone days through their dialects and art forms and makes a strong statement on how lopsided modernization policies, vested interests of politicians and natural disasters come together to wipe out this once vibrant society. He portrays the Hindu fishermen and the Muslim farmers living together harmoniously initially, but the partition of Bengal leads to communal tension .Mallabarman's story documents a way of life that has all but disappeared. *Titash Ekti Nadir Naam* was a Swan Song of not only this remarkable writer, but also of the river and Malo fishing community on the banks of the Titash too. In fact it is symbolic of fishing communities around the world facing the

same plight. It is to Ghatak's credit that he has done justice to the adaptation of this novel.

The tale is set among the Malo fishermen who toil on the waters of the Titash. There are multiple characters as the film follows a mosaic pattern of story telling. The main protagonists are Basanti, Kishore, his bride Rajar and their son Ananta. Basanti is a young girl who wants to marry Kishore, but he marries Rajar, whom he happens to rescue from a village conflict, yet he is separated from her soon after marriage, as she is abducted by some bandits. He is deeply disturbed by this turn of events. Basanti later on gets married to Kishore's brother Subol, but he is drowned. The story picks up after a lapse of ten years when Rajar comes to the village with her son Ananta. Kishore and Rajar are unable to recognize one another. Later we are witness to Kishore's demise and how Rajar drowns alongside him. We see Basanti taking care of little Ananta; even in the face of criticism by her parents. Meanwhile the landowners rake up misunderstandings and conflicts between the communities to protect their vested interests. They insist on the repayments of loan from the poor fishermen and peasants. The film takes a critical view of the Zamindari system and the havoc it caused to the social fabric of our country in those times. At the end the river dries up (partly due to a scheme engineered by the landowners). The death pangs of the village are portrayed vividly. The opening shot depicts the tragedy of the film, a dried up river, and this same river is again shown at the climax of the film amidst a Bengali song at the backdrop. The bone dry river bed is pictured eloquently in long shots, even as poignant images of begging and starvation deaths in the village pull at our heart strings. From harmony, understanding and peaceful coexistence the two communities are pushed to a struggle for survival leading to conflicts and violence. Basanti is a sad witness to this sorry state of affairs unfolding in the village. We can see Basanti desperately walking through the desert, stumbling, yet she doesn't give up hope as she tries to dig for water on the river bed. Even as she is dying she has a flashback or a vision of a young boy running across green paddy fields, [possibly Kishore], and her face lights up; the film ends on a freeze-frame of her

The partition of Bengal was a heartbreak for Ritwik Ghatak. Even as he highlighted his anguish he mused, "Civilisation never dies. It may change, but it is eternal. Where the paddy field is born on the dry river bed of Titash, there begins another civilisation." So, for Ghatak, civilisation is eternal.(Ghatak,2000). Ghatak never gives easy answers in his films as we have to engage with layers of meanings. Many of his protagonists were in the depths of disillusionment, despair and a sense of failure, yet they had a ring of truth around them. Most of his films ended with a glimmer of hope in the

horizon. Perhaps he is ending on a hopeful note, that all is not lost, and there is yet hope for mankind if we mend our ways to not only improve the physical environment, but also the socio cultural and political environment. The message is for sustainable development and the need for preservation and protection of our water resources even as they are being increasingly threatened by man.

Bengali and Indian culture and symbols resonate throughout the film. The plot develops amidst the undercurrents of mythology and religious icons. This makes it a little difficult to decipher the subtle characters and the unfolding events during the first viewing of the film, particularly for foreign audiences. Motherhood is a recurring theme in most of Ghatak's films visualized by shots of rain, boats, big, sprawling trees, water bodies and so on. The concept of Mother Goddess, Bhagwati is also weaved into the storyline.

Conclusion: Films and documentaries have played a powerful role in riveting the attention of society towards environmental concerns. Ritwik Ghatak has portrayed the environmental issues of water crisis and loss of livelihood in an aesthetic and thought provoking manner in his feature film *Titash Ekti Nadir Naam*. The partition and its terrible aftermath has been a recurring theme in many of his other films. His partition quartet consists of four films; *Meghe Dhaka Taara*, *Nagarik*, *Komal Gandhar* and *Subarnarekha*. Uprooted from the land of his birth he never forgave the world for turning him into an eternal refugee. His films are thought provoking and linger on in our minds, raising questions of sorrow, concept of family and humanity at large. His last film *Jukti Thako aar Gaapo* (1974), was an auto portrait of a rebel and won the National award. In it he plays the alcoholic intellectual Nilkantha and says "I am burning – the universe is burning, everything is burning." All his films give us a new perspective of history and historical events and invigorate us to take a larger view of issues on a global scale. He uses folk music, local myths and so on to convey his message.(Pradeep,2015).

At times Ghatak is a little melodramatic. He uses myriad techniques to portray the emotions and the dilemmas of his characters. Close ups are interspersed with long shots, the latter helps the viewer to take a look at the happenings from a distance. So the audience gets a bigger perspective of the issue, both from the individual level and from a global context. In *Titash*, this perspective is needed to gain a finer understanding of environment issues for the stakeholders.

Viewing Ghatak is an edgy, intimate experience, an engagement with a brilliantly erratic intelligence in an atmosphere of total honesty. The feeling

can be invigorating but never comfortable.(Levich,1998). Ghatak once said in an interview that art was not a trivial thing. The primary objective of making films is to do good to mankind. If you do not do good to humanity, no art is a true work of art.(Ghatak, 2000). Ritwik Ghatak is a film director whose cinema is remembered for his depiction of social reality. The powerful message he has sought to convey in *Titash Ekti Nadir Naam* must resonate in our ears. It is in this milieu that films like *Titash Ekti Nadir Naam* are close to our heart. They remind us of the haunting stories behind the greed of man and the subsequent ecosystem collapse.

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