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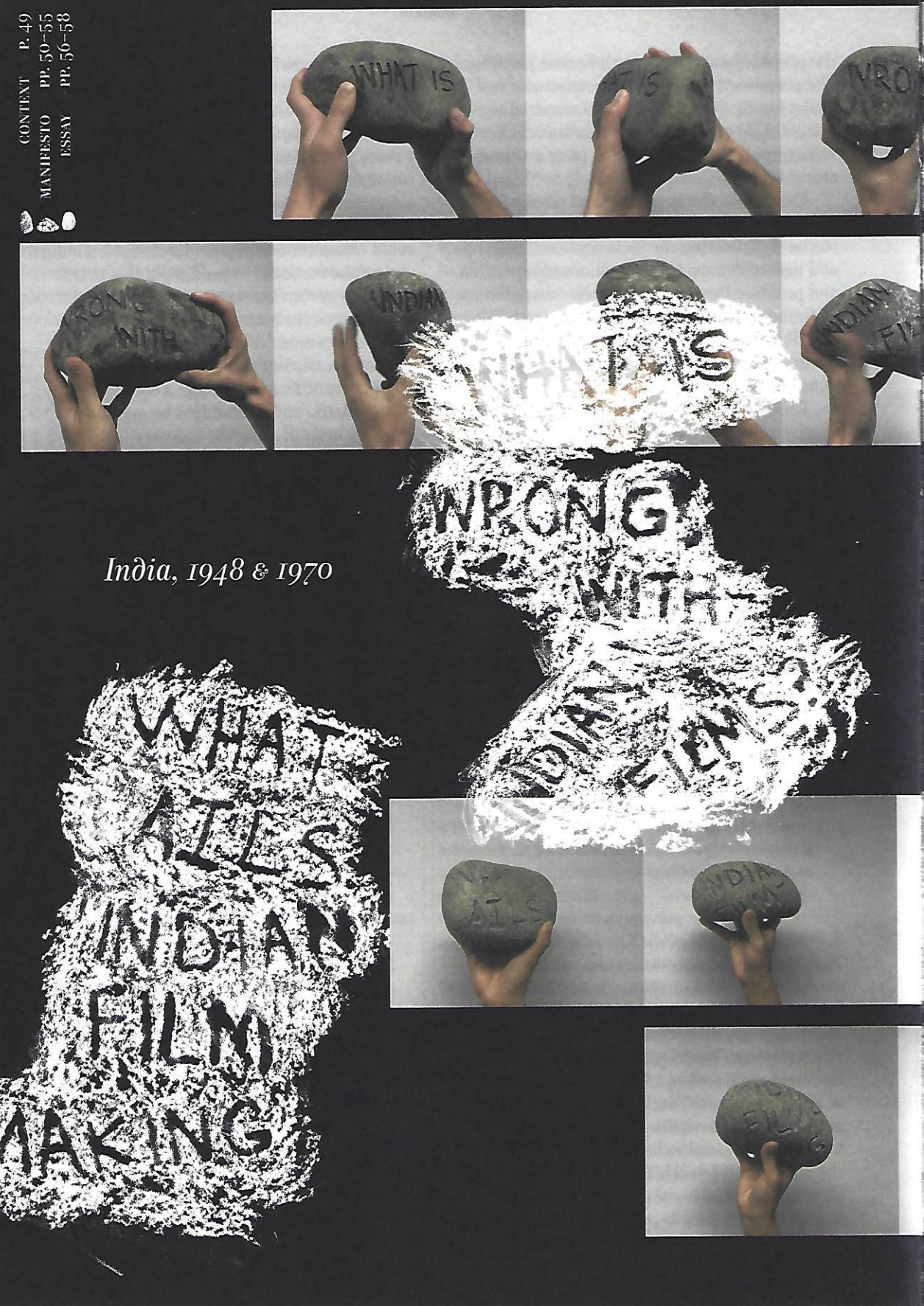

India, 1948 & 1970

Satyajit Ray and Ritwik Ghatak are perhaps the most important filmmakers to come out of India in the twentieth century. Along with Mrinal Sen, they form the triumvirate of Bengali directors who led the movement known as Indian New Wave cinema, starting in the 1940s and continuing to the early 1990s. Emerging as an alternative to the mainstream, more commercial, products of the Hindi film industry, "parallel cinema," as it came to be called, existed as a distinct aesthetic and philosophical movement within Indian cinema. Inspired by Italian neorealism and French poetic realism, the films that came out of the movement such as *Pather Panchali* (Satyajit Ray, 1955), *The Cloud-Capped Star* / *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (Ritwik Ghatak, 1960), and *A River called Titas* / *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam* (Ritwik Ghatak, 1973) were inherently political and featured narratives that revolved around the working classes. In this sense, they were obviously rejecting the clichés of the predominant commercial Hindi film industry, more commonly known as "Bollywood." Most distinctly, each of the New Wave directors looked at filmmaking as a product of film theory; not only did they draw extensively from global film theory in crafting their own works, but they also wrote numerous essays calling for an aesthetic renewal of Indian cinema.

Satyajit Ray had not yet made his debut as a director in 1948 when he published the essay "What is Wrong with Indian Films?" in a local newspaper. Nonetheless, he was passionately engaged in the cinema, having founded the Calcutta Film Society the previous year. Politically, 1948 was a time when India had just won Independence from the British and, naturally, there was an abundance of nation-building narratives, often jingoistic in nature, that were taking over the conversation around public media. The film industry was dominated by large studios, which had been earning massive profits since the 1920s.

The government would not actively step in to support parallel cinema until the 1960s, when it would set up the Film Finance Corporation in 1960, the Film Institute of India in 1961, and the National Film Archives of India in 1964. But while these newly established film institutions were trying their best to identify and hone film talents, it was still terribly difficult for independent films to find funding, since distributors were interested only in commercial blockbusters, and the state did nothing to intervene in or regulate film distribution and exhibition systems.[1] Ritwik Ghatak's "What Ails Indian Film-Making" is a cry of protest against this situation, informed by the director's distinctive political, aesthetic, and cultural perspectives.

Ray's 1948 essay "What is Wrong with Indian Films?" and Ghatak's 1970 essay "What Ails Indian Film-Making," as their names suggest, critique the flaws of contemporary Indian cinema but also suggest ways in which it can reinvent itself. They served as important milestones on the long and difficult path of establishing a parallel cinema tradition in India. Apart from inspiring and informing the Indian New Wave, Ray's and Ghatak's essays helped to lay out its ideological, aesthetic, and economic foundations.[2] They are the voices and thoughts that would eventually inspire a pan-Indian cinema movement.

— *Bedatri D. Choudhury*

1 Procuring funds from the Film Finance Corporation was especially difficult if one was an independent filmmaker, and did not have a guarantor who would ensure that the money would be paid back. Nonetheless, there were some exceptions. In 1968, Mrinal Sen was given money by the FFC in spite of not having a guarantor, and he went on to make the acclaimed *Bhuvan Shome*. After the film's success, the FFC changed its policies and became somewhat more open to funding for parallel cinema.

2 Mrinal Sen and Arul Kandi's "Manifesto for the New Cinema Movement," first published in the periodical *Close Up* in 1968, also called for new aesthetic approaches, enlightened audiences, and different means of production and distribution to support non-mainstream films.

CATALYZING THE INDIAN NEW WAVE

by Bedatri D. Choudhury

When Satyajit Ray writes "What is Wrong with Indian Films?" as early as 1948, insisting on quality over quantity in Indian films, and calling out Indian filmmakers on their lack of originality and creativity, it is, in itself, radical and revolutionary. It is the first open cry for a new kind of cinema that rises from all the flaws plaguing contemporary Indian cinema. It is, in a way, the first Indian New Wave manifesto.

In the essay, Ray celebrates the evolution of cinema from starting out as an extension of photography and a substitute for theater, to becoming a world-renowned independent art form that enjoyed the love and respect of people all over the world. He acknowledges that in its bid to keep providing objects of interest to the ever-demanding and ever-growing American audience, cinema was developing fast—both technologically and thematically—and was able to accommodate a diverse variety of themes by combining a large array of aesthetic codes. Ray, however, refuses to look at modern cinema as an American contribution to the world. For a filmmaker writing in a country that has just freed itself from two centuries of colonial rule, it is perhaps natural for him to insist on a distinct identity for Indian cinema. But this is not just nationalistic fervor; he is also trying to actively remind cinemagoers and filmmakers of India's strong and specific history of filmic aesthetics, one that they should not shy away from or give up in exchange for the more "in vogue" and flashier modes of American cinema. "For a country so far removed from the center of things, India took up film production surprisingly early," he reminds his readers.

After having established India as a country that is no stranger to cinema, he goes on to critique the contemporary modes of Indian filmmaking and its lack of quality, especially when compared to international standards. This was 1948 and it was easy to get caught up in the tide of patriotic love, and blindly praise everything that the country produced, but Ray makes an important critical interjection. As a cinephile and as an active proponent of the Film Society Movement,[1] he is aware of world trends in cinema such as Italian neorealism and realizes how very far away from that international standard Indian films really are. When he writes, "Let us face the truth. There has yet been no Indian film which could be acclaimed on all counts," it is definitely a lament but also a call for action. Ray is a critic, and never a cynic.

One of the main things that he thinks is wrong with Indian films is related to the way people in the film business always complained about what they didn't have. He does not dismiss them, but insists

1 From the late 1940s, starting with Calcutta, film societies began to be established in several Indian cities. These societies dedicated the screening and viewing of international films which would rarely be released in the mainstream theaters. Apart from acquainting their members with international cinema, film societies in India inspired their local filmmakers, and contributed to their cinematic education.

that such conditions don't prohibit the making of quality films, citing Italian post-war films as an example. Delving deeper into his arguments, he posits that there seems to be a basic problem in the way Indian filmmakers have approached the medium of cinema: "In India, it would seem that the fundamental concept of a coherent dramatic pattern existing in time was generally misunderstood." What emerged, according to Ray, was a confusing mishmash of aesthetics, and a strange amalgamation of action and melodrama.

This confused aesthetic coupled with a short-sighted copying of American cinematic aesthetics led to what Ray saw as the biggest problem of Indian films: a lack of originality prohibiting the creation of a distinct style true to the cultural traditions and political contexts of the country. At a time when cinema was making the transition from black-and-white to color, and undergoing a sea of technological changes, Ray posits a rather surprising solution: "It is only in a drastic simplification of style and content that hope for the Indian cinema resides." His manifesto calls for a concentration on the resources that India already possesses: its stories, its cultural history and its landscapes, and to a method that does not aspire to imitate the American method. He calls for a process-driven, disciplined approach to filmmaking and concludes with, "The raw material of the cinema is life itself." Ray himself would stay true to these principles when he made his internationally acclaimed debut *Pather Panchali* in 1955, shot in a remote village with a cast of non-professional actors. The story of a poor priest and his family who struggle to make ends meet, the radical simplicity of its style and the directness of its storytelling stood out starkly in an industry that was saturated with nationalistic and celebratory narratives.

When Ghatak writes "What Ails Indian Filmmaking" in 1970, a lot has seemingly changed for Indian cinema. He had, by this time, made the Hindi film, *Madhumati* (1958)—his only "hit." He had also made his most acclaimed and well-known works, *The Cloud-Capped Star* (1960), *E-Flat / Komal Gandhar* (1961), and *Golden Lining / Subarnarekha* (1962), all a part of his trilogy that explores the city of Calcutta in the post-Partition era through its refugees. The commercial failure of these works deterred him from making any more films through the end of the decade.

It is these experiences in part that fuel Ghatak's attack on India's exhibition trade as the main problem that ails Indian filmmaking. He says that while filmmakers produce films without any guarantee of making money, film exhibitors are uniquely guaranteed to make a fixed sum of money irrespective of a film's commercial success. The money that they earn is almost never re-invested into films, thereby creating what Ghatak calls "a cistern with a leak." This lopsided money-making equation prohibited cinema from being a democratic medium of expression, and it is natural that Ghatak, being a leftist filmmaker, would criticize private capital's hold over the processes of filmmaking (especially independent cinema).

While we see public bodies like the Film Finance Corporation starting to support parallel film doyens like Mani Kaul (his *Uski Roti* was state funded in 1974), it is important to note that Ghatak was one of the first people to voice this demand for a nationalization of the film exhibition trade. Although a short-sighted solution of building more cinema theaters was being offered by the government, Ghatak referred to these as "fringe benefits" and argued that building theaters without having any control over what films get played just adds to the problem. As a filmmaker who only experienced commercial success once, in spite of having made some of the most important works in Bengali film history, Ghatak's criticism of the exhibition trade comes out of his personal frustrations of having clashed with film exhibitors, and of having negotiated with the rampant corruption in the sector, and failed. The call for a nationalized and standardized public film exhibition system is also directly in line with his much publicized communist leanings.

His objections are not just economic. Cinema theaters promoting and playing only big-budget, star-driven films create a visual culture that is inherently rich, showy, and glamorous, thereby leaving no space for the kind of gritty, humane stories of suffering and survival that Ghatak made. This was a moral and political concern because the dominant visual culture bred generations who would only watch happy stories of achieving wealth, and would also grow up to crave that wealth. The star system, or the visual culture propagated by it, could only be eradicated "if we educate our filmmakers and encourage them to make worthwhile movies, by showing that such films also can pay."

he insists. And for Ghatak, this could be ensured only if the state took charge of the exhibition trade. At the same time, he believed it was important for the audience to be trained to appreciate such films. While he saw big-budget Hindi films around him failing to find commercial success, he was optimistic that people's tastes were evolving, and hopeful that audiences would warm up to films that did not follow the cookie-cutter aesthetics of Bollywood. Arguably, Ghatak's text puts forward the idea of an organic film critic, akin to the Gramscian idea of the organic intellectual, who is an intellectual member of a society but, unlike a traditional intellectual, does not consider his intellect to be a privilege that sets him apart.

"I am no critic. I have no panacea for all the evils that beset a serious filmmaker, nor do I have the answer to all the pet questions," he insists, before going on to express a striking similarity with Ray. "So all art should be relative to something. In my thinking, that something is man," he writes. This is in line with Ray saying, "The raw material of the cinema is life itself," and it is in this drawing from life, and not from its aspirations, that Ray and Ghatak go on to create the films that made history.

Ray, coming from a family of authors, artists, and book publishers, was the epitome of the "plain living, high thinking" intellectuals of Calcutta. An artist himself, in his essay he discusses the importance of finding an original aesthetic for Indian cinema before embarking on a movement. As one of the founding fathers of the Indian New Wave, Ray concentrates on establishing an ideology first. It is this ideology that he proposes in his essay.

Ghatak, on the other hand, writes on the economic aspect of film distribution not just because money is the logical second point to ponder over after the ideology is in place, but also because this is an aspect of the film industry that had failed him throughout his career. Nonetheless, as discussed earlier, his essay does not posit only an economic argument, but also an ideological one. Ghatak's films are the perfect example of how art cinema only got valued in retrospect; which is why there is a larger need for the sort of political intervention that Ghatak calls for in his essay.

A truthful and just depiction of society serves as the backbone of the films of India's parallel cinema movement. That is what cinema meant to Ray and Ghatak: an art form of course, but also a product that needed labor to achieve its truest, most democratic form. It is this equal importance that they accorded to both theory and practice, and the insistence of recognizing the labor beyond the art, that define their contribution to Indian cinema.