

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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THE CITIZEN / NAGARIK

1952 / 1977

Ritwik Ghatak

(Bengali language)

Contents (Overview – Plot – Themes – Characters)

OVERVIEW

Ritwik Ghatak's directorial debut was a film that portrayed the unrelenting misery of a middle-class family in Calcutta during the Second World War and the Partition in 1948 (the division of British India into India and Pakistan). Ghatak's first venture, which remains his most overtly political film, proved to be an inspiration for other politically-motivated Indian directors, such as Mrinal Sen and Shyam Benegal. It also contains his only explicit propaganda scene, when the Internationale is heard in the background as the family vacates their house while another family enters, apparently to endure the same grinding poverty.

The story, which opens in the years just after Partition, focuses on one family and their gradual impoverishment. They have recently fallen on hard times and moved to a smaller house. Ramu, the oldest son, can't find work. His father is aging and ill. They take in a lodger, who helps, but still they are unable to make ends meet and they are forced to move to an even more undesirable neighbourhood. Lightening the unrelenting misery of this steady decline are two love stories. Although the film was finished in 1952, it was never released, due to financial problems, and was considered lost. However, a badly damaged print was found and restored before its eventual release in 1977.

CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

This film owes its inspiration to a cultural organisation in Calcutta known as the Indian People's Theatre Association. Founded in 1942, the IPTA (as it was known) was the cultural wing of the Communist Party. It was an anti-colonial movement that promoted politically-conscious arts such as poetry, theatre and films. After Independence, the focus shifted from colonialism to economic oppression, particularly of peasants in Bengal. Ghatak worked with the IPTA in 1948, writing and acting in plays, which led directly to his writing and directing *The Citizen* in 1952. That film, his first, was unique in its noir atmosphere and its use of realistic social details within a melodramatic plot.

STORY

Setting After the credits roll, a wide-angle camera shows panoramic views of Calcutta. Tents of refugees (who fled to Calcutta from Pakistan in the Partition of 1948) line the river bank. Fishermen sit idle in their boats. We also see modern factories, iron bridges, magnificent public buildings and the bustling streets of the metropolis. The calm, subdued voice-over announces: 'The joys and sorrows of human life keep rotating here like a merry-go-round.' The protagonist, Ramu, hears a street musician playing a violin and asks him to play it again. But when he holds out his hand for money, Ramu shakes his head and turns away.

Future prospects At home, Ramu cheerfully tells his mother that he had a good interview. This is good news because the family has fallen into poverty and have been forced to evacuate a large house and move into this near-slum neighbourhood. While the whole family is excited that Ramu will get a job that will pull them out of poverty, the father is pessimistic. 'An interview is not a job,' he glumly points out.

Humiliation The depths to which the family have fallen is revealed in the next scene. The father of a prospective groom for Ramu's sister, Sita, has come to 'inspect' his possible daughter-in-law. Sita does not want to see this man but is persuaded by her mother to serve him food. Her father sings her praises, adding that she didn't complete school because 'we didn't want her to be too educated' (which might put off prospective grooms' families). The father of the prospective groom subjects Sita to a humiliating examination, as if she were a commodity, asking her to let down her hair and turn around.

Finances Ramu visits Uma, his girlfriend, and tells her about the bright future they will have when he gets his job as a land surveyor. 'It's just a dream,' she says, echoing the words of his father. 'No, it's true,' he promises her. Uma's sister, Shepali, is ill, but they have no money for medicine, even though Uma works extra hours as a seamstress. Then Ramu is told that Uma also has stomach problem that requires medical attention, but again there is no money.

Lodger His mother comes up with a partial solution to their financial problems and suggests they take in a lodger. Sagar, the lodger, is another unemployed graduate, like Ramu. He and Sita are attracted to each other.

No job While waiting for his land surveyor job to come through, Ramu is persuaded to interview for another job, but it transpires that he is over-qualified. With no job and no income, the family try to survive on their ration cards issued by the government entitling them to discounted rice. Their situation spirals downward. Ramu tries but fails to earn some money and ends up in despair on a bench in the park. Finally, Sagar gives some money to Ramu's mother, so that the family can eat that night. Sita feels embarrassed to take money from a lodger.

Poverty Ramu and Sita hardly eat, and Ramu takes a loan from a friend on the thin hope that again he will be successful in an interview. The interview is cancelled. Sagar is then told that he has a job, or that he will surely get it, which to him and Ramu is the same thing. Meanwhile, a neighbour's son is dying of malnutrition, and Uma's sister is forced into prostitution to bring money into her family. Ramu's father falls seriously ill, Uma's sister, Shepali, goes away with a dubious man, and Ramu's mother decides that the family must move to a slum in order to afford the rent.

Sita's declaration During the family's preparation to move away, Sita tells Sagar that she loves him. When he tells her that he is going far away, she says that she'll go with him. Hearing their declaration of love, despite their poverty, Ramu takes heart and makes a speech about the need to face problems.

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Departure The family leave the house. The two couples, Ramu and Uma, and Sita and Sagar, have pledged themselves to each other, but their futures are far from bright. The rain pours down as they walk away, and a new family arrives. 'Don't worry,' the man says to his wife. 'As soon as I get my job in the tax office, we can pay the rent.' The merry-go-round of poverty will rotate again, just as the narrator had predicted in the opening shots.

THEMES

Poverty The main theme of the film is the pervasive poverty, which afflicts post-Independence India, and its causation. This large social problem is examined through the detailed lives of one family and their immediate neighbours. It is significant that the film-maker chose an upper-caste, middle-class, educated family rather than a family of low-caste labourers or peasants. We don't know the exact reason for the family's decline that forced them to leave a large, comfortable house and move into a low-rent district of Calcutta. We know only that the father is old and unable to work, while the oldest son is unable to find work. Ramu may be a dreamer, unlike his practical father, but he does go to interviews only to find out that he is either too qualified or that the interview is cancelled. We learn also about the all-important ration cards that many people depended on to make ends meet in the 1950s (and 1960s). Slowly, the lack of income (which forces one neighbour into prostitution) builds problem upon problem: there's no money to buy medicine or enough food or to pay the rent. How could this happen to a such a relatively well-off family? A similar question is asked of India as a nation. Sagar, the lodger, reads a book about the country's natural resources and realises that India is a rich country. He says that this well-endowed nation is poor because it lacks willpower, an explanation endorsed by the father, who decries the lack of backbone in his son. Although the director supported social and economic change, the film never proposes a political solution. For example, when Ramu is invited to a political party meeting, he simply says he's too busy. There is hope at the end of the film, however, in the union of two pairs of lovers, but the final shot reinforces the initial statement that misery is a never-ending cycle. The director appears more interested in exposing the problem of poverty than in proposing solutions to it.

Dreams and realities A second theme is the contrast between the characters' individual responses to life's challenges. Here, the film presents the tension between dreams and realities. Ramu, the central character, is a dreamer, who plans his future house based on an ideal cottage depicted in a calendar that hangs on the wall. While things get progressively worse in the family around him, he repeatedly gazes at the red tile roof and tidy garden. He has a rich imagination, as suggested by the scenes in which he dreamily looks at trees and flowers. Opposing him are his father, who more than once compares going to an interview to gambling by buying lottery tickets, and his girlfriend, Uma, who has no time for wasteful fantasies. His mother seems to inhabit both camps. She is trapped in her memories of the old house but is practical enough to face the realities around her. The film thus poses the question of how to cope with difficulties. Is hope a good thing? Do dreams distract us from facing reality? Or is hope, in fact, the very thing we need to solve our problems? What is the right balance between ambition and practicality? The film concludes with a speech from Ramu that comes down strong on the side of hope as essential to useful action, but it has raised enough doubts to undermine its own conviction.

CHARACTERS

Ramu Ramu, the son, is the main character. Ramu, the protagonist, is a young man with hopes of getting a job. Although he takes this task seriously, he is something of a dreamer and sometimes, in his worst moments, a fantasist. He is not above lying to hide his failures, and sometimes wallows in self-pity. However, he is a kind and considerate person, if not always perceptive. Finally, as shown at the end, he is capable of inspiration and determination.

Optimistic Ramu's dominant characteristic is his optimism. In an early scene, he comes home from an interview and chats with his mother. She looks around her and complains of 'the suffocating space of the place.' He agrees but then bubbles over with confidence. 'Don't worry, ma,' he enthuses. 'It was a good interview. I nailed it.' She looks at him with sceptical eyes and he goes on to say, 'Yes, I'll get this job and take you away from this in a few days. Just you see.' At this point in the long film, we are unsure whether he is simply a confident young man or a hopeless fantasist. The genius of this quiet, unsensational film is that we are kept guessing right to the very end.

Inspired After the many setbacks in his family and his own inability to get a job, Ramu falls prey to doubt and self-pity. And, yet, at the end, he shows that he is still capable of inspiration. In the most dramatic and moving moment in the film, he overhears his sister, Sita, talking with their lodger, Sagar. She declares her love for Sagar, but he feels unable to reciprocate because he is too poor to support her. Ramu then intervenes and makes them see that they must unite to fight their problems together. He has been inspired by the depth of their love for each other in the face of dire poverty. Facing the camera, Ramu gives an inspired speech about how hope rises from despair, like a mother in labour who feels she will die but then gives birth to new life. This scene is followed by an equally significant one in which he tears up the calendar (with the picture of his ideal house) and marches out into the rain. The transformation of Ramu from dreamer to man of action may require a little suspension of disbelief, but it is a moving scene, nevertheless.

Sagar Sagar is the lodger, who later marries Sita. Sagar, the family's lodger, is similar to Ramu in several aspects: he is young, educated, kind, polite, unemployed and somewhat disorganised. But he is more resolute, less self-pitying and more determined than Ramu. While Ramu seeks solace from his troubles by wandering in a garden, Sagar buys a book and tries to understand the world around him.

Kind As soon as Sagar enters the family house, he displays his kindness. He is diffident and crosses the threshold as if entering a shrine. The half-blind father asks him to help identify a small bird he has in his hand. 'It's probably dead,' the father says, 'I found it on the floor of the veranda.' 'No, it's not dead,' Sagar says. 'It probably fell from its nest. It's a baby sparrow. It'll fly away if you let it. Here, let me take it from you.' Sagar then holds the tiny bird and gently strokes its wings in order to revive its strength. He releases the bird and describes its movements to the father with growing excitement. 'It's standing up. It's walking. It's on the veranda. Yes, it's flown, flown away.' Sagar laughs with joy at his success in saving the little creature. We know then that he is a man with nothing but kindness in his heart.

Resolute Sagar (a trained but unemployed chemist) is less passive than Ramu and reads a great deal, which provides him with ideas and explanations. This information makes him more resolute than his friend and better able to face life's problems. A good illustration of Sagar's determination (and its contrast with Ramu's weakness) occurs when Sagar is busy reading and Ramu walks in dejected. Ramu says he feels like a failure, and Sagar speaks to him like a doctor to a patient. 'You're feeling tired and frustrated, like all of us,' he says. Ramu asks why this is so, and Sagar explains that he read a book recently about India's natural resources. 'We are a rich country,' he says, 'but we breakdown at the first problem we face, such as poverty. It's the same with you. We have to be strong and resolute.' Ramu looks perplexed, as well he might, and Sagar continues, gaining more conviction with every sentence. 'We deserve better. Every person should live a fulfilled life. All we need is will power.' Ramu shakes his head in disbelief and leaves, while Sagar ponders his own words in silence.

Sita Sita, who is Ramu's younger sister, is a strong presence in the story. She shows resilience in the face of the family's slow decline, and she displays dignity when humiliated in the 'marriage market.' She is not a rebel, or a 'modern woman,' but she has self-respect and the courage to express herself at key moments.

Humiliated One of the most excruciatingly painful scenes in the movie occurs when Sita is subjected to the gaze of her potential father-in-law. She is a mature young woman, and her father wants her married (to decrease the number of mouths to be fed). The father of a prospective groom has arrived and sits in a front room, waiting for her to appear. She nearly refuses to enter but is persuaded by her mother that it 'is the right thing to do.' She walks in and remains standing while the prospective groom's father inspects her like an animal he might want to buy. 'Let down your hair,' he says, although women do not let down their hair in front of strange or non-kin men. 'Turn around,' he commands and then, 'pull up your sari and walk a little.' When Sita's father looks concerned, the man

says, 'It's nothing. Some girls have defects, you know.' Meanwhile, her father is prattling on, explaining that she is not too educated (an educated woman might not, in some people's eyes, make a good wife), that she is a good housekeeper and that she is quiet. Sita submits to these humiliations, but her sour expression makes it clear that she is angry inside.

Outspoken Sita's submissive behaviour in the above scene at the start of the film is in sharp contrast to her bold action in a scene at the very end. The family, having been defeated by poverty and illness, decided to move to a cheaper house. For some time it has been apparent that Sita and Sagar are attracted to each other, although neither has shown any outward signs of their affection—the cramped quarters of their house discourage any such displays. Now, when things are about to change, Sita enters Sagar's room and tells him that she will go away with him, not her own family. He is shocked at such an overt declaration of love and tells her to reconsider, that he is 'no one' and that he has no prospects. Sita says that she knows he loves her from his eyes. She insists that he must tell her if she is right. He hesitates and remains silent, but she pleads with him. Finally, he can no longer withstand her boldness and admits that he, too, loves her. Sita has shown great courage in admitting her love first, a reversal of the normal gender roles.

Sita Ramu's sister.

Uma Uma is a neighbour who falls in love with Ramu.

Father Ramu's father is an old and ill man.

Mother Ramu's mother is a strong, practical woman.



(Ramu promising his mother that the future will be bright)



(Sita consoled by Ramu after her declaration of love is not immediately reciprocated by Sagar)



(Sagar, facing camera, explains to Ramu the importance of self-will)