

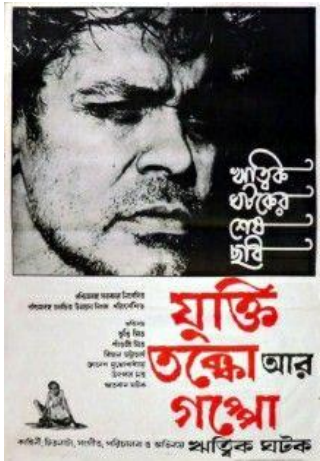
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**REASON, DEBATE AND A STORY / JUKTI TAKKO AAR GAPPO (1974)**

Ritwik Ghatak

Bengali language

Film link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pAQ7-68uTZ0>



OVERVIEW

**Director** Ritwik Ghatak was born in Dacca (in present-day Bangladesh), and his family moved to Kolkata just before masses of starving people streamed into the city as a result of the famine of 1943-44 and the Partition of 1947-48. Those two events, along with the Bangladesh war in 1971, which also brought refugees to Kolkata, would dominate most of his films. Ritwik Ghatak became politically active in the IPTA (Indian Peoples Theatre Association) in the 1950s before entering the world of film as an assistant director and making his directorial debut in 1953 with *The Citizen (Nagarik)*, which went unreleased but is considered a classic today. Ghatak joined and was then purged from the Communist Party of India, after which he became a prolific writer of short stories, plays and film theory. He directed one of the all-time great films of Indian cinema with *The Cloud-Capped Star (Meghe Dhaka Tara)*, 1960). Along with Satyajit Ray and Mrinal Sen, he charted a Bengali film industry that reflected the turbulent politics of his day and surpassed Bollywood in its social realism. His personal life was however rocky; he suffered from mental illness and alcoholism and even sold his film reels to shady producers for money and alcohol— leading to many of his film prints being recovered in unusable condition and having to be restored.

Ghatak directed eight full-length feature films (of which only seven were publicly released) and a handful of documentaries, which depict the lives of ordinary and marginal people. *The Cloud-Capped Star (Meghe Dhaka Tara)* was listed at number 231 in a list of all-time best films by Sight and Sound in 2002, while *Golden Lining (Subarnarekha)* was listed at 346. Ghatak also received many awards in India, including the National Film Award for Best Story in 1974 and a Padma Shri from the Indian government in 1970.

**Film** *Reason, Debate and a Story* is Ghatak's last film. It is somewhat of an autobiographical satire featuring a broken, addicted, disillusioned hero's journey back to his "home" that he had lost. Unable to reform himself, he is ultimately killed at the end. Ghatak himself explained:

In it [*Jukti Takko Aar Gappo*] the political backdrop of West Bengal from 1971 to 1972 as I saw it has been portrayed. There is no ideology. I saw it from a point of view not of a politician. I am not supposed to please a political ideology... I have seen the untold miseries inflicted on my people in the name of independence— which is a fake and a sham. I have reacted violently to this (in *Jukti Tokko*).

Ghatak was aware of a complete breakdown of moral values around him, especially among the

younger generation. He tried to portray this in this film (and also in his unfinished film *Sei Vishnupriya*).

*Background* In *Cinema and I*, Ghatak relates a poignant anecdote from the making of the film:

While I was making my latest film, *Jukti Takko Ar Gappo*, I had to go to a village and had to stay there for a few days. The persons with whom I had to stay were a poor peasant couple, victims of my exalted didi, [older sister] Indira Gandhi. I was at that time oozing blood, having six cavities in my left lung, that too at a very advanced stage of phtysis [phthisis]. Before every shot I started vomiting blood. This peasant couple looked after me and fed me. (Though I had that much of resources with me). One night I asked the lady (the wife), "How do you live?" She said, "Rice, wheat, Bajra, Bhutta, everything is a dream to us. We have a small cultivated land from where we bring some *bhindi* (okra) and sell them in the market 10 miles away, and buy a little mustard oil. We cannot buy kerosene oil. So we cannot have the luxury of having a lamp in our hutment". They take almost poisonous herbs from nearby jungles and eat once a day. The whole night they live in the dark. She said, "The authorities have not yet been able to steal two things from us. God's air" and the Sun. But they will do it." I am supposed to be a hard-boiled nut, but believe me, tears came to my eyes. Such is the condition of my people, and what kind of films we make!

As usual for Ghatak, *Reason, Debate and a Story* gained barely any traction while he was alive and became a cult favourite only posthumously in the 1980's and later. Ghatak employed again an excellent cast for the film—from Utpal Dutt, a thespian and stalwart of Indian cinema to Shñaoili Mitra, possibly the most accomplished Bengal theatre actress of recent times and founder of the theatre group *Pancham Baidik* which pioneered widely acclaimed plays on women's emancipation. The superlative musical score was composed by Ustad Bahadur Khan and playback sung by Debabrata Biswas and Arati Mukherjee (among others), two of Bengal's best-loved singers. The film is now widely critiqued with many excellent essays and book chapters devoted to it and has found its way into university syllabi.

## CHARACTERS

|                        |   |
|------------------------|---|
| Nilkontho              | Alcoholic, disillusioned intellectual (played by Ritwik Ghatak) |
| Durga                  | Nilkontho's estranged wife (played by Tripti Mitra)             |
| Satya                  | Nilkontho and Durga's child (played by Ritwik's son Ritaban)    |
| Nachiketa              | Nilkontho's young friend and guide/mentor                       |
| Bongobala              | Young refugee woman who tags along with Nilkontho               |
| Jagannath Bhattacharya | Brahmin refugee teacher who tags along with Nilkontho           |
| Satyajit Basu          | Nilkontho's old friend (played by Utpal Dutt)                   |
| Panchanan Ustad        | Chhou performer   |

Naxalite Leader, Police Inspector and others

## SYNOPSIS

The plot is in the format of a hero's journey, except of course it's the most disillusioned, broken, addicted and pathetic hero Nilkontho, played by Ghatak himself. After his wife, Durga, takes his son Satya and leaves him to teach at a girls' school far away, Nilkontho seems to be fine with it even after he's evicted from the apartment. He is herded around by Nachiketa, a jobless young man and Bongobala, a refugee young woman in search of shelter. They soon befriend another refugee Jagannath, a Sanskrit teacher, who is fond of quoting from the scriptures. The trio roam around the city and Nilkontho doesn't miss a single opportunity to drink. They meet Satyajit Basu, an old estranged friend of Nilkontho's, by chance; Satyajit is sorely disappointed by how far Nilkontho had fallen. Nilkontho decides to walk to Durga's workplace, which is a village many miles away. On the way, they meet a Chhou [masked-dance] performer Panchanan Ustad, and spend a night at his hut, enjoying the local festivities. We see more of Bongobala's unfettered, innocent nature. Jagannath is killed by a stray bullet after an altercation with a local landlord. Nilkontho, Nachiketa and Bongobala keep walking and finally reach their destination. They receive a lukewarm welcome from Durga, who takes a liking to Bongobala but tells Nilkontho to leave. Nilkontho wants to rest and the three of them go to spend the night at a nearby pine grove, where they meet a group of insurgent Naxals [revolutionary group of those times]. Nilkontho happily drinks all night while striking up a conversation

with the Naxal leader about politics and morality. At dawn, a large police force attacks the Naxals. There is heavy firing and the Naxals are eliminated. Nilkontho is shot in the stomach and dies.

## SCENES

**A macabre dance** An old, decrepit man sits under a shed and looks at the camera. Three shadowy men in black body stockings (similar to mime costume) perform a dance in front of a barren white landscape.



**Durga leaves Nilkontho** A woman, Durga, leading away her child, Satya, leaves the house after saying goodbye to a drunk and decrepit man, her husband, Nilkontho. Some movers pack up a few remaining things and Nilkontho tells her not to leave anything. She tells him that she tried everything over the years to stay together, even sending him to a mental institution for treatment, but his drunkenness was ultimately too much in the end. She needs to build herself and their son, Satya, up from scratch: "Separation is essential". She forbids him to visit at her new workplace. Nilkontho says that his son will be a bigger intellectual than him. Durga says that if she leaves the books behind he'll sell them for alcohol soon enough and those should instead be his son's inheritance.



**Nilkontho meets Nachiketa** A young bearded man (Nachiketa) arrives in Nilkontho's room. Nilkontho tells him to sell the ceiling fan for booze; the country doesn't need engineers like him but labourers. Nachiketa replies that Durga gave him the responsibility of taking care of Nilkontho, but Nilkontho shoos him away.



**Nilkontho meets Bongobala** Nilkontho rants in the evening all by himself. Suddenly, a young pretty woman appears. She says she is from Bangladesh, her name is Bongobala and she is a refugee. She needs shelter. Nachiketa brings a bottle of local booze and tells them that the landlord is evicting them. Nilkontho tells Bongobala to come with him—they will find a sanctuary together. Nachiketa calls her an *apod* (unwanted burden) but lets her come along.



**A night together** Nilkontho asks Nachiketa for a bottle of cheap booze. They go to a place where a few poor labourers are drinking. Bongobala tells him that her home was near the border and her father was a teacher. One night, suddenly, they were accosted and shot down. No one helped them. Nilkontho tells her to sleep, quoting from "At Galway Races" by William Butler Yeats: "Someday, at some new moon we shall learn that sleeping is not death. Hearing the whole earth change its tune". Nilkontho hugs Nachiketa and Bongobala and says he loves all of them. They are the future, Bangladesh unborn. He too had many dreams in his youth, but all were dashed.



**Old romance** In a wooded mountain landscape, a woman runs away from a man in typical Bollywood style. We see many picturesque landscapes with the Tagore song "Amar onge onge ke bajae banshi" ("Who's playing the flute on each part of my body/soul") playing in the background. They are Nilkontho and Durga in their youth. They lay together on the grass romantically.



**Disturbed by the police** At night, a small police squad come to arrest the three of them sleeping on the park bench, but go away once they recognize Nilkontho. Nachiketa says that numerous men like him no prospects...but before he can finish his thought, Nilkontho interrupts, repeating the word "prospects" several times.



**Jagannath meets the trio** Next morning, children play on a field and then tease an old man who was praying. Nachiketa chases the children away and brings the man to Nilkontho and Bongobala. The man is Jagannath, a Sanskrit teacher in his village school, who migrated to Calcutta for a job. He has no family and is like a lost crow. Nilkontho invites him to join their group. They have some breakfast. Nilkontho says, "I hold nectar in my hands; do you want some?"



**An old, estranged friend** We see a smiling monkey. At Princep Ghat (on the River Ganges), an itinerant singer sings the folk-devotional song "Namaz amar hoilo na aday". Satyajit stops his car to watch and tells the younger man riding with him that Nilkontho has been demanding the unification of Bengal for thirty years, but now that it's imminent, he is drowning in alcohol fumes. Nilkontho notices them and tells Bongobala that it's his old friend, Satyajit Basu. He began as a revolutionary artist but now sells "consumerist pornography" as art.



**Nachiketa and Jagannath** Elsewhere, in front of the river, Nachiketa asks Jagannath if he was actually a madman or just a drug addict. Jagannath replies that Acharya Jagadish Chandra Bose wrote about the origins of the Ganges river from Shiva's hair-knot: "This, right here, is that soundless Bhagirathi". Nachiketa says that he's showing off. Nilkontho and Bongobala join them. Nilkontho complains that all their money is going fast.



**Satyajit drinks with his friends** At night, Satyajit and five or six of his companions drink under a tree. One of the artists brings an unopened, gigantic bottle of Chivas Regal. Satyajit is morose. Another artist complains that all the good artists have turned commercial. They can't decide on a topic to chat about (politics, arts, films) and ramble on until they see Nilkontho and run away.

**Nilkontho and Satyajit meet** Satyajit offers his own glass of scotch to Nilkontho, who refuses. He then offers some money. Satyajit says that the singer's song has made him think about Nilkontho and his demands for a cultural reunification of Bengal. Nilkontho says that he knows what Satyajit was thinking, as he saw him at Princep Ghat. Nilkontho takes one bill from Satyajit's proffered stack and utters the iconic words, "*Bhabo, bhabo, bhaba practice koro!*" ("Think, Think, Practice thinking") His thinking was fruitless; maybe the younger generation will have a better shot at it. Nilkontho leaves. Satyajit dashes his glass to the ground.



**Another night passes** Nilkontho drinks with a couple of goons at a cheap shop. The three other wait out the night in front of shuttered door. Nachiketa says that this aimless life is not for him and he will line up at the docks next morning for some labourer gig. Jagannath says that a home needs a homemaker. Nilkontho reruns to them and rambles. The next day, there are some protests about closed factories. A man gives an impassioned lecture about fighting for Mother India and democracy as many people watch.



**Bongobala's loss** Bongobala sits by a pond and sings a plaintive folk song about loss and leaving home, remembering bathing her (lost) child. Nilkontho watches admiringly. Nachiketa says it's not a song but a cat's howling cry. Bongobala gets angry. Nilkontho says that he will go to his wife and they have just enough money to walk there. He wants to turn his life around. They start walking.



**The group meets Panchanan Ustad** On the way, they meet Panchanan Ustad, a poor farmer, who gives them water to drink. He asks them to spend the night there as the next township is far away. There is hardly any water and little food, but they will share. He used to be a Chhou [semi-classical] dancer, but that art form has fallen from popularity. He never has guests, so is overjoyed with their visit. Instead of waiting for the food, Nilkontho and Nachiketa step outside.



**A village fair** There is a cattle race with many children and adults running and jumping on a wide field. A row of archers positions their bows. A local landlord Madan Jotdar accosts them and asks Nilkontho why they're here and which political party they're from, but Nilkontho says he doesn't belong to any party. There is singing and dancing.



**Panchanan's regrets** Bongobala and Panchanan finish cooking while Jagannath continues napping. Bongobala admires a Chhou mask that Panchanan is repairing. Panchanan laments that nowadays these masks are dead, as the city *babus* buy them and hang them on their walls or inside curio cabinets as show-pieces. In his youth, he was a great performer. He gives an interpretation of a popular folk rhyme "Agdum Bagdum".

**Bongobala wants to dance Chhou** Bongobala says she wants to dance as Maa Durga. But Panchanan tries to snatch away the mask and tells her that women don't dance Chhou; only men dressed as women. But she insists, and he gives in, telling her that nothing will happen if she doesn't dance.



**A Chhou performance** Masked Chhou performers, dressed as Durga, Lakshmi, Kartik, Ganesh, Shiva, demons, monkey and baby perform to live music at the fair as a crowd watches. Nilkontho and his companions watch, enthralled; Panchanan plays the *dhol drum* enthusiastically. A scene of war and separation is enacted as the music reaches a crescendo and Ravana and Hanuman face off. Finally Durga arrives with her children and kills Ravana.



**Jagannath and Panchanan argue** Later at night, Jagannath and Panchanan chat about their old age and Jagannath, ever quoting from scriptures, utters that famous shloka from *Bhagavat Gita*: 'As a person sheds worn-out garments and wears new ones, likewise, at the time of death, the soul casts off its worn-out body and enters a new one. ["*vasansi jirnani yatha vihaya/ navani grihnti naro 'parani*"]. Bongobala poses with a Durga mask next to her face. Panchanan shows her a few more masks.



Jagannath again quotes from scriptures, annoying Panchanan, who says it's his mother and not any of that *mlechha* (foreign, unclean) nonsense. Jagannath is astounded, but Panchanan insists that Sanskrit is a *mlechha* language. Bongobala breaks up the fight but they still call each other names.

**An uneasy night** Nilkontho has found a local to drink with as the singing and dancing continues at the fair. The local man passes out and Nachiketa brings Nilkontho back to Panchanan's house. But Nilkontho walks away again. Nachiketa complains and Bongobala almost hits him with the Durga mask. Nachiketa is terrified. Jagannath quotes a Durga shloka at him. Later, while eating, Bongobala comes and throws down a plateful of rice by Nachiketa, who gets furious and walks away, stepping on the food. Nilkontho sings a famous Tagore song to Bongobala, "*Keno cheye achho go maa*" ("Why do you look at us, mother") and Bongobala starts sobbing.



### Goodbye to Panchanan

The next day, Panchanan is very sad to let them go; all of them cry a lot and Jagannath consoles him with some scriptures. They set off but are immediately confronted by the aggressive local Madav Jotdar with his goons, who had earlier questioned Nilkontho about his political affiliation. He threatens them with a rifle and Bongobala pounces on him. The gun accidentally goes off and the bullet hits Jagannath. Jagannath dies. The ghosts dance while the old man watches.



### On the way to their final destination

The three of them walk again. Nachiketa explains to Bongobala that Nilkontho is sprouting nonsense ("I'm burning, the world is burning" etc.) because he's afraid of his wife sending him away again. Nachiketa hears a noise in the bushes. Nachiketa continues teasing Bongobala. They arrive at the village of their destination. Nilkontho promptly finds a drunkard on the street and gives him money to buy some booze. The man also gives them confusing directions to the girls' school where Durga teaches.

### Unwelcome

They wait outside for a while as Nilkontho is in a quandary whether to go right in. Nachiketa refuses to go into the "lion's den" by himself and Nilkontho "gathers courage" by taking a big gulp of his cheap booze. When he enters, Satya, the son, is overjoyed but Durga is quietly furious. Nilkontho tells her that he has brought her a whole daughter, just as she had always wanted. He is now a reformed person and will work for his keep. Durga tells him to leave regardless, but only after he has eaten a meal. Durga takes a liking to Bongobala and tells her to wash and chop some vegetables.



### A promise

Bongobala sings a folk song about lost home while Nilkontho and Satya enjoy her singing. When it's time for Nilkontho and Nachiketa to leave, Durga tries to hold Bongobala back, but Bongobala says that she'll stay with Nilkontho, who is like a child and beat him into the straight and narrow. Durga sighs and tells Bongobala to bring him back if she's able to reform him.



### Bittersweet words

Before leaving, Nilkontho wants to go to a nearby pine forest (with Durga), as he's very weary; he doesn't tire easily, but is weary today. Durga tells him that she will no longer be fooled by his sentimental words; if he really is weary, then he should settle down somewhere. He snaps out of his mood and says he'll spend the night in the forest. Then he requests her to bring some food to him in the forest in the morning. Durga is touched, but says she'll think about it. He also wants to see his son's face in the first light of day, as he'll be carrying that memory with him.



### Meeting some Naxal revolutionaries

Later, while walking and drinking, Nilkontho mumbles about his failed generation and failed Independence. Suddenly, some young men with guns come and accost him, saying that he might be an "agent". They ask him who he is, but he answers vaguely, saying, "I'm burning, the world is burning, I'm a broken intellectual". After hearing his name, the Naxal leader tells the others, "He's a well-known man; he has no politics". But Nilkontho won't leave them alone: he wants to see what drives them.



### A history lesson

Nilkontho settles down with his bottle. The Naxal leader asks him why he drinks so much, as he admires Nilkontho. Nilkontho replies that his own generation is full of thieves and bewildered people; the younger generation like them is the cream of the crop, but they are misguided. The man keeps arguing politics with Nilkontho, who replies with a history lesson beginning from historical materialism through Lenin, Mao and Che Guevara.



The Naxal leader calls Nilkontho names, but he doesn't mind at all and goes on and on. We hear snippets of the conversation between them. Nilkontho says that no matter what depths he falls to, he will never lie. The Naxal leader says that's also a pose, for getting money to buy booze from easily

duped people. Nilkontho says that he's confused— we are all confused, just floundering around.

**Bongobala and Nachiketa** Interspersed with their conversation, Nachiketa and Bongobala get annoyed with mosquitoes and the cold bothers them. Bongobala and Nachiketa sit back-to-back against a tree while sleeping sitting up. Soon, they exchange meaningful glances, then start breathing heavily. Looking at them, Nilkontho says, "Life, life is the wealth of the living". Standing up back-to-back against a tree, they keep groaning and sighing (from the cold and perhaps also mutual desire). Durga arrives with Satya.

**Shot by police** A large group of police come to kill the Naxals and surround the forest. Much fire is exchanged, with big runs, smoke bombs, grenades and bombs. This goes on for some time. Nachiketa and Bongobala are flustered and can't find a way out. The Naxal leader gets shot and we see his dead face with open eyes, body supine on the still rattling machine gun. Nilkontho gets shot in the stomach. Durga cries out and runs towards him, but stops. Before collapsing, Nilkontho comes towards the camera and pours his cheap alcohol over it.

**Death** Durga and Satya run towards him as he falls down. He mutters "I'm burning, the world is burning, everything is burning" and asks Durga if she remembers the story of Madan the Weaver by Manik Bandyopadhyay. He dies. The police pick up his body and they all march hurriedly down the hilly trail. There is much clanging and ululation in the background score. Nachiketa and Bongobala go hand in hand. Police follow with captured Naxalites. Wedding music and ululation play in the background score, followed by cacophony. The ghosts dance while the old man watches, now in close-up.



## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**Nilkontho** Nilkontho, played by Ghatak himself, is the somewhat mentally unstable and alcoholic protagonist of the film. In his journey back to his wife, who separated from him, he meets a slew of characters who help explore various positive and ugly facets of then-contemporary Bengal; however, he himself remains unchanged in his "confusion", caught between disillusionment and hope.

*Friendly* Nilkontho easily befriends anyone and everyone without question or judgement, no matter what strata of society they come from or what intentions they have towards him, as if he himself is but a passing twig in the river of life, enjoying their company for whatever it's worth. He tells Bongobala and Jagannath to come along and doesn't think twice before sitting down to drink with both the lowly rabble and the intellectual elites.

*Famous* Nilkontho was once a popular and famous public intellectual, so much so that even the police leave him alone when he spends the night on the park bench with Nachiketa and Bongobala. The Naxalites, too, don't shoot him at first sight as the leader recognizes that he "has no party or politics". Being left alone by both police and Naxalites (warring forces) is an impressive feat given his ragged appearance and abnormal behaviour such as not caring at all for his own safety or comfort. Satyajit, too, laments his old friend's fall from grace as "drowning in alcohol fumes".

*Alcoholic* Alcoholism almost defines Nilkontho's character. From beginning to end, it is the cause of all his woes, from Durga and Satya leaving to being reprimanded by Nachiketa, Satyajit, Bongobala and even the Naxal leader. He doesn't offer any clear explanation as to why he drinks so much, as to be expected from an addict. But one can guess that it is a reflection of the widespread downfall, decadence, chaos and dishonesty that surrounds the characters. But it is clear that he doesn't drink to forget as much as to reduce his inhibitions, as his wit is still quite sharp and discerning, if not downright incisive and revolutionary. Finally, after Nilkontho gets shot in the stomach in the police raid, he spills his bottle of alcohol over the camera, in a symbolic representation of completing his own funeral rites himself by offering the last sip of holy water before death to himself (instead of a family member doing it as is customary). But instead of water, it's alcohol, fiery yet cheap, killing him from the inside and a fitting end for a man like him.

*Confused* Nilkontho repeats that he is "confused" several times in the film. Although anyone who observes him concludes that he is just a broken, disillusioned man (he agrees with that), there is more to him in all his positive traits. He doesn't hesitate to criticize or praise, depending on the occasion or person he's interacting with. He has not a single good thing to say about his own generation, yet is hopeful for the next generation, the Nachiketans, Bongobalas and Naxals, though he

does think that the latter in particular are misguided and lack purpose.

**Bongobala** Bongobala, literally meaning “daughter of Bengal”, is a young refugee woman who meets and befriends Nilkontho by pure chance and later seems to develop feelings for Nachiketa, Nilkontho’s other companion. She is a spirited, brave woman with a mind of her own, unshackled by tradition in a way only refugees can be and acts as somewhat of a “little mother” to Nilkontho.

*Spirited* Bongobala usually doesn’t take any disrespect lying down, even though it may cause her pain; in this and everything else, she finds Nilkontho’s support. For instance, when Nachiketa calls her names and fights with her about wearing the Durga mask, she doesn’t serve him food properly and instead throws the plate of rice down by his feet. Somehow Nachiketa is able to salvage his dignity by walking away. But later she is sad and cries when Nilkontho sings the famous song, “Why do you keep looking, Mother, at my face?”

*Unconventional* From the very beginning, Bongobala shows her unconventional side, from quickly deciding to join Nilkontho and Nachiketa without being worried for her own safety, to accompanying them through various unsavoury and unsafe situations, like lower-class alcohol dens and a woodland taken over by Naxal revolutionaries; thankfully she gets out of it physically unscathed.

*Caring* Bongobala is somewhat of a “little mother” to Nilkontho and assumes a characteristic caregiving function to the whole group, cooking them a meal at Panchanan’s house and keeping him and Jagannath from coming to blows. When she meets Durga, there is an immediate onscreen chemistry between them (they are mother and daughter in real life). She refuses Durga’s offer to stay as she wants to take care of Nilkontho, a feat she could possibly have mastered (had Nilkontho lived) given their shared migrant roots and mindsets, whereas Durga failed.

## THEMES

**Semi-autobiography** At the time when Ritwik was making this film, his lungs and kidneys were shot from years of abuse and he sensed that was nearing the end. That is perhaps why he chose to make a thinly veiled autobiographical film that was a compilation of both his significant life events and deliberations on a broader scale on issues that India and Bengal were facing at that time. The central events are clearly based on and are a satirical take on Ghatak’s own life events, similar to Fellini’s autobiographical satire *8 ½*. Familial abandonment gives Nilkontho, the ultimate example of a disillusioned, once-respected but now-pitied intellectual, an opportunity to delve deeper into the issues plaguing current society, with a touch of satire, humour and hope. Each person or group he meets on his journey helps explore the rootlessness of post-Partition Bengal, the emotional and moral inconsistencies of society, the absence of any visible prospects for the youth and an utter confusion stemming from the disillusionment of the post-colonial, post-Independence dream. The destination, i.e., his wife who abandoned him, present yet absent simultaneously, also ultimately symbolizes nostalgia for a “lost home” and makes Nilkontho himself a refugee— themes that run through all of Ghatak’s films. As such, this film is the culmination of Ritwik’s cinematic genealogy which had been asking questions of identity throughout. Who was an Indian? Who was a Bengali? Who was a refugee? Who was to be blamed for this painful predicament?

*Illustrative moment.* There is an almost one-to-one correspondence between Ghatak’s morbid alcoholism followed by his wife, Surama, leaving with their son Ritaban to the beginning of the film when Durga and Satya leave Nilkontho. Durga sternly tells him that she cannot be with him any more as she has the responsibility to raise their son correctly— “separation is essential”— for he will only drag them down. His lifestyle of irresponsibility and “drowning in alcohol” was neither sustainable long-term nor appropriate for a middle-class household.

**Allegory** The film has, at first glance, a far too simple and familiar story of a disillusioned intellectual who loses everything because of his alcoholism; men like Nilkontho haven’t been rare in the last few decades in Bengal (with the significant difference that Nilkontho doesn’t turn bitter as these men usually did). But Ghatak was an absolute master at depicting complicated things simply; every character or event or sequence has multiple symbolic and allegorical resonances, helping make this perhaps his most widely reviewed film.

For instance, Ghatak himself plays Nilkontho with élan. Nilkontho [‘Blue-Throat’] is named after Shiva (whose throat turned blue after drinking poison to save the world) and strives to accept all the “poisons” of the world and coexist with them, from the refugee woman of unknown status to Naxal revolutionaries. Next, Tripti Mitra, an established theatre and film actress, plays Nilkontho’s wife



Durga (named after the Hindu goddess Durga, Shiva's consort). In an interview, Ghatak described his wife Surama Ghatak as a Sati (another form of Durga renowned for her piety). Like Durga, she remains faithful to her husband despite differences, until the end. Ritaban Ghatak (Ghatak's real-life son) plays the role of Nilkontho's son Satya (meaning "true" or "real").

Of Nilkontho's friends and acquaintances, Nachiketa is inspired by the Hindu mythological character of the same name, who was granted three boons by Yama, the god of death, and asked about the secret of death, which Yama was unable to answer. Bongobala (meaning "daughter of Bengal", played by the most notable Bengal theatre actress of late, Shñāoli Mitra) is a personification of the female refugee and together they are the face of the next generation. Similarly, Jagannath Bhattacharjee, a Sanskrit language teacher, can be read as a representative of ancient Sanskrit civilisation, in uneasy coexistence/conflict with equally old folk or indigenous heritages, represented by Panchanan Ustad, a Chhou performer. Panchanan is another name for Shiva in his five-headed form as SadaShiva, and Jagannath is an avatar of Vishnu/ Krishna. This naming also a subtextual reference to the longstanding feud between the streams of Hinduism in Bengal (Shaiva, or following Shiva; Shakta, or following Shakti or the goddess Kali; and Vaishnav, or following Krishna).

Then, of course, Ghatak takes it even further; as Geeta Kapur argues:

But having set up the protagonist in this mythical framework, *Jukti Takko's* narrative proceeds to devolve his iconicity; mockingly, affectionately, a transcendent figure is turned inside out into a man filled with grand illusion but also marked by the fallibility that distinguishes the martyr...

In *Jukti*, he demonstrates-and indeed the film is a kind of pedagogical exercise-the immense condensation (in symbolic and linguistic terms) that must take place in such a figural construction. And then the series of displacements that must proceed so that in the narrative as such the destinal figure detaches itself sufficiently from the claims of metaphysical sovereignty through the game of masks. Having already distanced itself from the given forms of realism (the standard representational correlate to the historical), the figure stands somewhat tendentiously in the narrative as a 'free' signifier. But it is precisely as free as Ghatak himself. It is part of Ghatak's iconoclastic strategy that the covert mythology of the author is deconstructed along with that of the martyred hero in that both are contained in the person of Ghatak who demonstrates the falling apart.

*Illustrative moment:* The film's opening scene is a masterful exercise in visual allegory, not to mention one of the most striking opening sequences in world cinema. We first see an old, decrepit man sitting under a thatched shed with a half-dazed look on his face, staring at the camera. Suddenly, three shadowy men in black body stockings (similar to mime costume) spring up and perform an animated, vigorous dance with a barren white landscape with pillars in the background. This sequence is repeated at another important narrative juncture (Jagannath's death by accidental fire), perhaps marking an irreparable break from "tradition"; and then again as the closing sequence after Nilkontho's death.

Some commentators have compared this scene to the "dance of death" scene from Ingmar Bergman's *Seventh Seal* (1957), and it is also visually reminiscent of the "dance of the ghosts" sequence from Satyajit Ray's 1969 *Goopy Gayin Bagha Bayin*. Varied (and convoluted) interpretations of this scene have been proposed by critics, but Ghatak himself said in an interview that he didn't think too much about it, only meaning to symbolize "ghosts' dance" in Bengal (i.e., disorder and chaos); when pressed (by the interviewer), he agreed that the old man represented India.

**Inner Conflict** All the central characters of the film suffer from inner conflict and of course these issues are systemic and more representative of societal turmoil than that of any given individual. Nilkontho is in conflict with his own long-standing ideals while looking at the damages inflicted upon his motherland. Nachiketa is in conflict with his pursuit of material comforts and his reverence towards Nilkontho and Durga. Early in the film, Nilkontho asks Nachiketa, "What prospects does the Indian state offer its citizens?" This is in the context of Nachiketa's relentless (and fruitless) search for employment and suggests that he become a labourer instead of following his training as an engineer; later, Nachiketa, despondent, says he would find a labourer gig at the river docks. Similarly, Bongobala ("the soul of Bengal" according to Nilkontho) is in negotiation with her more secure, but

now lost past and her heavily uncertain present to which she is mostly resigned, going along with Nilkontho's whims with a hope of reforming him. Jagannath and Panchanan Ustad represent a long-standing dialectical conflict in the Indian subcontinent— one between the “outsider” upper caste Aryans and the “indigenous” outcaste Adivasis [tribes]. Jagannath is a representative of the ancient ‘Vedic’ civilization and invokes the past power dynamics by blabbering authoritative Sanskrit shlokas. Panchanan, a Chou dancer, is illiterate but has a rich cultural heritage to protect. He calls Jagannath a ‘*mleccha*’ (unclean foreigner), alluding to the Aryan invasion and reflecting the long-standing agony of the indigenous communities. The feuding men are reconciled when Bongobala intervenes, signifying the motherly quality of the homeland to unify antagonistic communities in a bond of fraternity. Finally, Durga, too, is in conflict with her love/tenderness for Nilkontho versus her instinct for self-preservation, raising her son right and leading a normal, unremarkable middle-class life. Feudal violence and conflict between landlords and peasants also play out in the land grab scene that leads to Jagannath's death in the crossfire. Perhaps the only character who is *not* conflicted is the young Naxal leader, who calls Nilkontho a disillusioned, humbug fool (among other names); but perhaps it is the conviction of (misguided) youth that ultimately leads to his death by police.

*Illustrative moment:* When Panchanan and Jagannath almost come to blows because Jagannath's constant parroting of relevant (and irrelevant) Sanskrit verses annoys Panchanan no end. Even though the consummate host, sharing his meagre food with his “godlike guests”, Panchanan is so annoyed with Jagannath that he threatens violence and tells him to get out of his house (but apologizes when it's time to leave).

**The “Great Mother” Image** In all of Ghatak's major films, critics have noted the centrality of the “Great Mother” figure, which has reached iconic status beyond individual female characters (whether or not they are actually mothers, like Anasuya in *Komal Gandhar*). In the film in question, we have Durga and Bongobala, each representing different facets of this “Great Mother” image. Bongobala is quite straightforwardly the “daughter of Bengal” and the face of the new generation. On first meeting her, Nilkontho drunkenly mutters, “Who are you mother, are you the spirit of my country, that Bangladesh which is yet to be born?” Both Nilkontho and Durga have a parental relationship to her as Nilkontho even brags that he finally brought her a “whole daughter” just like she had always wished for (incidentally, Shñāoli Mitra is Tripti Mitra's real-life daughter). But just like daughters play motherly roles in Bengali men's lives, especially in caregiving tasks (remembering that girl children are often called “maa” by their fathers), Bongobala also hopes to “reform” Nilkontho to the straight and narrow. She also intervenes and breaks up the fight between Panchanan and Jagannath, signifying the motherly quality of the homeland to unify antagonistic communities in a bond of fraternity. In contrast, Durga, literally the “Great Mother Goddess”, is much more restrained and practical, perhaps even cruel/uncaring towards her child-like, irresponsible husband who loves to play the fool. As Geeta Kapoor explains,

(H)ere we have the wife-mother who is literally called Durga and the destitute girl, a substitute little mother, who is equally significantly called Bangabala [Bongobala]. Ghatak places this cruel and compassionate mother-figure in her iconic form within an even larger matrix of myths (after Jung, whom he admired), thus converting what may be myth as mystification, a specifically construed superstructural value in Bengali culture, into the perennial source of the human unconscious. This conversion can be seen as an ideological operation with which one may be out of sympathy. But so far as the playfulness of the man-child in the film is concerned, he enacts it with sufficient irony to refute any charge of false consciousness. He enacts the child in order both to appease the mother and to subsume her powers within the more existentially complex figure of the fool.

*Illustrative moment:* Bongobala is so enamoured with the Durga mask that Panchanan was repairing for a Chou dance performance that she wants to dance in Durga's role. Panchanan refuses, as women don't traditionally dance Chou, but he later revises his perspective and encourages her. There are many lingering close-ups with Bongobala holding the Durga mask right next to her own face and she even puts it on once.

**Love/ Marriage** Given this complex figuration of the Mother in Bengali culture, it is interesting to revisit that one notable flashback scene where Nilkontho romances Durga in typical Bollywood style. They frolic and chase each other over a wide hilly field, finally laying down in an embrace, all while the Tagore song “Who's playing the flute on every part of my body” plays in the background. That is of course a not-so-subtle reference to Krishna as the paramount lover (always depicted in this

form with his flute) whom every woman desires\*. At some point after their marriage, however, the dynamic shifts from the Krishna paradigm to the Shiva paradigm and Durga takes on the role of managing and sustaining him like a mother to an errant child, instead of having a full and competent, equal partner. But even after years of neglect and indifference on Nilkontho's part, love remains between them; they cannot make a clean break however much they try, quite literally until "death does them part".

This relationship, like everything else in the film, can (and should) be read with a mythic lens as well. It may be customary here to note that Indian Hindu male behaviour patterns are in general quite adequately covered between Krishna (lover, prankster and politician) and Shiva (irresponsible but fiercely loyal)— which is also why there are numerous religious rituals devoted to women worshipping Shiva and Krishna to get a husband just like them. The Krishna figure in particular is an infinitely plastic myth applicable to many real-world and contemporary situations; for instance, Geeta Kapoor argues that errant-Nilkontho-as-neglectful-husband is in the mode of Krishna-the-prankster. However, she doesn't account for the fact that all of Krishna's pranks are to pique interest in him, ie. attention-seeking, whether from his foster mother or the cowherd girls or his beloved Radha or his wives, and all of them come with a positive reward at the end for the women (and devotees). However, Shiva just couldn't care less, unless it's a dire family emergency; that, and given his name Nilkontho, a simpler and more elegant correlation with Shiva is to be expected. Locally, in Bengal, Shiva is a marijuana addict with little care for household affairs, spending his time at cremation grounds and forests with his equally degenerate and lazy underlings, always filthy with ash and dirt and so on— Nilkontho quite directly correlates with his godly namesake in behaviour patterns (his patterns of thought are a different issue). Like Shiva, Nilkontho is also fiercely loyal, making his journey back to Durga even after they were estranged and she chose to abandon him.

*Illustrative moment:* When Nilkontho appears on Durga's doorstep with his ragged companions— one curious and the other deathly terrified— he receives a cold welcome and is told to leave. But Durga reconsiders and tells him to stay for lunch in a mock-offensive way— "If one has arrived, then one should swallow some *pindi* [ritual offering of food to pacify the spirits of dead family members] before leaving"—and then proceeds to lovingly cook a meal for them. But he doesn't mind very much as he's used to her abrasiveness.

**Loss of identity/culture— Chhou** Ghatak made several documentaries on the indigenous peoples of eastern India, and his films have always included some variation of a sense of loss for traditional/ folk/ marginalized cultures by the onslaught of urbanization/ industrialization. Sometimes these people are able to adapt and reinvent their lifeways and practices to suit modern times, like the Oraon in *Ajantrik*; at other times, there is a total loss of life, history and/or identity, like the Malo villagers in this film. In fact, Panchanan Ustad's situation presents a most persuasive deliberation on the erosion of the Chhou tradition and its mutated reinvention. Panchanan laments that the performative form is dying out and now that living practice is reduced to city elites buying the performance masks and hanging them on their walls or using them as show-pieces, reducing them to dead artifacts devoid of joy, life, sweat and tears of the marginalized peoples and performers.

*Illustrative moment:* There is an almost 10-minute-long sequence featuring a Chhou performance at Panchanan's village (for some occasion that isn't clearly shown). Panchanan enthusiastically plays the *dhol* drum while the city people (Nilkontho and his friends) are enthralled spectators. Again, the mythical takes centre stage, combining the heroic aspect of mythic gods with the comic aspect of all heroism. The virtuosity of the grandiose dancers with majestic masks and costumes contrasts sharply with the mischievous monkeys leaping here and there and intruding upon the audience. Of course, one remembers that Hanuman and his money kinsmen played a major role in securing Rama's victory over Ravana. The performance then transitions to a local interpretation of the Durga story and a popular Chhou set. The major combatants face off with broad physical gestures, cartwheels and so on that is typical to the Chhou form; one example is when Mother Goddess Durga arrives with her four children (Laxmi, Saraswati, Kartik, Ganesh) to slay the Great Demon Mahishasur. After much back and forth, the demon is slayed and good prevails over evil once more. In all this, one scarcely knows whether the performers are appropriating the Hindu gods humbly or subverting the pantheon in the process of adapting them to their own iconographic and ritual ends. Ghatak, for his part, likely deliberately opted for the "primitive" to gain a deliberately ambiguous identity for himself, and then inserted that ambiguity into the contemporary political scenario—the arrival of positive energies from the younger generation to wipe out the disillusionment, deception and misdeeds of current times.

**Degeneration of morality** The film's montage brings out the disturbed state of affairs in a Bengal

ravaged by poverty, hunger, caste violence, unemployment, and the influx of millions of refugees from the newly-formed Bangladesh. The Baul singer at Princep Ghat sings, “*Namaj aamar hoilo naa aday/ Darun o khannas er daay*” (I couldn’t offer my prayers/ Pressured by an unquiet/ impure mind), hinting at the daily struggles of the common man as a result, perhaps, of forced migration and communal violence; for example, how one could not offer prayers because the wife said they were out of rice and the children were crying or how one had to find lost calves and so on. Typical of all Bengali Baul folk songs, there is a superficial meaning that correlates directly with the real-life struggles of the common people and then a spiritual/ religious interpretation. Soon after, Nilkontho meets his old friend Satyajit Basu and tells him, in iconic words that have become synonymous with intellectualism in Bengal, “Think, think, practice thinking”, encouraging him to pull himself out of the mire of a comfortable life in service of the powers that be. Satyajit is disturbed and promises to think about it. Later, in the long interaction between Nilkontho and the young Naxalite leader, Nilkontho reprimands his own generation as “lost” or “cowards” or worse, “liars and thieves”: his generation is lost and now it is up to the present generation to wipe the slate clean and start afresh with a revolution.

*Illustrative moment:* Nilkontho, in the throes of his drunkenness, repeats, “I’m burning, everything is burning, the world is burning” several times in the film. These words can be interpreted in several ways, but the simplest seems to be that after ingesting the “poison” of the current political scenario, he (and his generation) is literally burning up with no way to digest it or find an antidote. It is a slow burn from inside that quietly, but surely, destroys everything—just like his alcoholism did.

**Revolution** The 1970’s were more a time of disjunction than convergence. It was not that revolutionaries of the previous generation, like Satyajit Basu and Nilkontho himself, were all dead, but they found themselves trapped in an impasse, either having sold themselves to the powers that be for a comfortable life or having abandoned their ideals and become disillusioned and fallen into a state of moral and artistic decay. They were totally unable to understand the motivations of the new group of fiery, young rebels like the Naxalites. The youth of the 1970’s were like the middle children, caught between a generation who saw the dawn of independence and the upcoming generation who would observe the mechanistic march towards liberalization. Hence, towards the end of the film, Ghatak shows a passionate interaction between Nilkontho and a young Naxalite leader, where Nilkontho harshly criticizes his own generation, talks about the betrayal of the people by the bourgeois ruling class after 1947 and questions the meaning of ‘Independence’. He reaffirms his faith in the youth as the ‘cream of the Bengal’ and in their ‘complete capital for the future’. At the same time, Nilkontho is concerned that the youth are utterly misguided; though he doesn’t mention it directly, armed violence has much to do with it as Nilkontho is a pacifist and gets beaten up without protest earlier. For this, the rebel dismisses him as a lost cause and a remnant of a distasteful bygone era. Throughout the conversation, Nilkontho appears to be a defeated, confused but wise ascetic and the rebel appears to be a strong-willed but impatient fighter. To be fair, all they had, just like Nachiketa and Bongobala, was a confusing and ambivalent present. They did not know who they were or where they belonged, a rootless generation grasping at straws, so to speak.

*Illustrative moment:* With his dying breath, Nilkontho speaks to Durga not about love or family but revolution, citing a dialogue from (contemporary author) Manik Bandopadhyay’s short story “Madan the Weaver”. In the story, an old weaver, when admonished by his comrades for working the loom while they were on strike against the moneylender’s exploitation, replies, “I run an empty loom so as not to let my limbs rust, so as to keep in practice”. And then adds, as he dies, that one must do something. One must act irrespective of gain, irrespective even of the result. Pessimistic as this may seem, the film ends with an injunction to act, and to act politically.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1) What is your impression of Nilkontho Bagchi as the protagonist of the film? Discuss with two examples of character traits. Have you met anyone like him in real life?
- 2) Discuss your impression of Bongobala in the “great mother” image, using specific scenes as examples.
- 3) Analyse and interpret the opening scene. Why is the scene repeated?
- 4) What is the significance of Nilkontho’s dying words?
- 5) Of the minor characters (Durga, Nachiketa, Satyajit, Panchanan, Jagannath), who did you most identify with and why?

6) How does the soundtrack affect the development of plot? Discuss any two songs or sequences.