



The Story of Arri : Imagined
Landscapes, Emergent
Technologies and
Bengali Cinema

Regarding *Pather Panchali* (1955) Satyajit Ray recalled You had to find out for yourself how to catch the hushed stillness of dusk in a Bengali village, when the wind drops and turns the ponds into sheets of glass, dappled by the leaves of *saluk* and *sapla*, and the smoke from ovens settles in wispy trails over the landscape....¹

Much has been written about the ways in which Ray aspired to capture the ‘rambling quality’ of the village life (as found in the novel by Bibhuti Bhushan Bandyopadhyay) in his first film.² Among others, Moinak Biswas (2005) elaborates on this aspect of ‘ramble’ in his significant essay on Ray’s early films. Biswas shows at length how the novel was an ‘encyclopaedia’ of Bengali village life. Moreover, for anyone who knows Bibhuti Bhushan Bandyopadhyay’s stories, it is evident that Bandyopadhyay’s narratives produced a vast pool of images through the descriptions of the foliage, its dark green shadows, insignificant and sometimes nameless flowers, free flowing water bodies, mundane everyday objects, ordinary food, faceless people, and spoke of little girls suffering in silence and signifying a massive historical transformation. Before Ray began filming *Pather Panchali* the Bengali the novel culture -especially

those created by the so-called three-Bandyopadhyays- had already popularized a plethora images concerning rural Bengal. However, in the film, as Biswas illustrates

A great density and beauty of description suffuses the narrative as it moves freely between plants and animals, the human world and the natural cycle. The tapestry of sounds, colours and shapes is woven through a narrative voice which, as Apu grows up, shifts imperceptibility between outside and inside him.³

Certainly, there was a historical purpose for Ray's realism, as the beautiful landscape and the mundane merged into one another, while the details of the everyday re-produced an imaginary *sashya-shyamala roop* (green and fecund landscape) of Bengal.⁴

The opening sequence of *Daktar* (Phani Mazumdar, 1940), New Theatres' adaptation of Shailajananda Mukhopadhyay's *Teen Purush*, becomes significant in this context. By deploying specific location shots, the film created a topos that seemed unexplored. *Daktar* opens with the train entering the idyllic village space with the doctor (who stands on the doorway of the bogie) singing the song of 'new life'. Commenting on the slow and scenic village life, Pankaj Mullik's enigmatic voice produces its own resonances, while the village space emerges through the long and descriptive shots of people as well as various ritualistic actions. Later, while the young doctor (or the reformist hero of the film) sets up a hospital called Palli-Mangal Seva-Sadan, the village is presented as picturesque yet steeped in superstitions. Despite being a narrative geared towards development, *Daktar* is located on the uneasy margin of realist concerns and melodramatic narration (manufactured through emblematic indoor settings and dramatic lighting) as it negotiates a particular moment in Bengali cinema and the emergence of the Socials.⁵

Mukti (P C Barua, 1937), another New Theatres production made before *Daktar*, happens to be landmark film that explored individual artistic quest. *Mukti* has been described as an early melodrama dealing with the complexities of urban life. It is well-known for its opening sequence involving magnificent tracking shots. In addition, while the protagonist of the film fakes suicide and flees to the forests of Assam, Barua creates intriguing images of the journey through his mobile camera. An important aspect of *Mukti* is Barua's visual treatment of Rabindranath Tagore's lyrics '*Diner sheshe, ghumer deshe*' (music composed by Pankaj Mullick) as well as Rabindranath Tagore's overall involvement with the film.⁶ The outdoor shots of *Mukti*, which involve sweeping pans over dark shadowy trees, bushes, shrubs, water ways, with the vast sky

looming large over the greenery, remind one of Abanindranath Tagore's (or what is popularly known as the 'Bengal School') evocative series done after his visit to Shahajadapur (East Bengal). As described by Tapati Guha-Thakurata, "'wash' technique is used here with optimum effect: compositions soaked in water, with blotted images and evanescent blends of blues, greens and yellows...."⁷ Indeed, the influence of Japanese art and artists left a strong imprint on Abanindranath's oeuvre. Amongst the disparate influences and phases one of most prominent aspects of Abanindranath Tagore's style was his self-conscious works drawn from the Japanese art, where elongated frames have empty upper halves while figures are placed at the lower half of the frame. The presence of nature and sky are the defining elements of Japanese painting. The void creates a mysterious sense of emptiness and perhaps a sense of futility (which is also evident in Abanindranath's Puri series). Moreover, the method of application of (water) colour and the washing away of it was unique within the Indian contexts, since the common practice was to smear solid or thick coats of colour to produce a jewel-like effect. The unique wash-technique created an unusual (diffused) light quality, which Barua seemed to have borrowed into his films.⁸

Nevertheless, the specific descriptive style of Ray, or the details of everyday elements and especially the emergence of an autonomous landscape, was a historic turn within Bengali cinema. To borrow from Biswas

As the camera acknowledges nature's animated presence in *Pather Panchali*, this contact seems to dictate the rhythm and the flow of the events. The movement generated by such a pictorial stance is impossible to think without conceiving the contact of the camera and the 'real location' as a principle of shooting.⁹

By addressing the multiple influences on Ray, this paper examines his 'principle of shooting' as well as the realization of an independent landscape in cinema, and the ways in which the '*saluk* and *sapla*' featured in Bengali films, thereby producing the *sashya-shyamala roop* of Bengal. The purpose here is to re-visit a certain change within Bengali cinema where a particular kind of landscape is explored visually. Moreover, the paper analyzes the manner in which the filmmakers of the period deployed specific technologies to re-produce an imagined Bengal. My intention is to contextualize as well the processes through which the topography was reframed owing to the use of the lightweight Arriflex camera, imported somewhat single-handedly by the maverick cinematographer Subrata Mitra, who began his career with *Pather Panchali*.¹⁰ Indeed, while Ray's as well as the CFS (Calcutta Film Society) group's passionate

involvement with the making of Jean Renoir's *River* (1951) have been narrated and studied at length, not much research has been conducted on the means and the historical significance of the re-presentation of a particular image of Bengal.¹¹ To put it briefly, what have been by and large overlooked are the functions of technologies and the technicians in the production of a certain film aesthetics, which eventually characterized an unambiguous political-cultural imagination as well, and became popular across mainstream Bengali cinema of the sixties.

It is within this contested domain that this paper considers the exploits of Arri II cameras and the manner in which these facilitated new cinematic forms. Through a research on the existing literature as well as conversations with filmmakers and technicians (associated with Subrata Mitra), this paper aspires to generate alternative histories for alternative practices in India. The objective is to tackle issues of landscape (imaginary as well as real topographies), and consider how an identifiable landscape eventually appeared in Bengali cinema during the post-partition period. As discussed earlier, while some early films, including *Mukti* and *Daktar*, explored the land, it was indeed *Pather Panchali* (and the Apu trilogy), which initiated a paradigm shift and entirely transformed the style in which Bengal may be portrayed. The details of trees, bushes, leaves, flowers, insects, raindrops, pathways, ponds etc., shot in unprecedented light conditions, arguably shaped a certain tendency and the topography of Bengal. In fact, when Subrata Mitra imported Arri II A for Ray's *Aparajito* (1956) and later Arri II B and C, he was attempting to explore new grounds both literally and figuratively.

It is within this framework that this paper argues for three different trajectories emerging through the precise uses of the light-weight Arriflex camera. For instance, a) a film like *Kanchenjunga* (Satyajit Ray, 1962), where landscape attains autonomy and functions beyond its limited application as a setting, b) the production of what may be described as 'anti-landscape' -as depicted in films like *Ajantrik* (Ritwik Ghatak, 1958)- or images of a rough and parched terrain as opposed to a beautiful (green) one; c) the exploration of the cityscape as in the case of *Aparajito* as well as in *Interview* (Mrinal Sen, 1971), where Mitra's Arri II C is eventually revealed within the narrative. This paper addresses such parallel courses to comprehend the history and the production of a certain landscape through the multiple uses of a particular technology.

Subrata Mitra writes

In my first film *Pather Panchali* I had used an old Mitchell camera which had a viewfinder but its parallax-correction device was missing. It was a terror for me to operate the camera....

If *Aparajito* stands out as a landmark in my creative development and in the story of Indian cinematography as a whole, thanks to my improvisation of the art of bounce lighting, there was something else about *Aparajito* that has meant a lot to me. I purchased my first Arriflex 35 camera just before shooting began for *Aparajito*....

[T]he old cameras in the studios making too much noise, my blimped Arri remained in demand. All Ray's films till *The Home and the World* (1981), long after I had stopped working for him were shot on my Arri.¹²
[emphasis mine]

Curiously, besides 'all' Ray's films until 1981, films of Ritwik Ghatak, Mrinal Sen, Tapan Sinha and others, were all shot with Mitra's Arri. Moreover, Mitra initiated a new technical as well as visual possibility, which was later displaced onto the domain of popular cinema. Conversations with cinematographer Purnendu Bose (who was initially Mitra's assistant) as well as Mitra's bother and long-term associate, Bacchu Mitra, along with several meetings with Mrinal Sen (during 2010-11), laid bare the fact that Mitra played an exceptional role in envisaging a distinct film aesthetics (that included issues of composition, tonalities, contrast, emphasis on grey tones, illumination, etc.), and consequently redefined the natural topography of Bengal.¹³ The production of this topography was a combination of many historical conditions. As suggested by cinematographers of the period (including Ramananda Sengupta, interviewed by the author in June 2004, Kolkata), after the Second World War quite a few photographers began shooting films with light-weight army disposal cameras (like the Cineflex and American cameras), which were readily and somewhat cheaply available in a post-War situation. The Arri too was a War-time product.¹⁴

The War, feminine, riots, and partition forced upon people a new experience of fragmented spaces, accentuated by the rapid transformation of familiar locations. In short, unprecedented historical situations produced new sensibilities. Films like *Chinnamul* (Nemai Ghosh, 1951) as well as *Nagarik* (Ritwik Ghatak, 1952) - shot primarily with Mitchell cameras- attempted with grave difficulties to narrate impossible histories of uprootment, migration

and shifting spaces. Though the Mitchell camera was a rather steady equipment and offered predictable results, one of the primary problems with Mitchell was that it had an AC motor, which operated with the three-phase household electricity and was therefore, largely restricted to the studios. However, Mitchell was a multiple-pin registration camera with dependable image reproduction. Therefore, the big budget production houses (especially in Bombay) continued to use it.¹⁵ Nevertheless, as and when the mammoth Mitchell was taken outdoors (as in the case of *Pather Panchali*) filmmakers continuously confronted multiple obstacles and struggled to ‘catch the hushed stillness of dusk in a Bengali village....’

As described by Purnendu Bose and Bacchu Mitra, the path-breaking film *Ganga* (Rajen Tarafdar, 1959) was shot with Mitchell fitted with DC motor (which in actuality had to be operated with numerous batteries) in unprecedented conditions along the Hoogly river banks. Shooting during the high tide and when the river surged in forcefully, as well as by putting the camera on the boats and by involving several actors, the making of *Ganga* seemed like an impossible task.¹⁶ It was as much a physical challenge for the makers as it was for the actors who came up with marvelous physical acting and introduced to Bengali cinema specific images of the labouring body. By contrast, Mitra’s Arri was hired for the making of Tapan Sinha’s *Kalamati* (1958). While the unique story of the film was set in a colliery, Sinha transported the camera (Eyemo hand-cranked war camera, since even when the film was shot with Arri, for this sequence the Arri was not allowed inside the colliery because it was operated with battery) a thousand feet below into the mines in order to achieve the reality-effect. He describes in his interviews the massive difficulties under which they shot the film.¹⁷ Indeed, other houses (like Image India, Kolkata) also imported the Arriflex camera, and landscape-shots eventually became a popular style in the sixties, as several films including *Nirjan Saikate* (Tapan Sinha, 1963) and *Palatak* (Tarun Majumdar, 1963), incorporated the expanse meaningfully. In effect, *Pather Panchali* and *Aparajito* popularized an approach that was keen to explore the vast and varied landscape of Bengal despite the unpredictable difficulties of location shooting. At a given time, three major Bengali films, namely *Paras Pathar* (Satyajit Ray, 1958), *Ajantrik* and *Kalamati*, were all being shot almost simultaneously with the same camera (and crew).

Note that the tests for *Pather Panchali* were done with a 16mm camera and with the Universal Processing stock, while certain sections were shot with a very old ‘New Wall Camera’ (seemingly certain images shot with the (New)

Wall Camera remain in the final version of the film).¹⁸ Even though *Pather Panchali* was like a ‘diploma film’ that eagerly took major cinematic risks, it is immensely significant that the film through its sweeping outdoor shots manufactured a new sensibility and an expanse, which until then was unexplored in Bengali cinema.¹⁹ For instance, Mitra ‘picked up’ (from Patel India’s office in Kolkata) the 815 (yellow) and 515 (orange) filters, to produce a range of tonalities- of the dark foliages as well as the skin tones - which in time became a recognizable sign of the Apu Trilogy. In 1956, with a drive to find this imagined territory and working within an extremely tricky situation, Mitra on his own initiative ordered an Arri IIA for approximately twenty five thousand rupees (through Gomok Ali, Central Camera, Kolkata). Arri IIA had a DC motor and could be operated with batteries, therefore, was easier to handle in locations. Moreover, limited budgets forced Mitra to frequently work with fewer lights and innovate as well, which eventually emerged as his style through films like *Kanchenjunga*, *Devi* (Satyajit Ray, 1960), *Charulata* (Satyajit Ray, 1964) as well as *Shakespearewallah* (James Ivory, 1965), *Teesri Kasam* (Basu Bhattacharya, 1966) etc. Therefore, the complicated technical conditions (“no books, no libraries, no knowledgeable technicians, no lens, no filters, little lights” as described by Bose) juxtaposed oddly with an imagined new cinema, which aspired to shoot on locations, with available lights and break new grounds. Though, the DC motor- run Arri had major sync problems (which could be rectified with the crystal control system), nevertheless, Mitra imported the Arri IIB and Arri IIC in 1962 and 1968 respectively. Intriguingly, while Arri did have sync problems (in the absence of a Nagra sound recorder) as evident in the epic film *Subarnarekha* (Ritwik Ghatak, 1962), the preferences for this mobile camera demonstrate a curious tendency of alternative aesthetics and the ideology of Bengali cinema. Eventually, Mitra got the Nagra sound equipment in 1968 to overcome the problems of sync sound. However, though Film Services in Kolkata also imported a blimped (silent) Arri, few actually knew about the functioning of Arri because they were mostly trained or self-trained with the Mitchell.

Indeed, *Aparajito* was the first film that was shot with Arri IIA.²⁰ Therefore, the magical moving shots of the Varanasi ghats, the toppish shots of Harihar climbing the steep stairs and later traversing through the infamous narrow lanes with much difficulty, become significant aesthetic interventions.²¹ Also, the ways in which Kolkata refigures in the film and is shot on locations (in the incredibly narrow lanes), were indeed facilitated by this handy Arri IIA. Arri completely revolutionized the style of shot taking and the visual language of

Bengali cinema. Indeed, it may be productive to revisit *Aparajito* to comprehend the nature of realism achieved through this technical device. For instance, the scene where Apu moves around somewhat aimlessly in Varanasi after the death of his father is crucial in this context. First, with some coins in hand Apu goes near a temple. The following series of shots beaming with child-like energy (mostly POV shots of Apu) – of monkeys and different idols, a female monkey with its baby, a monkey scratching, a monkey swinging on a bell, (a close shot of) Apu feeding some as others rapidly climb down, monkeys ringing the temple bell and playing around joyously, etc., – appear somewhat random and have a so-called ‘documentary’ quality about it, which produced a unique naturalist moment in the film. Such scenes show how a particular technical condition and imagination produced marvelous instances, which were so evidently outside the narrative logic of the film. Moreover, the compositions, framings, lensing and the overall style taken up by Mitra appear like a giant leap forward in terms of visual language. After *Chinnamul*, *Aparajito* was effectively the first city film, which used documentary elements or documentary like images to underscore the implications of a larger transition and the entry of an entire generation into the big city.²² In reality, Ray and Mitra transported the camera to the confined lanes and by lanes of Kolkata to illustrate the allegorical journeys of the individuals.²³

The instance of Apu’s arrival holds a personal significance as well for me, since (revealed twice) behind Apu and opposite the printing press, there stands



8, Patuatola Lane.

my aunt’s place at Patuatola lane. However, this becomes somewhat important in the sense that through the specific uses of a mobile camera *Aparajito* effectively lends itself to similar personal narratives (through recognizable locations like the Sealdah station, the college or the maidan etc.), which may be studied within the structure of the larger national-modern.²⁴

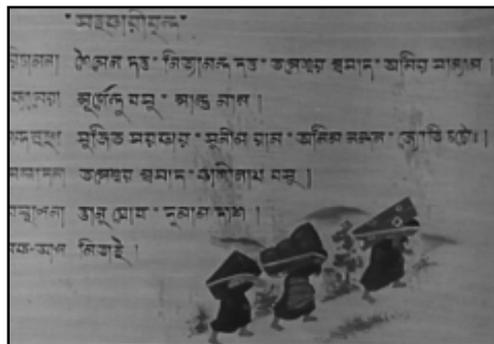
Similarly, the remarkable scene of returning to the village (from Varanasi) marked by shifting images (from Uttar Pradesh to Bihar and eventually to Bengal, reframed by the train window), and emphasized by the use of the memorable background score from *Pather Panchali*, exemplify how the Arri

became an imperative tool within the broader framework of alternative cinemas.

Writing about landscape and setting, Martin Lefebvre (2006) makes the distinction between the two.²⁵ The setting is the space of the story and the event as well as that of the genre. Certainly, every setting is open to interpretation and cannot be limited to the space of the narrative. Nevertheless, ‘in a certain sense’, landscape is ‘inverse of setting’, and landscape “at least in the visual arts, is a space freed from eventhood...”²⁶ While, images of impressionist landscapes are by and large absent in Indian traditional art (and became perceptible after the Company paintings), the function of ‘filmic landscape’ (as described by Lefebvre) at ‘a level of detachment from the story’ come up uniquely in *Kanchenjunga*.²⁷ Certainly, *Kanchenjunga* remains a benchmark of Mitra’s shooting standards and the ways in which his famous grey tones were translated into a fantastic sense of (subdued) colour. While the mountain and the landscape were narrativized by Ray (especially towards the end when the mist disappears and the stunning Kanchenjunga emerges to shed light on personal predicaments), I would like to discuss the exceptional sequence where action recedes into the background and landscape takes over. For instance, immediately after Anima’s affair comes into light, her child (seated on a horse back) calls out. As she moves out, the mist magically enters the frame. This long-shot with a curious tree in the foreground is comparable to Abanindranath Tagore’s painting *Flag* (1918-19). Indeed Ray pays his tribute to Tagore (as evident through the title cards) and sutures a series of images which evoke memories of Abanindranath’s landscape paintings of the Darjeeling. About Abanindranath, R Siva Kumar writes

His paintings of the Darjeeling series are about the world viewed in twilight; in them light does not erase the darkness but enhance the shadowy presence and enigma of motifs. In the paintings that followed, light floods the scene but does not render it clearer.²⁸

While one may study the overall influence of the Santiniketan School on Ray, such mysterious similarities between Abanindranath and Ray indicate a more complicated history of visual cultures.²⁹ Thus, the first image



Coolie Girls from Kanchenjunga



Kachenjunggha in the Mist



Darjeeling houses



'Professor' shot in Darjeeling

Kachenjunggha, and shot at the wee hours as well as during the darkly afternoons, thereby incorporating the morning glow and the fading afternoon light along with the mist that was covering up the landscape like a thin muslin. Mitra waited for the mist to arrive and then balanced it out with the sky light, though

in this sequence is followed by a shot of a mountain covered in the mist, which is comparable to Tagore's 'Camel Back Hill' (1916), followed by shots of huts in the mist, which is similar to 'The Slum' (1919). Likewise, the next shot (a pan) culminating into trees is similar to 'Towards the Valley' (1919-20). Moreover, as the sequence continues we are reminded of Abanindranath's 'Rider and Horse' (where the rider wears a red coat) (1924), 'The Coolie Girl' (1924) and so on. Later, as Manisha's dilemma crops up, the mist enters the landscape forcefully. This juxtaposition of people and landscape (in the mist) continues and closes with the haunting song 'E parabashe robe ke.' In this context it is crucial to comprehend the fact that, while Ray's visual sense was strongly drawn from Abanindranath, that the 'twilight' and the mist flooding in could be effectively adapted into the film was indeed a landmark technical achievement.³⁰ As stated by Mitra's associates, he took huge risks when he did

he combined this “with smoke from burning leaves to create fogs when a real fog was not available” (and desaturated the colour tones in scenes without mist).³¹ In comparison, *Professor* (Lekh Tandon, 1962) set in Darjeeling (except for the song sequences the film was primarily shot indoors) used a large number of reflectors, lights and completely different visual principles. Therefore, the glossy, colourful and well-lit picture postcards images (with the Kanchenjunga as a backdrop) of *Professor* show the other side of the spectrum as well as highlight the alternative aesthetics that Ray and Mitra hoped to translate into cinema. While we are aware of the light-weight cameras and the manner in which the French New Wave directors produced a certain tendency along with a certain cityscape, there is little or no literature on the histories of technological innovation in India and the ways in which technology was crucial in the production of parallel aesthetics. It is within this perspective that this paper explores the narratives of alternative practices, and the story of Arri.

And then there was anti-landscape or the uncanny presence of technology

A film like *Ajantrik* never ceases to surprise the viewer, since one is not quite sure as to ‘who is narrating’ and ‘who is looking’. According to Ghatak, “the story has a ramshackle car as its central character.”³² He builds the plot of *Ajantrik* through archetypal motifs, and writes that there are “two types of minds”, the ‘tough-minded’, who are ‘inert and reactionary’; and opposed to this the ‘tender-minded’ who are the ‘progressive impulse’. According to Ghatak, Piyari Singh who is Bimal’s opponent is ‘tough-minded’ while Bimal remains ‘tender-minded’. While suggesting that these two face each other in human history, Ghatak elaborates on how this is worked out in the film.³³ He insists that, while Bimal is an archetype, Bulaki, the madman, is his ‘absurd extension’; and the tribal Oraon are his ‘sublime extreme.’³⁴ Additionally, Ghatak shows how this is a “variation on a minor scale of the main theme, a sort of echo....”³⁵

The theme of ‘madness’ becomes a powerful tool in *Ajantrik* through the associations between the sublime and lunacy as well as the nurtured and the primordial, which allow us to understand the ruptures within the structures of modernity. The film’s location, its repeated exploration of the rugged landscape by Bimal and Jagaddal (his car) as well, entirely different deployments of the Arri IIA become crucial within the framework. Shot by Dinen Gupta, *Ajantrik* explores barren stretches and produces a de-centered frame by positioning the characters on the edge and through the explorations of empty (or negative) zones. Indeed, *Ajantrik* poses several complex questions for the viewer as it

becomes increasingly complicated to re-locate one's self outside the veil of perspective. Certainly, *Ajantrik* it is remarkably different from the ways in which Ray's detached camera records the journey of Apu. Borrowing the psychoanalytical paradigm Moinak Biswas discusses how

(i)n *Ajantrik*, his first major film, Ritwik Ghatak took up precisely this theme as his story- the necessity to invent a *modernity which can resolve the trauma of the continuing encounter with the modern*. . . .

This meant an acknowledgement of the fact that the symbolic order of the narration where fragments are joined together so as to create the sense of a continuously unfolding reality there is always a leftover, *a piece of the 'Real' which is left unsymbolized*. He made a film which could isolate this remnant, designate a place for it.³⁶ [Italics mine]

While this paper doesn't include any thorough psychoanalytical study of *Ajantrik*, Biswas' point becomes useful as we engage in a close reading of the film. Briefly, the question is who narrates in *Ajantrik*? As well, whose voice and whose POV, push the narrative forward? Indeed, the moot point is, through whose POV does the viewer eventually experience the dance of the sublime? In this essay, I would like to speculate that in *Ajantrik* the narrative is organized around Jagaddal's POV, which is in this case, is facilitated by the meaningful presence of the Arri. *Ajantrik* chooses the POV of what Biswas describes as the (Lacanian) 'Real' or the 'leftover' and 'remnant'. Perhaps, it is Jagaddal –the machine or the child of iron - who through the Arri, observes and comments



Jagaddal, the central character

on the 'trauma of the continuing encounter with the modern'.³⁷

For instance, the film begins with the two 'mad-caps' -the uncle and the nephew (*mama-bhagne*) duo – who are on their way to participate in the wedding of the latter. While Bimal is presented as an archetypal outsider living beyond the graveyard, Piyari

Singh, the madman and the bazaar are introduced in this sequence. Later, after a series of negotiations Bimal agrees to drive the groom and his uncle to Jhalpur. It is through the following remarkable exploration that an 'anti-landscape' is presented. Beginning with a shot of Jagaddal's probing eye (or the head light), the scene shows the disapproving and grunting car carrying

the load with much difficulty. While the first shot of the following scene is the POV of the uncle looking out into the greenery through the car window, what follows afterwards is somewhat unprecedented. The fierce rain, the long stretches of the highway and the testing hilly terrain with overflowing streams, are indeed



De-centred framing in Ajantrik

shown through Jaggadal's POV. Certainly, one can repeatedly sense the uncanny presence of the camera inside the car. Thus, through the 'over-the-shoulder' or what may be described as 'over-the-bonnet' shots an alternative terrain of Bengal-Bihar is produced. Moreover, such shots are often juxtaposed with shots of the roving eyes (head-lights) of Jaggadal. In effect, one may argue that in the process the entire land is re-produced through shots of the 'Real', which don't belong to any living character or to the realm of the symbolic. Thus, often such images are left unclaimed by the narrative and remain somewhat un-composed without a specific centre. For example, after the *mama-bhagne* episode, while Bimal drives through the landscape, a sharp cut- from an extreme long shot of the car moving, to a close-shot of a cow- followed by almost documentary like (mid) shots of the cattle and thereafter a composite shot of Jaggadal 'looking' at the herd set up an exceptional relationship between the machine and the location. Therefore, when Bimal pours water into Jaggadal, the exaggerated sound emphasizes the theme. Similarly, when the runaway bride and her unfaithful groom ride Jaggadal, they traverse a vast wilderness, which is marked by random haystacks and flags. Such images reconstitute a landscape that is opposite to the *sashya-shymala roop* of Bengal and its environs. Ghatak writes, "the story is laid in a terrain which is one of the least-known to normal Bengali film-goers....The different planes and levels are refreshingly unusual to the plainsmen of the Gangetic delta."³⁸

There are telling moments in the film which highlight Bimal's pathological identification with Jaggadal (especially when he protects Jaggadal from the children throwing mud at it). Moreover, one can perceive certain erotic connections as Bimal dresses up to be photographed with Jaggadal or as one encounters Jaggadal's all pervasive eyes looking sternly at Bimal as he sings off-tune, and staring disapprovingly when the young woman touches Bimal

somewhat unmindfully. Nevertheless, perhaps the emblematic sequence of the film emerges when after seeing off the young (now deserted) woman Bimal finds her belongings in his car. Bimal decides to rush (against the train) and deliver the bundle. A censorious Jaggadal is eventually forced to move along. Thereafter, we see long-shots of Jaggadal cutting across the wasteland. These shots are inter-cut with jerky shots taken from the car. Cut to a sweeping pan over the mountains and trees. This is followed by rapid inter-cuts between shots of Jaggadal (taken from another car) and jerky shots of the landscape.³⁹ This moment culminates into an unexpected powerful shot taken from another car (POV of Arri) that almost collides into Jaggadal approaching from the other side. The scene continues with close-shots of Bimal struggling, inter-cut with long-shots of Jaggadal retreating into the wild and eventually halting. As Bimal tries to fix Jaggadal, he turns with the introduction of an unfamiliar drum beat. Cut to a sweeping pan over the landscape, followed by a sharp cut and the appearance of the snakelike musical instrument. It is well-known that, this is followed by the magnificent dance of the Oraon.

Besides the fact that *Ajantrik* offers an alternative view of Bengal and Bihar, shot after *Nagarik*, the film clearly demonstrates the visual range Ghatak aspired to capture. Ghatak had written about the 'lost landscape' and the Bengal environs in his short article on making films.⁴⁰ He recalls the spaces and the places (like his home), lost through migration. He describes the 'marks on the wall', as well as 'different sounds, images and minds', which were lost after partition. This problem of 'lost landscape' along with lost 'faces and language' appear like a hindrance in his cinematic quest. However, this sense of loss is translated into a film language, which may be described as 'free of allusions and powerful'. Indeed, to cite Ghatak, such (cinematic) language can be achieved only when 'one is very angry and loves much; when one is overjoyed and can cry in ecstasy'.⁴¹ Certainly, it was the Arri (as opposed to the Mitchell he used in *Nagarik*) that effectively produced this new vista. The proximity of the camera to the objects and the people as well as shots taken from the car are engaging and allow us to experience his alternative worldview. For instance, the scene following Bimal's statement that he is like a machine (since he loves the smell of petrol) and that Jaggadal is human (along with his confession that Jaggadal arrived the year after his mother passed away), become crucial in this regard. In the next scene, we see shots of the colliery and the workers (tribal woman), a pan over the dried out grass and the rocky terrain, followed by the shots of coal-tubs moving across the skyline, which reveal Ghatak's evolving style.⁴² It also suggests that the mobile Arri camera was taken to such unexplored

territories and in the process produced another history of the community.

In conclusion, returning to the question of the city, it is imperative to discuss the ways in which Mrinal Sen's films, shot primarily with Mitra's cameras, showed the post-colonial, post-partition ravaged city with its refugees, beggars, street dogs,



KK Mahajan with Arri IIC

footpaths, dustbins, drains, etc., with a certain kind of vitality.⁴³ For instance, in Sen's *Calcutta 71* (1972), the young political activist is shown running through the Kolkata by lanes. These images are then compared with images of Bangladesh and Vietnam War. His famous documentary style becomes evident in this film as he uses photographs from newspapers, etc., to locate the national and local politics within the larger framework of international politics and violence. In fact, Sen uses disparate forms like the mime or applies the sound of radio and other location sounds to make meaning of contemporary conditions. In many of his films, 'fictitious' moments merge into 'real' images of political rallies with raised fists and intense faces of political activists. Indeed, the beginning of *Interview* seems to present the political-historical mesh of the times. Opening with mobile shots of the Kolkata lanes, followed by shots of the over-crowded city taken from a terrace (producing an unusual view of the city), and the milk van, the fish market, the hair-cutting saloon etc., *Interview* recorded the city life from a different vantage point. Everyday images recur in the film with some amateurish excitement and great deal of playfulness, as evident in scenes where the protagonist waiting for trimming brushes through a film magazine and reads articles on D G Phalke ('Pioneer of Indian cinema' by B D Gagra) or hunts for proper shoes for the interview, or travels across the city and encounters hoardings of popular films. In one of the most interesting scenes of the film Ranjit Mullick travels by a tram for his interview, and after looking around randomly he finds a woman reading a film magazine. Cut to close shots of the magazine page showing the popular stars of period. This is followed by a curious intervention, as we see a page with Ranjit Mullick's photo on it and a caption suggesting that he is acting in Mrinal Sen's *Interview*. This peculiar Brechtian moment continues as we find Mullick seeing himself, while his co-passengers watch Mullick looking at his own photo. After a point,

Mullick admits that he indeed is the man in the photo and explains the situation to the viewer. Looking back into the camera, Mullick states that, “ I am not a star....My name is Ranjit Mullick, I work for a weekly and live in Bhowanipur....My life is uneventful, but Mrinal Sen liked that and wanted to follow me around...”. This is followed by a sharp cut and K.K Mahajan, the cinematographer, holding (Mitra’s) Arri II C is revealed. This perhaps is the most exciting moment of the film, as we see Mullick continuing his talk, which overlaps with a ‘cut’ call, followed by a closer-shot of Mahajan, who is now smiling as he stops shooting.

As Mahajan gets off the tram, Mullick continues to explain the form of the film by the stating the fact that the woman who played Sarbajaya in *Pather Panchali* plays his mother in the film and fits the part well (Sen includes the scene of Harihar’s return after Durga’s death at this point).⁴⁴ This scene holds a historical value since in actuality the audience gets a glimpse of the handy Arri and the range of its exploits.⁴⁵ Indeed, the story of Arri, which to repeat Mitra’s words “operates on two levels- one historical and the other personal,” demonstrates the function of cinema in the larger history of modernization and the processes through which a technical device may re-frame the history of the land and its people.

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¹ Andrew Robinson, 1992, *Satyajit Ray, The Inner Eye*, Allahabad/Bombay/Delhi, Rupa & Co., 76.

² Satyajit Ray, ‘A Long Time on the Little Road’, 2001, *Our Films, Their Films*, Kolkata, Orient Longman, 33.

³ Moinak Biswas ‘Early Films: The Novel and other Horizons’, Moinak Biswas (ed), 2005, *Apu and After, Re-visiting Ray’s Cinema*, London, NY, Calcutta: Seagull Books, 47.

⁴ Regarding issues of realism and Ray also see Ravi S. Vasudevan, ‘Nationhood, Authenticity and Realism in Indian Cinema: The Double-Take of Modernism in Ray,’ Moinak Biswas (ed), 2005, *Apu and After, Re-visiting Ray’s Cinema*, 80-115.

⁵ The New Theatres film *Udayer Pathe* (Bimal Roy, 1944). includes song sequences (like ‘Chander hashir’), which were shot within idealized settings (with the back-light leaking through cut-outs of trees etc., or the diffused artificial moon-light creating an aura), and demonstrate the uneasy juxtaposition between a desire for the reality-effect and other popular modes.

⁶ See Subrata Rudra, 2004, *Pramathesh Baruar Jiboncharit*, Calcutta, Aruna Prakashani, 79-82.

⁷ Tāpati Guha-Thakurata, 1992, *The Making of a New 'Indian' Art, Artists, Aesthetics and Nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850-1920*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 267.

⁸ However, in my opinion Barua seems to have borrowed from the three Tagores – Abanindranath, Gaganendranath as well as Rabindranath- at various junctures. Thus, the mystifying slender figure of Jamuna Barua (as in *Devdas* (1935)) and her and longish face may remind one of both Abanindranath and Rabindranath's works. Moreover, the darkness and the geometric structures of the interiors in Barua's films (as in *Adhikar*, (1938)) bring to mind some of the paintings of Gaganendranath. In fact, the uses of light in the interior spaces are somewhat dramatic and expressionistic, therefore, in effect are remarkably different from the wash technique he imbibes for the outdoors. At times his outdoor images (for instance, when *Devdas* makes the final journey, Barua used coloured filters for the desired effect), are sharper and more darkly intense like Rabindranath's (silhouette) landscapes done during the same period.

⁹ Moinak Biswas 'Early Films: The Novel and Other Horizons' 45.

¹⁰ Arri , derived from the names of its manufacturers Arnold and Richter, officially began its production during the first world war. In fact, based in Germany, Arnold and Richter weren't interested in manufacturing equipment; their early efforts came up from their desire to create tools for themselves as cinematographers. By 1920, Arnold and Richter were already making their own cowboy pictures. However, around 1924-5 that the situation changed when they had offers from the Hollywood. However, the improvements of the Arriflex cameras happened after the Second World War when Arri II was introduced.

¹¹ See the DVD Extras ('Seven Short Films set in India' (1899-1945)) of *The River*, produced by BFI.

¹² See Subrata Mitra, 'Cinematography- A Personal Story', *Chitrabhash*, 'Cinematography and Cinematographers Special Number', Vol. 41 (no. 1- 4) & Vol. 42 (no. 1), January 2006-March 2007, 32.

¹³ Apparently Mitra was influenced by Vermeer and Turner and tried to maintain the rich middle tones for the reality-effect. Mitra gave musical names to these mid tones- namely *Sa Re Ga Ma Pa Dha Ni*, where *Sa* represented black and *Ni* was taken for white, and *Ma* for the 18% grey tone, etc.

¹⁴ Personal conversations (March 2011, Bayonne) with the renowned French New Wave cinematographer Raul Coutard, brought forth questions of War and the proliferation of light-weight cameras during that time, as well as the emergent film aesthetics after the War . Coutard suggested that, since he initially functioned as a War photographer he easily imbibed the New Wave techniques of location shooting with available lights etc. Moreover, post-War popular perceptions of image-making had transformed remarkably.

¹⁵ Mitra writes, "Filmmakers in Bombay and Madras soon came round using the Arri, as they

wanted to use the zoom lens which they could not, with their Mitchells. Most of the time however they would be using the Mitchell for regular shooting, and the Arri with a zoom lens for the flashy song and dance routines.” See ‘Cinematography- A Personal Story’, 32. The Arri possibly helped Ghatak to work with his signature wide angle lens (since these were not adaptable with the Mitchell).

¹⁶ See Dinen Gupta, ‘Cinematography prasange’ *Chitrabhash*, ‘Cinematography and Cinematographers Special Number’, 72-75.

¹⁷ Also see Tapan Sinha, 2009, *Chalachitra Aajiban*, Kolkata, Deys Publishing, 310.

¹⁸ Also see Satyajit Ray ‘A Long Time on the Little Road’.

¹⁹ See Subrata Mitra, ‘Cinematography- A Personal Story’, *Chitrabhash*, Cinematography and Cinematographers Special Number’.

²⁰ Apparently the functions of Arri were in actuality tried out at Varanasi, and the camera effectively started operating after much trial and error.

²¹ See Satyajit Ray, 1994, *My Years With Apu*, New Delhi, Viking, 112-115.

²² Similarly, *Baishe Srabon* (Mrinal Sen, 1960) shot with the Arri used available lights. It has marvelous scenes in the train indicating the city-suburb transactions of people and property.

²³ Kalipada Dass’s remarkable comedy *Jamai Babu* (Silent, 1931), depicts such entries of suburban persons into the city, the ways in which he was overwhelmed and troubled by the big city, as he traverses from North to Central Kolkata and encounters wide streets with cars and trams, followed by loitering around at Victoria Memorial, etc. The outdoor shots of the city are juxtaposed with interior tableaux, which make the film an atypical example of early Indian cinema.

²⁴ Also see Sourin Bhattacharya. ‘Develop-Mentalist Turn: Recovering Ray’s Panchali’, Moinak Biswas (ed), 2005, *Apu and After, Re-visiting Ray’s Cinema* 19-36.

²⁵ For a discussion on *Pather Panchali* and *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (Ritwik Ghatak, 1960) see Wimal Dissanayake, ‘Landscapes of Meaning in Cinema: Two Indian Examples’, Harper, G. and Rayner, J., (ed), 2010, *Cinema and Landscape*, UK/USA, Intellect, 189-202.

²⁶ Martin Lefebvre, ‘Between setting and Landscape in the Cinema’, Martin Lefebvre (ed) 2006, *Landscape and Film*, New York/London, Routledge, 22.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 34.

²⁸ R Siva Kumar, *Paintings of Abanindranath Tagore*, Kolkata, Pratikshan in association with Reliance Industries Ltd., 150

²⁹ For instance, Abanindranath’s eminent and influential disciple Nandalal Bose also painted the ‘Darjeeling in Fog’ (1945) playing with the mist in the mountains. Moreover, Ray’s Guru Benodebehari Mukherjee’s oeuvre includes paintings like ‘Sthala Padma’ (n.d.) and ‘Mussoorie Landscape (Mist)’ (1952-3) that illustrate the complex nature of multiple influences.

³⁰ It has been suggested by the interviewees that, the final image of Dayamoyee merging into the night in *Devi*, was inspired by Abanindranath’s ‘Avisarika’ (1901). Mitra thus, took major

risks to produce the image of darkness and the film was regarded as a major breakthrough in its times. Also see Abanindranath's *Deewali* (1903).

³¹ See Subrata Mitra, 'Cinematography- A Personal Story', *Chitrabhash*, 'Cinematography and Cinematographers Special Number', 34.

³² 'Some Thoughts on Ajantrik', Ritwik Ghatak, 1987, *Cinema and I*, Calcutta, Rupa & Co., 33.

³³ In his writings Ghatak explains mythology and refers to Joseph Campbell. See 'Manabsamaj, amader aitihiya, chobi kora o amar procheta', in Ritwik Ghatak, 2005, *Chalachitra manush ebong aaro kichu*, Kolkata, Deys Publishing, 149.

³⁴ See 'Manabsamaj, amader aitihiya, chobi kora o amar procheta', 148-152. Also see Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Gangar, Amrit (ed), 1987, *Ghatak: Arguments/Stories*, Screen Unit/Research Centre for Cinema Studies.

³⁵ See 'Chalachitra Chinta', in Ritwik Ghatak, 2005, *Chalachitra manush ebong aaro kichu*, 146.

³⁶ Biswas, 'Modernity and the Logic of the Remnant in Film Narration', *Thoughts*, No. 2, 2002

³⁷ The question of production of *affect* through camera is a pertinent one. How does or can cinema at all, produce affect through the deployment of camera? Embarking on a thorough study of POV shots in cinema, Edward Branigan produces a schema for POV in film narration. He shows how gaze (of the character) and glance (in a more general sense) establish space. Moreover, Branigan and others have shown how the POV of the character becomes a dominant aspect of film narration. It is in this context that I engage in a close reading of *Ajantrik*. See Edward Branigan, 'The Point-of-View Shot', Bill Nichols (ed), 1985, *Movies and Methods Vol. II, An Anthology*, Calcutta, Seagull books, 672-690. Also see Colin MacCabe, 'Realism and the Cinema: Notes on Some Brechtian Theses', *Screen*, Vol. 15, No. 2, summer 1974, pp-7-27.

³⁸ 'Some Thoughts on Ajantrik', Ritwik Ghatak, 1987, *Cinema and I*, 32.

³⁹ 'Chokh: Chobite gati', Ritwik Ghatak, 2005, *Chalachitra Manush Ebong Aaro Kichu* 111-119.

⁴⁰ See Ritwik Ghatak, 'Chhobi kora', October- November 1984, *Chirtrabikshan*, 35-36.

⁴¹ See Ritwik Ghatak, 'Chobi kora' 35.

⁴² Veteran photographer Ahmed Ali is well-known for his work on the tribes and their displacement during the making of the Tata Steel Plant at Jamshedpur.

⁴³ See Deepankar Mukhopadhyay, 1995, *The Maverick Maestro, Mrinal Sen*, New Delhi, Indus. Also, see Mrinal Sen's interviews published in 2002, *Montage, Life. Politics. Cinema.*, Calcutta, Seagull Books.

⁴⁴ In my opinion, the appearance of Mahajan on the screen is significant as well, since he would eventually- somewhat single handedly- shoot almost all alternative films of the period, including that of Mani Kaul, Kumar Sahani and others.

⁴⁵ In 'Self-reflexivity and the Indian 'new wave': Revisiting Mrinal Sen's early films' *Chitrasristhi*, 2008-09, Vol. 5, No. 5, pp. 17-23, I discuss the question of inter-textuality between Ray and Sen. Beginning with *Bhuvan Shome* (1969), Sen pays his seditious tributes to Ray, which may

be studied as a reflection of the Ray-Sen debates after *Akash Kusum* (1965) and *Bhuvan Shome*. *Interview* shot at the same location as *Pratidwandi* (Satyajit Ray, 1972) brings this up more directly.