The City and the Real: Chinnamul and the Left Cultural Movement in the 1940s

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Chinnamul is arguably one of the first Indian films to show a political consciousness of the reality of the metropolis. Here the country-city dualism, that global symptom of culture, is cast in a mould that had been unknown to Indian cinema till then. As we are invited by the film to witness the city of Calcutta we are made aware in a quite unfamiliar and urgent way that we are in the midst of an intractable present, a present that cannot be escaped from because it has a special status of reality validated in the film, validated by cinema as a new political practice. Moreover, as the film invites us to witness what can be called the 'present as the city' - it invokes a gaze that belongs to the country that has come to invade its territory, to lay claim to the reality and the time in question. In order to understand some of these new impulses one needs to take a look at the context of the film's production. I would start with a brief overview.

Chinnamul was made in 1950-51. The director and cinematographer was Nemai Ghosh but by all appearances it was a collective effort and the team that worked on the film came almost wholly from a cultural background that has come to be named after the IPTA (Indian People's Theatre Association), a cultural front launched in 1943. The team of actors in the film include some of the stalwarts of that

movement and two of them were of crucial importance in the history of the radical arts in India - Bijon Bhattacharya and Ritwik Ghatak. The first was the author of the play that ushered in the era of social realism in theatre and served as the signal work for the launching of the IPTA, and the second was instrumental in shaping a modern cinema for India. In a way both of them as well as Nemai Ghosh were part of an enterprise that started in the 1930s and culminated after the independence, an enterprise of forging a modern culture that would mark a move forward from Tagore and will be characterised by a new realism and an artistic consciousness which was thoroughly internationalised. The writers and intellectuals in question were not necessarily partisan individuals, but they were increasingly responding to the call for a socially committed art. Japan's Manchuria campaign, Mussolini's attack on Abyssinia and finally the Spanish Civil War provided the context for such organised cultural efforts on the part of the Left. The Progressive Writers' Association was formed in 1936 - the year Franco's troops marched on republican Spain - and had the support of Tagore and Prem Chand among the veteran liberal writers. A large number of front -ranking writers and critics joined the forum. The leaders were from the political left and it was through their initiative that a large section of the Association members also became a part of the Anti-Fascist Writers and Artists' Association when it was convened in 1942, right in the middle of the War. A year ago Germany had attacked the Soviet Union and the Indian Communists had adopted the controversial People's War line. 1942 was the year of the August Movement, one of the bloodiest and most widespread revolts against the British Rule. A chain of events was set in motion that would continue to rock the country and specially areas like Bengal through the decade. 1943 saw the devastating Famine in Bengal, the death of five million people of starvation, the migration of thousands of peasants to the city of Calcutta. The Famine also brought home the fact that the world is linked into a fateful unity by the forces of modernity even as it exploded the ahistorical illusions that urban educated classes would nurture about the Indian village. The Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) was formed as a direct response to this in Bombay in 1943 and Nabanna, a play by Bijon Bhattacharya brought upon the stage completely new protagonists - a stream of hungry peasant characters. Communist partisans led IPTA but its cultural agenda could mobilise the support of a very wide spectrum of artists. This broad base could be maintained till 1953-54 though a section of the liberals were drifting away from the ranks as the Party adopted a more militant politics around 1948 and fell out with the Congress government sharply over peasant revolts and workers' agitations. It is impossible not to take the crucial role of the IPTA into account in understanding the culture of the period even when the particular artist in question was not directly affiliated to the organisation. One could make a distinction here, following a veteran artist of the association, between IPTA as an organisation and IPTA as a movement.[1] Its

[1] Hemango Biswas makes this disctinction (Biswas, 1998).

reverberations could be felt right into the early 1970s when the second wave of radicalism after the independence came to a climax.

As Prem Chand, a patron of the PWA, pointed out in 1936, progressive literature was committed to 'a rationalist and scientific reflection of social reality' (Chand, 1979). What Prem Chand and a whole host of younger writers from the generation would practice in the wake of the progressive movement was a realism of social criticism - a critical realism as Lukacs would call it distinguishing it from socialist realism (Lukacs, 1963). The progressive movement included both the liberal critical stance of fiction writers like Tarashankar Banerjee, Premendra Mitra, Subodh Ghosh or Narayan Ganguly and the more politicised vision of Manik Bandyopadhyay, Nabendu Ghosh, Manoranjan Hazra, or Gopal Haldar. The doctrine of Socialist Realism was adopted in the Soviet Union at the first Writers' Congress in 1934. But even when the Indian left critics mentioned the term in the 1940s - and they did read Gorky and Louis Aragon on this as well as Mao's Yenan Forum lecture on art at that time - they often confused the word with social realism - a term that was ideologically more loose and inclusive. A play by Bijon Bhattacharya, Jabanbandi, was singled out by the critic Dhurjatiprasad Mukhopadhyay as the first instance of socialist realism in Indian drama. In fact, though there were important thematic changes in the new literature there was continuity in form with the realism of the liberal democratic consciousness. As a form realism can be adopted in a consensual politics as it has been proved many times in the course of this century. A theoretical vindication of this was the Dimitrov thesis which was much discussed among the left at that time and which continued to be a landmark document for cultural critics as Franco Fortini's famous theorization of Italian culture in 1967 showed (Fortini, 1974). Presented in 1935 at the Comintern this thesis argued for a common forum, which Dimitrov called the Popular Front with the democratic progressive section of the bourgeoisie against fascism and a united front with the national progressive bourgeoisie against colonialism. It was as much a matter of cultural cohabitation as of political entente. Bourgeois realist modes could well serve as the radical choice within such compulsions. And looked at from the point of view of the local history of the art forms, realism was still the mandate of modernity that many of the forms had yet to fulfil. The IPTA produced a powerful crop in the first years in songs, plays and painting and dance. The last three were brought thematically close to the lives of the toiling masses and their everyday struggle for survival, to the topical crises of the day though social realism or the progressive reflection of reality meant different things for each of these genres. Intervention in film was rare - film could not be brought into the project of non-commercial artistic practice so easily, and the structure of the popular film has resisted the impulse of 'modernisation' quite strongly in India. It is common wisdom that this cinema has worked within paradigms, which do not conform, to realist textual ideals. The themes of social reform were common in the films of the 1930s and 40s, but even as they adapted regional literature where realist conventions were fairly established they

treated the material with typical emphases on hybridity and schematism. A large number of the films fell under the generic description 'Social'- a term borrowed from the popular stage - but the discourse of the family romance in these films revolved around the broad 19th century questions of social conflict around modernity and tradition, the impact of the West and of course the dualism of the country and the city. In literature, music and painting avant-garde precedents already existed. Drama and film were organically popular, not yet touched by the avant-gardism of the sort that produces a high and low distinction. As the IPTA intervened in these two forms it was natural that they would come quite close to each other again. They showed similar democratic potential in terms of their function.

A direct involvement of the IPTA in films didn't happen before 1946 but the new impulses are already palpable in a film like Udayer Pathe. Made in one of the foremost studios of the first sound era, the New Theatres, Udayer Pathe was directed by Bimal Roy with an important role played in the production by the writer Jyotirmoy Roy. Jyotirmoy Roy was already close to the Progressive Writers' Association and a socialist , Bimal Roy became the President of the IPTA later on. The film comes at the climax of a trend that can be traced back to the 1930s. One can mention Charu Roy's Bangali (1936), Nitin Bose's Didi (1937) and Desher Mati (1938) in this context. When one of the major writers of the period, Premendra Mitra, made Samadhan in 1943, he showed the divergence between the kind of realist fiction he had been writing and the compulsions of film conventions. It is another story of conflict between workers and the factory-owner reduced to a cross-class romance and familial intrigue. When Udayer Pathe repeats the theme a year later certain marked changes are brought in. The use of a non-star Radhamohan Bhattacharya and a sharp and politically sarcastic dialogue throughout, the direct reference to Marx and socialism, the parallel cutting between the worker's colony engaged in a strike meeting and the rich factory-owner brother of the heroin throwing a banquet, the theme of intellectual exploitation of the trade unionist hero who is specially employed to ghost-write for the owner, and most importantly, the romantic climax that brings the couple out into the street, out of the parental family ambit showing them marching down the Delhi Road to organise a strike in a mining town - all this shows that the IPTA had taken place between Samadhan and Udayer Pathe.

The organisation got directly involved in film production in 1945-46. A report of the IPTA says, 'It was decided to produce a picture provisionally entitled Children of the Earth with an idea to depict in as realistic a manner as our resources could permit the life of Indian peasants in general and the Bengali farmer in particular, with special emphasis on the grim tragedy wrought by the recent famine in Bengal' (Pradhan, 1979). Udayer Pathe ends with the protagonists leaving the metropolis, as they walk into a new dawn in the picaresque tradition of cinema they renounce the city in some sense. Dharti ke Lal, the film that IPTA produced would draw upon two plays by Bijon Bhattacharya, Nabanna and Jabanbandi, and a novelette by Krishan Chandar, Annadata, and bring the theme of the country coming

into contact with the city back into focus. But there is a crucial new aspect to this migration from the country - it does not bring into play the gaze of the bumpkin or the morally pure rustic displaying foolish amazement or spiritual disappointment, it is a collective gaze of the peasantry cast at the city. The famine brings them to the city and they leave at the end for their villages with the dream of a new harvest. The village erupting into the city was like a sudden revelation of history itself in its vast and unbearable dimensions for the urban consciousness, which produced the art in question. But instituting the body and voice of the agrarian masses at the centre of the narrative meant a major shift in representation, and also in discourse. Satinath Bhaduri's Dhorai Charit Manas or Tarashankar Banerjee's Chaitali Ghurni, Ganadebata and Hansulibanker Upakatha performed the same function more convincingly for literature.[2] That is to say, the framework of the 'social film', one which set itself in the contemporary in terms of the perennial conflicts and family romance, and the studio style of filmmaking provided a framework that Udayer Pathe could still make use of but films like Dharti ke Lal would be uncomfortable with. In part both Dharti ke Lal and Chinnamul owned up the inadequacy of that system - of the conventional acting, mise-en-scene and shooting style - and were drawn to the radical theatre in search of solutions. The commonly held film-historical belief is that though these films were moving towards a stark realism of content, something like a neo-realist cinema was still beyond their reach, the realism of form was jettisoned by the persistence of the studio style and the melodramatic inputs from the system. Among other things it implies theatricality as a primitive trace in these films that one had to wait till Satyajit Ray's work to overcome completely. If one comes out of this notion of the linear destiny of realism one could discern that the films in question - and I would add films like Ghatak's Nagarik (1952) and Debaki Bose's Pathik (1953) to the group - were incorporating a new theatrical influence often quite distinct in character from the New Theatres films. They were using the elements that proved so successful on the stage in Bijon Bhattacharya, Binoy Ghosh, Tulsi Lahiri or Digindra Bandyopadhyay's plays. Khwaja Ahmad Abbas directed Dharti ke Lal and though finances were raised from the industry the production method was largely new. It was a collective effort from the script to post-production stages and involved a large number of the theatre and music and literary practitioners from the IPTA - Balraj Sahani and Shambhu Mitra, Sardar Jafri and Prem Dhawan, Ravi Shankar and Shanti Bardhan. Artistes of the IPTA performed all the roles and many of them reappear in Chinnamul. The hunger marchers were from the Kishan Sabha, the peasant wing of the communist party; the members of the Students' Federation appeared in the role of the organisers of relief kitchens operating for the famine stricken. Abbas and his team shot in a farm near Pune, but also used indoor sets for most of the locations. The lighting, art direction, dialogue and acting are close to the realist stage; they do not conform to the conventional realist filmic expressions

[2] Pradyumna Bhattacharya discusses the aspect of the peasants' gaze in the novels of Banerjee in (Bhattacharya, 1976; 1998).

known to us. Along with the people the streets of the city were supposed to come alive as documentary evidence, but this spatial articulation, like casual speech is avoided for a more schematic, commentative exposition. Abbas writes in his autobiography that he could not shoot on the streets of Calcutta because of the wartime regulations (Abbas, 1977). But the distinctively theatrical conventions he and his team adopt from the political drama would not much require such treatment. There is even a shadow play within the film in the style of certain stage items that the radicals were using for propaganda. The IPTA report on the film would call it the 'first documentary feature film in India' (Pradhan, 1982). Even Nabanna was often described as documentation. The visual and performative idiom of the film would be also found in a number of films made through the early 1950s, more specifically, till the moment of Pather Panchali (1955), which set a new ideal of realist filmmaking. One can mention here the unique history of a print of the film reaching Mao Tse-Tung's 8th Route Army in Yenan.

In Chinnamul, made five years later, a more curious combination of conventions takes place. The conventions of the studio era genre of the *social*, of the IPTA stage and visual arts, and then the seemingly non-fictional sections which didn't have a precedence in Indian cinematic practices. The actors - Bijon Bhattacharya, Ritwik Ghatak, Charuprakash Ghosh, Gangapada Bose, Shobha Sen, Shanti Mitra et al are from the IPTA and the rest are non-actors, sometimes actual refugees enacting this migration of a group of villagers from East Pakistan - that was what the eastern Bengal came to be known after the partition - to the city of Calcutta. The most memorable of these non-actors was the old widow, who clings to the bamboo pole of her house and says to her neighbours she wouldn't leave her home come what may. The director Nemai Ghosh considered it an experiment, a film that would not fit into the conventional framework of cinema of that time at all, a film deliberately aimed at breaking the logic of entertainment and consequently those of dramatic organisation. He points out six principles of the 'experiment': not to use professional actors, not to use make -up, shoot at low cost within 10,000 ft., no song sequences (still considered a major deviation from the conventional film in India), using candid camera, and using dialectal, natural speech (cited in (Bandyopadhyay, 1991)). Similarities with what Cesare Zavattini later drew up as characteristics of Italian Neo-Realism would be apparent. But one should mention that Neo-Realist films were not seen in India before the International Film Festival of 1952. Nemai Ghosh, like Ray, was on the team of assistants and observers that accompanied Jean Renoir while he was shooting The River in Bengal in 1949-50, and The Calcutta Film Society, founded in 1947, did give him and some of his associates an exposure to the European realist films besides the Soviet Avant-Garde. Pudovkin and the actor Cherkassov were shown the film in Calcutta in 1951. Pudovkin later wrote to Ghosh:

> ' ... a genuine realism comes into its own for the first time in Indian cinema with your outstanding film, and we hope that Indian Cinema will develop now in that direction.'

There was a line of development of a socially critical cinema that runs through films like Aurat, Udayer Pathe, Dharti ke Lal, Nichanagar (1946), Chinnamul, Babla (1951), Pathik (1952), Nagarik (1952) Natun Ihudi (1953), Bhor Hoye Elo (1953) and Do Bigha Zamin (1955), Jagte Raho (1956). But they had a troubled relationship with realism.[3] The full-blown realist aesthetic of Ray coincided with the receding of the political engagement of these films to the margins. It is a historical development yet to be studied. But when one looks at the work of Ritwik Ghatak and its specific 'difficulty' one understands some of the sources and motivations of his work from this perspective better. Ghatak carries over not only the political passion but also some of the formal characteristics of this era to his films of the 1960s, thereby occupying by choice a position astride the boundaries of what was from 1955 on considered two antagonistic realms: realist art cinema and the melodramatic tradition of the *social*. The city, urban space, becomes an increasingly important location for the films in the 1950s. As the new Indian cinema comes into existence a new popular is also fashioned by the industry - and both these trends had to work out in their specific ways an encounter with the modern.[4] The city became the site of contemporary struggle and change, lure and search. It embodied the life world of the new individual that cinema had to invent in the context of post-independence modernisation. I will take a closer look at Chinnamul in the following section and try to point out the formal elements as well as the thematic and contextual linkage that I have in mind.

One can easily note that the principles of filmmaking that Nemai Ghosh points out are not always followed in the film. The admixture of idioms in Chinnamul is even more curious than Dharti ke Lal because to a large extent the two styles in the film are segregated into two episodes and this is based upon nothing other than a country-city dualism. The neo-realist tendencies that have been often pointed out - the principles Nemai Ghosh mentions - become apparent in the second part of the film as the story moves into the city of Calcutta. The village is invoked through the idiom of the realist political theatre whereas the city invokes the documentary. I am trying to indicate the broad tendencies of course; not suggesting a complete divergence at all levels. But I think it can be arugued that as Chinnamul comes to stand at a juncture of film history in India it provokes us to go over the grounds of some of the old representationalist arguments once again. I am suggesting

[3] Taking a cue from Raymond Williams' discussion of realism (Williams, 1977) one can think of a framework where it would be possible to trace a quantitative as well as a qualitative 'development' of realism in this period. Realism was developing within the *social* genre and up to **Nagarik** and **Pathik**, appears in various combinations with the elements of social melodrama. After the moment of **Pather Panchali**, the diffusion takes another dimension, again calling for a mapping of realism across the genres rather than solely in 'art cinema'. The conceptual point that I would like to add is that so far as we think in terms of smaller sets within this history realism can indeed constitute a measure of advance in specific cases. Discarding the linear development of realism as a standard of history does not mean this local historical measure of advance becomes an irrelevant question.

[4] The point is to suggest that firstly, the popular cinema developing from around 1955 is not the same popular now coming into conflict with the modern art cinema - an assumption tacit in most discussions. And secondly, the popular cinema of the period was essentially a modern practice, not a traditional foil of modernity. It has to make its own negotiations with the modern. On the latter point see (Prasad, 1998).

that to the extent the two locations necessitate two languages in the film it is perhaps not so unprofitable always to think from a conception of reality and work through the question of 'reflection'. The theoretical mistrust of the connection - reality and reflection - is well-founded, but the figure has remained with us in a lot of our descriptive work and may serve a special purpose in reading the forces at work in texts which emerge out a of radicalising context, a context where the very urgency and fluidity of the two categories of event and form, experience and expression create the scope for a capture, for a portrayal that can be easily released into the life of the object. The question of representation can be reconsidered on these occasions.

The film opens with credits and music by Kalobaran that can be clearly linked to contemporary conventions. Then the title announces it is going to be a 'stark portrait of the victims of partition'. As it introduces the village 'Naldanga' and its inhabitants the film adopts a very schematic, almost commentary-like exposition. The river, the mosque, the temple, the man - this is how it progresses. We find then the protagonist of the first section, Srikanta, meeting a number of people, a sequence that gives us a view of the various trades - the potter, the goldsmith, and the jute farmer. It is like a reconstructed documentary exposition. The land and the life, its imminent crisis - all this is presented for the knowledge of the outsider to some extent, as the ethnographic documentary is often supposed to do. The actual use of voice-over narration in the place of dialogue at least five times in this section would confirm this observation. When these people enter the city this voice-over mode will almost disappear (it is used there only once and briefly, as if the story then becomes theirs, they are in a better position to represent themselves and need not be represented any more in the same way). Soon after this we enter Srikanata's home - the site of the family drama, of the story of the couple that will be used to provide a narrative limit to the film. The set is indoor and done with the characteristic artifice of the studio era. The road outside the house is also shot in the studio lot as well as some of the meeting places of the villagers. As Srikanta and his wife talk about their conjugal dreams of a happy home we are taken through images of a bird and its nest. It comes as a straight metaphor but the bird motif is brought back time and again over the rest of the scenes at Srikanta's home suggesting the nest being actually there and that it is an extended metaphor rather than a simple symbolic digression. The peasants talk about *akal* throughout, which is bad harvest and starvation. The dialogue on three occasions refers to the 1943 Famine. A shadow of another *akal* looms over the people now. At the same time they are aware that something of a large-scale historical change is coming about. They look up to Srikanta to explain that change. Srikanta is a political activist, but like many others in 1946-47, the partition is not something he could believe would happen. He tries to organise the peasants against the local landlords and their oppression. This is the time of Punnapra Vayalar, Telengana and Tebhaga peasant movements and the reference is clearly to these uprisings all of which were launched in 1946 in NW Travancore State, Hyderabad State and Bengal respectively. These were struggles that came into

confrontation with the Independent state and the National Congress leadership after 1947 and finally led to the banning of the Communist Party. The presentation of the peasants and their lives in Chinnamul is to be understood in the light of a politics that focused on the local reality of exploitation and resistance and not only on the colonial/ nationalist narrative to explain the historical moment in question. If this was shared with the socialist literature and theatre of the period the mode of presentation is also often borrowed from the socialist stage. The most schematic, almost allegorical parts of the film are related to the portrayal of the two landlords - one Hindu and the other Muslim - working hand in glove to make a killing as the peasants are forced out of their land. We are told they have done it before, during the great Famine, and this is how the political games at the national level translate into local terms of class exploitation. The two landlords are presented as classic villains. In a very literal manner they appear to work in collusion. As the police swoop down on the house of Srikanta and arrest him they are shown for the first time standing under a tree and leering frontally. The mixture of narrative idioms is quite pointed here. On the verandah the scene of the couple: the wife putting on her vermillion dot oblivious of the imminent disaster, Srikanta sensing the danger and asking her indirect questions about what she would do if something untoward happens. As he mentions his own possible danger she gives a start and the dot is smudged - a very familiar melodramatic action. This is also the climax: the door latch shakes, the boots stamp on it, the two villains under the tree watch. While the two are presented in the manner of 'cut-outs' reminiscent of the contemporary drama, dance drama and agitational pantomime, the police onslaught is more in tune with cinematic rhetoric. The quick cutting back and forth, the oblique angles, the accelerated montage and the suggestive exposition where we do not see the police at all but only the boots and the handcuffs evoke among other things the Russian films that were shown by the PWA, IPTA and then the Calcutta Film Society in the late 1940s.

There are other montages, more conventional to Indian cinema of the period, and these relate to seasonal changes or a large-scale time transition. The partition itself is presented in this manner. As the lonely, traumatised Shobha Sen, Srikanata's wife, looks on, there is a series of dissolves and super-impositions of shots of the nest, lightning and storm, a flame from an earthen lamp, two hands trying to guard it. Soon after this a second series: a hand holding a knife striking down, houses on fire, city streets streaming with people. Apart from the conventional cinematic iconography and punctuation technique what is palpable is the presence of the images of political reportage, illustrations and news photographs, of conventions borrowed from painters like Jainul Abedin, Chittaprasad or Somenath Hore, from photographers like Sunil Jana, from the visual aspects that one finds in publications like Swadhinata or Janajuddha.[5] The dual and strange presence of a documentary impulse and the stage in this section of the film is the most apparent in the unusual

[5] Communist publications from Calcutta.

technique of voice-over narration. At these points in the film the dramatic exposition stops and a voice narrates what is happening. This happens when Srikanta is found addressing a political meeting in Umeshpur, for example, or when the news of his arrest spreads. Often as this takes place the actions become more schematic and stage-like. The voice over not only tells us the events it also mimics the dialogues that are silently shown to take place. This helps abbreviate passages but also makes apparent the external narrative agency that realism usually tries to erase in a text. It is a language of propaganda, the idiom of activist art that can make these shifts in narrative instances so apparent. The one here is of a peculiar variety, but the basic principles of external narration are integral to the very aesthetic of popular Indian cinema - a sign of its troubled relationship with realism and modernity.

There was nothing in Indian cinema that could match the starkness and vividity of the image as the villagers arrive in Calcutta as refugees. As they board the train they come out of the indeterminate location of Naldanga, the name given to the village in the film, to real places on the map of a burning country. We catch a glimpse of the station 'Darshana' on the way, conjuring up the fateful route of the refugees who came in through murder and mayhem to the city. The approach the Sealdah Station in Calcutta - the top angle shot of the maze of tracks and the low angle shot on the platform shades - has almost a dream-like quality as a new reality dawns on the characters, as it invades the film's frame. They land in a sea of humanity; many of them displaced people, on the platform. This will be the temporary home for them and they will have to forge their new community with the refugees. For decades since this community would be a new and politically extremely important demographic entity. They have not come to marvel at the big city as peasants, nor to climb the ladder of individual success as we find in countless films and popular fiction. They are here to take part in the very making of the city anew. Post-independence Calcutta would be shaped with and through them. Already, in 1950-51, Chinnamul carries a vision of future. It institutes the refugees as the protagonists in the city and also institutes a refugee gaze at the city. What I mean by this is that these characters can now appear to represent themselves so that the ethnographic exposition and the commentary mode now almost vanish from the text. There is no doubt that Chinnamul could place the fictional characters of villagers right in the middle of a present time, a time coincident with the film's activity itself, because of its engagement in a certain politics. This politics was trying to bring into visibility another reality undercutting the chronicle of colonialism and nationalism. The events of riots, partition and the massive uprooting contribute to a tragic view of the moment of independence, to a political vision that finds this moment of the founding of the nation-state as the that of the beginning of a struggle rather than an end to a course of destiny. The city as it appears on the scene is a city in formation, a city that has just woken up to history itself. In a sense the village episode was still in some timeless place, these people now have entered time as immediate experience, no escape from its course is possible. The Famine shocked the urban artist into a new

consciousness as the villages burst upon the cityscape like a nightmare. In fact the metaphor of the phantasm, people without food, without clothes, shorn almost of their very physical reality haunt the literature of the period, the most memorable being Manik Bandyopadhyay's short stories.[6] But the intense workers' and peasants' movements since 1944-45 worked towards a new image of the awakening village, of the peasants becoming agents of history.

The refugees, some of who actually appear on the scene now, extended the city's limits. Only a handful of the well off came and bought property, the rest took the urban authorities by surprise. The Calcutta authorities, like their Delhi counterparts, were not prepared for the waves of migration. People just encroached upon the vacant land on the outskirts eventually stretching the city borders. The humbler section built squatter colonies on public land. The poorest flocked to relief camps - like the one shown in the film. The 1951 census puts the population of Calcutta at 2.7 million. By 1961 the slum population was estimated at 650 thousand. A large number of the immigrants flocked to the informal sector, many of them finding work if they ever did in areas which were dramatically different from their traditional trade and ethos. Contemporary literature and art seemed to grasp the new reality much more sensitively than the urban planners and other specialists as one demographer has pointed out (Chakrabarty, 1991). The theme of an overall moral crisis generated by a violent uprooting and the compulsions of survival appeared often in the literature of the time. Monohar, the goldsmith played by Ritwik Ghatak in the film is shown peddling 'American combs for four paisa each' on the street, and he is the one who saves some money for his own family. People like him move out of the group to set up on their own to the progressive weakening of the original community. When Srikanta finally finds them out Bishu and Prasanna tell him that the Naldanga he is looking for has fallen apart. But they are shown amidst refugees from other villages and districts. As the groups broke apart under pressure new groups were formed among the refugees and the colonies were built upon this new principles of re-creating the village. The refugee colony that Srikanta visits shows an inhabitant trying to nurture his little plants. He says 'If I had the land I could produce gold on it'. As the refugees built their new 'villages' in Calcutta they would create these plots of little gardens. They would build schools and clubs; they would have their own distinctive culture of humour, folk music as well as voluntary civic activities. One would remember Iswar, the protagonist of Ghatak's Subarnarekha (1962) getting a job and moving out of the 'Nabajiban Colony', which he has struggled to build. His friend Haraprasad calls him a 'deserter'. His downfall is related to this loss of engagement with fellow sufferers. But the vision is bleaker in Subarnarekha. Haraprasad himself turns out a wretch in the end, a person who has failed even more miserably. Iswar's sister Sita cannot escape the reality that Iswar was running away from in his search of the 'Natun Bari', the New Home. Ghatak

[6] For example of the stories collected in Uttarkaler Galpo Sangraha. For a translation of some of Manik's stories see, (Bhattacharya, 1988).

brings her back to the city in her pursuit of love; it is another colony that she lands up in. The earlier film Meghe Dhaka Tara (1960) is of course almost wholly set in a colony. These grew up mainly on the southern fringe of the city and were named after the nationalist heroes Netaji-, Chittaranjan-, Baghajatin-, Gandhi Colony - they would be called.

There was some violence between the residents and the immigrants but the way the new people merged into the pores of the economy and society in a gradual manner is perhaps unique given the fact that the refugees maintained distinctive cultural and even political profiles. Of the two crises that provide a dramatic coherence to the second section of Chinnamul one is the conflict between the refugees and the owner of the house they have occupied. The owner is a typical upper class *bhadralok* resident of the city, his language is different from the dialect of the villagers. But his language is also different in another sense. The refugees do not understand why he should have more than one house lying unused and object to people taking shelter in them. 'How would you react if anyone occupies your house in the village?' he asks. Prasanna answers on behalf of the occupants, 'When people are in danger we in the village offer them shelter in our houses. We have always done that.'

It was no coincidence that through the upheavals between 1967 and 1977, the 'colony' areas proved a stronghold of radical politics in and around Calcutta. They still constitute a support base for the left. That is part of the history of how these homeless who form that impossible crowd in the Sealdah railway station organised itself into a cultural and political entity, not merely a population to be brought under governance. But Chinnamul concentrates on a point where the crowd, an explosion of faces and bodies, of tongues and expressions hit the streets of Calcutta. The great novelty of Chinnamul as a film was to animate a 'crowd' of people into protagonists. They do not provide the passive objects for documentation of poverty on the streets like photo reportage has often done. And it is not the story of one of the hapless embarking upon a private odyssey as the standard narrative treatment would have it. The migrants from Naldanga become a collective focus of action. One feels it is a record of their tryst with a moment in history that the film is interested in, not so much in the conceivable end of their story. Srikanta is released from jail and he comes searching for his wife and the group to Calcutta. It is his search that provides a linear motion to a description, which is otherwise too broad in canvas and too unpredictable in development. It is a compromise, an inevitable one, with the logic of the institution, but the film does not appear to be rounded off around his search and Srikanta's final meeting with his wife. The forces of scattering are too strong in the narration. This is another sign of what I see as the city invoking a form. Srikanta's narrative is the narrative in the traditional sense - where the sense of being 'told', of experience already belonging to a kind of past, would work towards textual integration. But the sheer possibility of scattering that looms large on these lives, of the unexpected happening to them any moment, evokes the sense of a place and time

that are relatively free. We know that the film looks disorganised because of this other sense, the sense of being 'not yet told'. True to the habit of socialist fiction and films Sirkanta's union with his wife coincides with her death and the birth of their child. This is the climax of the story of the couple that began in the first part, but Srikanta is hardly the single focus of the film once the great journey of the people begins. As the city and the country come into an epic encounter in Chinnamul the category of the individual protagonist is rendered problematic.

The film was responding to a time when the city itself became the protagonist for a new generation of poets - Jibanananda Das, Samar Sen and Bishnu De being the most important among them - and we come across this image of a face in the crowd, a face that is anchored in a sea of humanity out on the streets quite often in the poerty of Subhash Mukhopadhyay or Sukanata Bhattacharya, and also in a large number of fictions. The crowd is no longer the anonymous horde, they have a voice and the gathering has a meaning and form. This is the time when Calcutta became the city of *micchils*, of political processions and rallies. A wave of protest marches and barricades started in the city around the time of the INA trial and the RIN Mutiny. Millions came out on the streets in organised protest that would often take the nationalist leadership by surprise and would often be straightaway let down by them. People would fraternise on the streets and brave the murderous police attack. November 21, 1945, was a preamble to a series of what looked like explosions of a revolutionary kind that had to be contained through brisk negotiation and transfer of power between the Congress leadership and the colonial government. It came to a climax on the Rashid Ali Day in February 1946. Manik Bandypadhyay's novel Chinha describes a single siege on the streets on 25th November and deals with characters that emerge out of the corwd. Tarashankar Banerjee captured the Rashid Ali Day protests in his novel Jhar O Jharapata, Bulbul Chowdhury's Rakter Dak is another importatnt documentation in fiction. The workers' and peasants' movements continued to inspire these rebellions on the streets. There were literally hundreds of these events between 1945 and 1950. In 1946 alone workers all over India launched agitations for 1629 times. The first workers' strike and the police attack on it in West Bengal came only eight weeks after the independence. Against the experience of the communal riots that ravaged the city between 1946 and 47, these were events, which involved a solidarity between the religious communities and presented the other, surging face of the multitude in search of a utopia. And there were not only local demands but a vibrant internationalism of concerns: In January, 1947, five months after the Great Calcutta Killing, the students laid siege to the Calcutta Airport to protest against the French Air force using the place for sending warplanes to Vietnam[7].

Srikanta's re-union with his people in the end is of course a coincidence. But it is a coincidence that should be looked at with the historical context in mind rather

[7] See for a spirited account of the decades, see (Sengupta, 1989). For surveys of art and literature, see (Das, 1992). For a general historical account, see (Sarkar, 1983).

than the convention. The partition is an event of a scale that cannot be approached through simple rationalities. Too many people were thrown into the nightmare of death, separation and loss overnight. The logic of such violence and dispersal is meant to generate accidents - unforeseen separations and meetings are the stuff that such times are made of. I would see this end to Chinnamul not only as a melodramatic one but also as melodrama invoked by a certain consciousness of reality. This could give us a point of entry to the work of Ritwik Ghatak. In his films of the 1960s - Meghe Dhaka Tara, Komal Gandhar (1961) and Subarnarekha - the conventions I have tried to trace in the body of Chinnamul would come together in the most forceful combination. When the refugees from Naldanga land in Sealdah there is a close up of Ghatak looking at the sordid life of the city. He is looking at scenes of pavement dwellers that seem to have come straight out of the contemporary drawings of Somnath Hore and Jainul Abedin. One cannot but remember the play that opens Komal Gandhar: the old refugee on the city street cries out, 'Even the sky is covered with smoke here, even the sky'. Ghatak would work through plays, songs and slogans from the IPTA and would be deliberately 'theatrical' in his treatment of the theme of partition, which he saw as an embracing symptom, both historical and civilisational in significance. In Subarnarekha he uses a number of coincidences in the plot and suggests to the critics who attacked him once again for lapsing into melodrama that the film is 'about coincidences' (Ghatak, 1987). The protagonist Iswar goes back to city and after the night of revelry lands up in his sister's house as a client. The city that we see in Chinnamul seems to lack memory. The drunken Haraprasad says as much over the shots of passing street lamps in Subarnarekha: 'They haven't seen the riots, the Famine, the War, Partition. Haven't seen it. No, never...' This city is caught in a grip of the present. It is the place to which memory must be restored. Coincidences will continue till then to bring people into profoundly new encounters.