I am not an artiste, nor am I a cinema artiste. Cinema is no art form to me. It is only a means to the end of serving my people. I am not a sociologist, and hence, I do not harbour illusions that my cinema can change the people. No one film-maker can change the people. The people are too great. They are changing themselves. I am not changing things, I am only recording the great changes that are taking place. Cinema for me is nothing but an expression. It is a means of expressing my anger at the sorrows and sufferings of my people. Tomorrow, beyond cinema, man’s intellect may probably rear something else that may express the joys, sorrows, aspirations, dreams and ideals of the people with a force and immediacy stronger than that of the cinema. That would then become the ideal medium.

RITWIK GHATAK
Chapter V

The Man and His Times

On 11th March, 1951, the West Bengal State Draft Preparation Committee was elected to prepare the basic principles draft of IPTA. For this a questionnaire consisting of eleven questions was distributed and people from Calcutta, rural 24 Parganas, Berakpur and Asansol responded to it. People from other places too participated in oral discussions on the draft as the committee travelled around in various districts. The previous drafts and documents of IPTA as well as of other organizations also were studied. The basic precepts of the draft thus were understood in a very democratic manner. After taking into consideration various view-points Ghatak and Surapati Nandi were requested to frame the draft. Ghatak reformulated several ideas and the two composed the draft. The draft was, however all but rejected by IPTA as it contained many ideas which the party (CPI) then considered wrong. Later a final draft was made out of Ghatak's and Surapati Nandi's draft which was accepted. Ghatak's draft stood substantially modified when the enlarged draft was accepted by the state preparatory committee.

One of the basic purposes of Ghatak's and Surapati Nandi's draft was to initiate widespread discussion and constructive criticism in order to formulate a correct policy. The draft placed at its background both IPTA's concern with the past heritage and the people's theatre movement, as well as the relation between IPTA and the humanist current in national and international progressive cultural movements. It also focused on the issue of tackling the cultural dearth of India by formulating its principles primarily on the lines of progressive and cultural
movements operative in India and elsewhere. It further reflected on the people's culture and its attitude to traditional art. Moreover the draft was written in 1952, the year that saw the artists of IPTA struggling for autonomy from the party in the area of art and culture. It subtly reflects this struggle for freedom demanding autonomy for art in terms of form and content; art must quest after quality even as it struggles to be a people's art, and it should avoid turning propagandist.

Thus the 1951 draft is Ghatak's most important creative statement. It reflects the cultural movement organizer in him as well as his political and organizational roots. IPTA's desire for autonomy in art and culture too finds expression, especially in the call for democratic functioning. Moreover it was through the process of preparing the draft that Ghatak crystalized his understanding of art and culture within a specific cultural complex. His ideas relating to the significance of the folk form and the significance of art as art against its turning propagandist are clearly stated here. The development of form within its varied dimensions both in terms of quality and popularity is problematised here. The draft further states that the classical is basically a derivation of the folk and hence must be incorporated. It also stresses the need to assimilate the western form along with Indian modes, and to understand and experiment in its medium. But most of all the draft emphasizes the need to retrieve the folk medium as the art form of India. Ghatak's later preoccupations with the epic and the melodramatic mode as a part of a people's residual culture find expression here. Moreover the fusion of a politically relevant content with a folk form, which is the central concern of Ghatak's oeuvre, finds its genesis in the draft. Ghatak's recognized cinema as the most socially relevant art form in 1951, a time when it was
not valued by the party.

The draft brings to the fore two very significant concerns of IPTA. The issue of the avant garde needs to be problematised in the context of India especially because it developed within a Marxist paradigm. Whereas in Europe (France and Germany) the notion of the avant garde was related mainly to the idea of subversion primarily in the arena of form, in the Socialist block it was related both to the idea of subversion in form as well as to a search for a new form and a new content. In IPTA, unlike in Europe or Russia, the avant garde was seen not in terms of subversion of form or content but in search for a new content. But this content, they believed had to be both contemporary as well as real (as in Russia). In this search was involved the retrieval of an indigenous folk form (unlike in the Socialist block) that would be capable of encoding the new reality in the people’s modes of expression and thus would approach the people from within their cultural paradigms. The retrieval of the folk was a central preoccupation of IPTA, and it was undertaken not merely to exalt the folk but to instantly reach out to the people.

Secondly whereas the Marxist Cultural thought in the Socialist block was not only atheistic but was also indifferent and at times even disrespectful to the idea of an indigenous culture and folk forms, in India the Marxist cultural front in the form of IPTA gave not only utmost significance to these forms but instead of teaching the people wanted the people in the form of the folk artists to be its leaders. IPTA’s struggle for autonomy from the party was significantly centered around this issue. For the party, IPTA as a cultural wing was merely a frontal organization, the main director being the party itself.
The cultural frontal organization was merely to assist and further the party ideology and to operate in its paradigms. It was merely a functional body meant to serve the party's line of thinking. The significance of the artists in themselves, especially folk artists, their problems and concerns and ideas related to art did not mean much to the party. The struggle of IPTA to bring folk artists to the front and to look into their concerns in order that the indigenous culture which they viewed primarily as the people's culture may survive was a conflictual arena within the party's line of thinking and its cultural wing (IPTA). It is in 1952 that the struggle for autonomy begins in IPTA. This struggle and its basic precepts find an expression in Ghatak's and Surapati Nandi's 1951 draft. The draft clearly takes an autonomous stance and was written in an absolutely democratic manner. The draft eventually came to be seen as a threat to the dogmatic branch of IPTA as well as to the party. Thus it was this draft that obliquely signed the death warrant of Ghatak first in the form of his expulsion from IPTA in 1954 and then his expulsion with severe allegations from the party in 1955.

In the latter part of the draft Ghatak critiques the phase of neocolonialism. He discusses the cultural dearth and the distortion of history that the imperialists caused in India. The draft brings to the fore the form in which the Britishers forced the artists to change into artisans and how eventually they destroyed the farmers by forcing them to plant indigo in their paddy fields. It further foregrounds the struggles of the people aimed at liberating the nation despite the manipulative policies of the imperialists and at recouping the purely indigenous national culture. The independence of India, the draft reflects, was a bourgeois compromise. After the Second World War and the
launching of independence movements throughout the world the imperial powers realized that they no longer could sustain their force in the form of imperialism and hence they played the divide and rule politics and sold a fake independence to the nations. Realizing that the old forms of exploitation would no longer work, they hatched the scheme of offering partnership to a portion of the capitalist class and then in the name of giving 'independence' they changed their sign boards and cadres and went underground in our country, states the draft. The partition of the country thus played havoc with the lives of the people; the independence of the nation in no way reduced the sufferings and exploitation of the people, it only created further confusion in the national liberation struggle. Thus this independence which was a bourgeois compromise in no way reflected the people's movement or their interests. It is this aspect related to the notion of a 'capitalist independence' that Ghatak highlights in the 1951 draft. Later, it became the basic preoccupation of his cinema, stories and drama. Moreover, in his analysis of imperialism and neoimperialism with its control over our economy, culture and ideology, Ghatak reiterates the strong need for an independent national economy. He also critiques the emergence of fascist Hindu tendencies in the post-independence era. The subtle co-option and encroachment of the indigenous culture of the people as well as sectarian and fractionist policies of the fascistic Hindu ideology are also stated in the draft. The draft insists that the national liberation movement must continue. Thus it inferentially suggests that India actually never attained independence. The need, as the draft asserts, is to intensify the national liberation movement and to release the nation from pseudo independence operative within the paradigm of neocolonialism as well as from its subtle consequences such as
being manifested in the rise of the Hindu state. The draft sees the desire for national liberation organically tied with the desire for cultural liberation. Hence, the role of IPTA is to use all art work to strengthen the national liberation struggle which basically is a people's struggle and to link it with the people's movement. It further highlights neoimperialist tendencies related to war and fascism and insists that the people of the world must unite to bring about peace.

The draft finally analyses the past of IPTA, its over-emphasis on city work, its shift away from the militant culture and ideas of the majority of people, and its failure to unite folk and sophisticated cultures. Ghatak further analyses the role of IPTA, especially during the B. T. Ranadive period, and critiques its fantasizing an imaginary revolutionary vision of reality in the name of workers and peasants. Unfortunately, the draft states, in the process the CPI abandoned the interests of the workers and peasants. Moreover, art was reduced to a propagandist mode and eventually into slogan mongering. Finally the organization almost broke down. But at the same time, the draft states, it is also important to look at the positive achievements of IPTA. The draft refers in particular to Punjab tour to prevent the Bengal famine; the playing of Nabanno; the creating of the Nabajivaner Gan; the touring of Bengal and Assam with Shaheedev Dak. It ends its analysis of IPTA's past by stating:

It is important not to abandon our past but to look at our past mistakes and to critique it, as the present is after all created by our past and at the same time it is also important not to completely denigrate the struggle of IPTA.

Thus it states that it is important to continue to work in complete sincerity, taking the people as the leaders of IPTA.
The draft ends with a call for unity and the need to establish the widest possible alliance with different cultural organizations and individuals in order to join in the struggle of the toiling people of the world.

The draft thus reflects Ghatak's basic ideas about art, culture, politics as well as about the significance he attached to folk art and artists. It also includes his critique on the form of India's independence; it not only divided a single people but was a complete betrayal of them. Thus the draft reflects the basic ideas of Ghatak both in the arena of art as well as in politics. These were to permeate in all his works.

In a letter written to the Secretary, West Bengal Provincial Committee, C.P.I, Calcutta, Ghatak clearly brings to the fore the power polemics and contradictions within the party and the degeneration setting forth in its leadership. The letter is a plea to the party not merely to reconsider his expulsion from the party but even more forcefully, it is a plea to the party to analyze its operations and its deviation from its ideology.

He states that at no stage of his investigation was he or the people directly concerned with his case called; nor was he informed, although innumerable other persons were called and their statements recorded. Ghatak not only speaks about himself in the letter but mentions the case of Utpal Dutt, Salil Choudhary, Debabatra Biswas and several other artists. He questions the ongoing process of liquidating many a frontal worker by implicating him/her in false cases and then operating his/her liquidation through slander and hush hush campaigns so that the worker will gradually wither away, as the records will not directly state the charges and through the word of mouth only the charges will be in circulation. Thus he states that through
the hush hush campaign he is being told that a commission is examining 23 charges against him and that he is being expelled soon from the party but surprisingly he has not been directly informed. He writes that he was forced to answer numberless questions completely unconnected with the original charges and when he questioned this form of investigation, he was told that this was the party’s way of conducting an inquiry by going into the entire past of a comrade. He further says that for the past one year he had to go on answering negligible and imaginary charges but still he could not get down to the main charge, that of being a Trotskyite or some such thing or a police agent, because this was unutterable as far as records were concerned. Ghatak appeals, saying that all throughout the body of IPTA his name is mud. Whatever he says or does becomes a charge forthwith. Despite his acute anguish on the form of the investigation, the main focus of the letter is on the fact that there has been no principled inner party discussion in IPTA or in the party circles. Ghatak states that things on the left political front had undergone a change since 1948-49 phase yet organizationally nothing had changed. The letter thus brings subtly to the fore the struggle of the artists since 1949-50. Till the end of the B.T. Ranadive period (49-50) IPTA was too rigidly controlled by the party. Eventually the pressure from the base became too much and as a result a nine day meeting was held to decentralize IPTA. Hence IPTA won considerable autonomy. This led to spectacular successes. But the party was worried if this new freedom would not lead to the breakdown of authority and to ideological perversion. They suspected that a conspiracy for anti-party rebellion must be taking place. The making of the IPTA policy draft ‘confirmed’ the paranoia of the leadership. They launched a full scale war against the struggle for autonomy.
in IPTA as they perceived it as an anti-party tendency within it. The party thus threw away powerful talents and a unified spirit all on its own. Eventually IPTA was split between the Ballet Squad and the Drama Squad. The Ballet Squad led by Sudhi Pradhan, Jnan Muzumdar and Bulbul Choudhary was in alignment with the party line. It was willing to subordinate the artist to directions from above and was also willing to submit art to propaganda as long as it was in the service of the people. From this point of view they were drifting into a position from where they faced with unconcern the prospect of comrades with untold artistic excellence dropping out from IPTA and they would not question regimentation within the party. The Drama Squad led by Shambhu Mitra, Bijon Bhattacharya, Ritwik Ghatak and others insisted that art should not only be progressive but also technically and qualitatively perfect, and in order for it to be so, they felt they must have absolute freedom for exercising their ideas. Thus they insisted on the autonomy of the artists. They had lost confidence in the capacity of the party to give them any guidance where art was concerned.

The letter reflects Ghatak's ongoing struggle as well as the struggle of IPTA for autonomy: the key theme that created and destroyed him thus was the clash between centralization and autonomy as it happened in the relation both within IPTA and between IPTA and the party during 1948-1954. Ghatak argues that it is absolutely urgent for the party to ponder over problems related to its own functioning and to critique its form of leadership. It must also look into its partisan stance, the prevalent factionism and the power pollution within the party as well as the problems within IPTA. The need thus, according to Ghatak, was to clarify things on the conceptual and the organizational level. Ghatak states:
... the greatest danger today is within the party and this danger is much more grave than
the shifting priorities of the Nehru government, the meaning of sovereignty, or our
reservations about India proceeding on the path of capitalistic independence.

It is true, he says:

... that these political facts have a profound bearing upon our whole work, but no line
of the party is "right" or every line is a "liquidation" one so long as the party including
its leadership is so much uneducated and apolitical.

The letter also brings to the fore the contradictions within
the party. Thus the letter is not only a plea for himself and
fellow artists who were being victimized; most of all, it is an
appeal for initiating a discussion regarding the party's modes of
organizational functioning. Though capitalism, he says, is the
most important concern, yet it can only be fought by fighting
first the power dynamics operative within the party.

Though all along since 1951, Ghatak had been an active
participant in the IPTA's struggle for autonomy, it is only in
1955 that, through this particular letter, he directly questions
the party's modes of functioning and criticizes the party he had
so much loved and valued. It is the problem of organizational
tactics in the relation between talented artists and the
revolutionary party that sets the arena of conflict between
Ghatak and the party. Eventually IPTA was split and Ghatak, being
an active organizer of the democratic, autonomous, anti-
authoritarian movement, was expelled both from IPTA in 1954 and
from the party in 1956. It took four years for the party to
dislodge him, from 1951 to 1954. This shows his deep relation
with IPTA, the tremendous support he received, and his commitment
and stamina. But since IPTA was so much a part of his life,
since he had been a part of this warm and dense community for so
many years, he had to be disembodied to be thrown out. In a
letter written to his wife Surma Ghatak, on the 1st of January,
1956, Ghatak writes:

But what I cannot come to terms with, is that I have lost my party for ever, my sole ideal is snatched away from me! I am strongly tempted to take a vow that I must soon go back to my party with due honour and glory. The party will rectify its faults and shortcomings, it will truly understand me and again I will be surrounded by work, action and enthusiasm. Barring that I simply cannot derive any happiness and fulfillment from life. . . . I must dedicate myself entirely and make a film in Bengali. . . . We all must go back to the party, to the people. . . . Shall we really be deprived of success and contentment?7

Thus an empty person was thrown out. The movement persona who not only saw film as a part of the movement but who had repeatedly been saying "... cinema is no art form to me. It is only a means to the end of serving my people,"8 was killed and the film personality survived. And this persona too the party tried to destroy allegedly in the case of Nagarik and in its critical responses to Komal Gandhar. And before this, it tried to stop the drama production of Ispat and Nicha Nagar as well as to suppress the 1951 IPTA draft of Ghatak. Thus he was totally destroyed. Unfortunately throughout his cinematic career after the protest he made in this letter, Ghatak became silent on the issue of power dynamics within the party as well as on reflecting directly the political scenario in his cinema. The question that repeatedly comes to the fore is, why is it that the issue of the refugee becomes the central concern in his cinema though he centers it around the problematics of class, and depicts the capitalist model of independence that India followed? Secondly, would it be right to say that this concern with the refugee inversely reflects a certain recession from several other political streams of thought and radical movements operative in the world, in India and especially in Bengal in the 1960s, movements such as 'Bangla Bandh' when the refugees, the people without the help of the Communist parties, had declared a red revolution in Bengal in 1966? The question that becomes significant is: why is it that living in the 60s, an era of the
most radical upsurge the world over did not find an expression in the cinema of one of the most radical film makers of India? There is a need to analyze his psycho-political dynamics and to understand what precisely led to this silence, for the only time he makes a little comeback and that too after years of silence, in 1962, is with a mild protest in *Komal Gandhar* where he tries to bring to the fore the power polemics and conflict in IPTA. But the film is highly criticized by the party. *Komal Gandhar* thus seals the fate of Ghatak as far as his relation with the party is concerned. He will protest no more. The only time when he implicitly refers to it is in the last scene in *Jukti Takko Ar Gappo* where he introduces himself as Neelkantha, a mad, degenerate bourgeois intellectual and kills himself within the cross-fire between the cadre of C.P.I. (M.L) and the state paramilitary. This is really the story of his life. His tragedy was his faith in the party, and the rejection from the party led to tremendous agony and depression. For Ghatak, the party was a significant vehicle of expression and somewhere despite his criticism and awareness of the power polemics within the party he still continued to see the party as a part of the people’s movement. Though it is also important to recall here that once while referring to the party, he had expressed to one of his close friends, Hemango Biswas, "... that art is for the people. Nowadays I don’t think about the party but the side of the people." Still, he was too broken to participate in the emerging struggles of the people in India as well as in the left throughout the world and to respond to the festival of revolution in the 60s. He does refer in passing to them in the script of *Shey Bishnupriya* as well as in his conversation with the Naxalites in *Jukti Takko Ar Gappo*, nowhere else in his cinema does he celebrate, critique or analyze them. But at the same
time it is absolutely important to restate here that though his cinema does not situate itself within the historical, political dynamics of the movements expressing the uprise of the people yet the struggle and the discontent in the lives of the ordinary toiling people remains the main concern of his cinema throughout.
Notes

1. I am especially indebted to Jogin and Dimple for this chapter.


3. Ibid., p. 172.


