HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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GOLDEN LINE */ SUBARNAREKHA* (1965)

Ritwik Ghatak

Bengali language

Film link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jeiGPWYIOqs

OVERVIEW



Subarnarekha

Der Fluss Subarnarekha

Ein Film von Ritwik Ghatak
Indien/Bengalen





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

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

Film The film's title refers to the Subarnarekha River that flows through the Indian states of Jharkhand, West Bengal and Odisha, and is a central location in the story.

CHARACTERS

Ishwar Chakraborty Sita's brother and partition refugee

Haraprasad	Ishwar's friend
Sita	Ishwar's sister; in love with Abhiram
Abhiram	Sita's adoptive brother, later husband
Bagdi-bou	Abhiram's mother
Rambilas	Ishwar's employer, a businessman
(Jogen) Mukherjee	foundry foreman at Rambilas's mine
Binu	Sita and Abhiram's son
Akhil	Ishwar's neighbour

SYNOPSIS

Ishwar, his sister Sita and his friend Haraprasad are partition refugees, who set up a new settlement in West Bengal. Soon after their arrival, Abhiram's mother is abducted and Ishwar decides to take care of him. Rambilas, Ishwar's college classmate and now a businessman, offers him a supervisory position at his coal mine in rural Jharkhand; Ishwar moves there with Sita and Abhiram. Sita grows up, while Abhiram is sent away to boarding school and then college. After his graduation, Abhiram wants to be a novelist and marry Sita. However, Abhiram's lost mother coincidentally arrives and passes away at their town and her lower caste is revealed. Ishwar now disapproves of the marriage as Abhiram is from a lower caste. At the point when Ishwar took in Abhiram his caste was unknown. and Rambilas is vehemently opposed. Sita and Ishwar fall out and he wishes her dead. Sita elopes from her arranged marriage with another man, leaving Ishwar somewhat deranged. Sita and Abhiram set up in a slum in Kolkata and have a child, Binu. Abhiram struggles and they become poor, while Ishwar amasses wealth. Abhiram is killed in an accident and Sita is about to be forced into prostitution to make ends meet. In the meanwhile, Haraprasad, who has lost his wife and children, arrives at Ishwar's door just as he's about to kill himself. They embark on a journey of indulgence, from betting at the races and getting drunk at a nightclub, their final destination being a pleasure house. Turns out that Ishwar is to be Sita's first client. Upon seeing him, she kills herself and Ishwar, belatedly recognizing her, grabs the knife she used to kill herself and proclaims himself guilty of her death. A court case ensures for two years, after which Ishwar is finally cleared of all charges. With Binu in tow, he returns to his workplace only to find out that he has been sacked and they have nowhere to go.

SCENES



Opening scene Schoolchildren sing *Bande Mataram* ("Praise the Motherland") at the inauguration of a new refugee settlement school. Ishwar Chakraborty is to teach English and History there. His younger sister, Sita, a girl around 7 or 8 years old, talks to Haraprasad, Ishwar's friend, about the infighting in their settlement. She doesn't like the settlement and wants to go to a new home.



Abhiram is abandoned At another nearby location, a low-caste (Bagdi) widow tries to find help for herself and her young son, Abhiram, from a tout but is refused. Suddenly she is dragged away by the landowner's goons on a flatbed truck and Abhiram is left behind. Ishwar takes the boy under his wing. Haraprasad tells Ishwar that he's settled this refugee camp in the landowner's fallow land and named it 'New Life'. Ishwar says they must try to find Abhiram's mother. All the men must stay awake all night to guard the settlement.



Gandhi assassinated The next day, they go to the newspaper office to put in an advertisement searching for Abhiram's mother. Breaking news is faxed: Nathuram Godse has killed Mahatma Gandhi [fixing the context as January 30, 1948]. Haraprasad and the other refugees are stunned reading the news. There is unrest at the settlement.



Ishwar gets a job offer Rambilas, an old friend of Ishwar and a rich businessman, suddenly sees him. They ride in Rambilas's fancy car together. Ishwar tells him that too much has changed since the last time they met. Rambilas takes him to his house where he has arranged a musical soiree. Rambilas praises his honesty and deep erudition. He then offers Ishwar a job as a coal mine and steel foundry manager in a remote place with a meagre salary and worse prospects. Ishwar accepts hesitantly. Rambilas drops him back to the settlement and tells him that he can leave for the place the next day.

A disagreement An itinerant singer sings a famous folk song “Dehotori dilam chhari” (“I’m setting sail on my body-boat”) at the settlement. Ishwar tells Haraprasad about the job. Haraprasad calls him a “deserter” and tells him to strangle Abhiram before he leaves since he’s escaping responsibility. Ishwar replies that he will take Abhiram with Sita and himself. The only responsibility he has is to see that Sita grows up without pain and hardship. Haraprasad is aghast. Sita is overjoyed since she didn't like the settlement. She keeps asking about their new home.

A new start At the remote train station, Ishwar, Sita and Abhiram are received by Mukherjee, the foreman of the foundry. They walk by the sandy banks of the Subarnarekha river. Mukherjee praises Rambilas’s work in building wells and temples. Mukherjee exaggerates the magnificence of their new house to Sita, but Ishwar stops him and tells him not to lie to children.

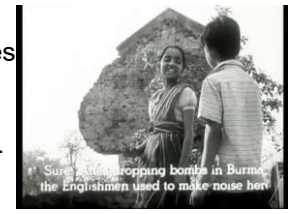


Meeting neighbours They arrive at the sleeping quarters. Mukherjee says the location is far away from town but he will have the company of Akhil, a railway worker. Akhil laments that he has to live in this arid, rocky land but thankfully he just received a transfer order. Sita pulls away Ishwar to the garden, where Abhiram is crying. Abhiram runs away from them. Mukherjee brings Ishwar to the factory and tells him that the manager is a strange man; his daughter eloped with someone and he still hasn’t recovered from the trauma.



A music lesson A music teacher [played by Ghatak himself] and Sita practice Tagore’s “Aaj dhaaner khete roudrochhyayae” (“Today, on the rice fields, sun and shade play a game of hide and seek”) while Abhiram sulks. The music teacher tells Ishwar that her future is in music.

Abhiram is sent away Sometime later, Abhiram is due to be sent away to a boarding school in Jhargram. He’s happy, but Sita isn’t pleased. He promises to return soon. They run around on the riverbank and reach an abandoned airstrip with damaged planes. Abhiram pretends to fly. They explore some dilapidated, abandoned buildings. Abhiram promises to return for the holidays.



The genesis of Sita Sita sings the Tagore song from earlier and walks on the abandoned airstrip. Suddenly, a street performer (*bohurupee)* dressed as Goddess Kali appears before Sita. The manager, who was there coincidentally, tells her not to be afraid as it’s just a ruse for earning money. The manager pays the performer and he says it was an accident. While walking back, the manager tells Sita that the whole story of Rama happens between when Sita, born of the Earth, is found by her father and when she returns to the Earth.



Ishwar is promoted A few years pass. Ishwar is now a trusted supervisor for the local workers. Mukherjee informs him that the manager has finally gone insane and was trying to bite everyone, so he has been taken away to Kolkata. Rambilas has promoted Ishwar to the manager position. Mukherjee tells the workers to keep the new manager-babu happy.

Melancholy We see picturesque scenes of the Subarnarekha river, which is almost dry. Sita is heard practising a classical piece (“Dekh bhor bhaee” / “Look, dawn is here”) as Ishwar approaches and listens intently. Sita is now a young woman, around 18. She scolds him for not taking care of himself. Ishwar says that he’s proud of Abhiram’s new piece that was printed, but he doesn’t understand Sita and Abhiram’s obsession with melancholy things. Ishwar says that people only like to see, read and hear about beautiful things. Ishwar is sad that Abhiram hasn’t visited for a year as he had exams.



Abhiram returns Sita is happy that Ishwar was promoted and she plans to go shopping for a dinner invitation. Abhiram arrives unexpectedly! Mukherjee also arrives and gives Abhiram the good news of Ishwar’s promotion. Abhiram says that a big publisher will publish his next book. He goes to help Sita with the shopping. Ishwar tells Mukherjee that he has applied for an engineering position in Germany for Abhiram.

Romance Sita and Abhiram start off in their usual teasing manner, but they quickly realize that their feelings have changed. They walk in a wooded area. Abhiram tells her the beginning of his next novel, which is somewhat autobiographical. He admits to longing to be back home all year and that he understood the feeling only that day. Sita teases him but admits that she also has feelings for him. Abhiram asks her how long she has felt this way and she simply says it has been years.





Tender moments The river is full of water again. Sitting on the bank, Sita sings another classical piece ("Aaj ki ananda, jhulat jhulane Shyamchanda" / "Such a joyous day, Krishna is on the swing") as Abhiram listens intently. Later, she sings while doing her chores. She scolds Ishwar again for speaking nonsense. Ishwar says Sita is just like their mother (whom she doesn't remember) in the way she scolds him, makes a long face and sulks. They have a tender moment when she says she's his mother. He tells her not to leave him like she did.



Sad news Mukherjee arrives with his wife. Akhil, who has been transferred back there again, also arrives. They have another surprise visor, Vinod, who brings sad news: Haraprasad's wife died by suicide after years of suffering from Haraprasad's eccentricities, leading to unemployment and even begging. She wrote a letter to Ishwar begging him to save her two young children. Vinod says that Haraprasad disappeared with his children, saying that he doesn't want a deserter to raise them. Vinod breaks down and cries.

Abhiram's success At night, Sita is anxiously sobbing. She says that she's frightened of growing up and she will never leave Abhiram. Ishwar consoles her. Soon after, Abhiram's exam results arrive and he has done excellently. Abhiram wants to go to Kolkata and publish his new novel. Ishwar disapproves as all he writes about is pain, suffering and tears. Ishwar tells him that he should study Engineering in Germany and give him some peace. Abhiram tries to object but is dismissed.

Abhiram proposes to Sita At home, Sita, while hanging up the laundry, tells Abhiram that she isn't angry or sad with him. He says that he has to leave in three weeks for Hamburg and won't see her again for four years. He wants to buy her something from the local tribal (Santhali) fair. At the fair, he buys her a necklace, then proposes to her. Ishwar and Mukherjee overhear him. Sita and Abhiram go to the broken buildings at the airstrip. Sita tells him not to go to Germany and remain strong on his conviction to be an author. He says he found strength in her words. At home, Sita lies to Ishwar about where she got the necklace.



Rambilas's business deal The next day, Ishwar tells Abhiram that he must leave for Germany in a few days. Rambilas arrives unexpectedly with his wife. Rambilas proposes to make Ishwar a partner in the business as it was getting difficult for him to attend to that mill. It was a purely business decision to have someone trustworthy like Ishwar at the helm. Ishwar says that he's very grateful. Rambilas strongly disapproves of Ishwar picking up and raising Abhiram since his family history and caste are unknown. Rambilas leaves hurriedly, postponing the partnership offer and saying that the discussion spoilt his mood.



Death Akhil brings news that a train full of refugees left two old women at their train station. One of them is dying. Abhiram, arriving there, recognizes his lost mother. She dies soon after the other old woman identifies her as a low-caste Bagdi. Abhiram and Sita meet at the riverbank. Abhiram tells her that everything has now changed after his birth caste has been revealed. Sita asks him to decide about the marriage.

Mukherjee's advice While bathing at the river, Mukherjee advises Ishwar to send Abhiram away since Rambilas will be extremely offended if he hears of it and all of Ishwar's efforts over the years will have been in vain. Ishwar tells Mukherjee to look for a groom for Sita as he wants her married off at the earliest.



Abhiram and Ishwar Abhiram tells Ishwar that he doesn't want to go to Germany but stay at Kolkata and write instead. Ishwar tells him that a family is coming to see Sita that day (for an arranged marriage). Abhiram replies that he and Sita want to marry. Ishwar tells him to leave next morning and try to earn his own keep in Kolkata.



A wedding match Sita refuses to appear before her prospective groom and family, making them wait. Ishwar is infuriated and bangs her head on the *tanpura* (a large musical instrument). Sita says that getting angry makes him ill so she would meet them. Later, Mukherjee lets Ishwar know that they match has been agreed on and there is an auspicious wedding date coming soon. Ishwar tells Mukherjee to arrange it while Sita watches, sad. Later, at the airstrip, she sings a sad classical song ("Mor dukhuya ka se kahun... aaj'" / "Whom do I speak my woes to, today?")



Sita and Ishwar fall out Sita tells Ishwar that he is being unjust. Ishwar tells her that Rambilas has postponed the partnership offer and written that Ishwar shouldn't be shocked about Abhiram's caste. Sita tells him that he never tolerated dishonesty. Ishwar replies that success is finally within his grasp now after years and tells her to shut up. He would rather see her dead that be married to Abhiram or anything else. Sita remains calm.



Sita and Abhiram elope The next day, when Abhiram is leaving, Sita asks him what his plans are. She tells him that she doesn't wish to harm Ishwar and that she should leave with him. Abhiram tells her to wait while he finds a place for her to stay. The wedding day comes. Sita is dressed up in all her bridal finery. Guests arrive. But she is nowhere to be found when it is time for the rituals. Her wedding headband floats down the river as she walks away with Abhiram.

Ishwar's madness Six years pass. Ishwar is walking around with a "killer's eyes", says a villager; another calls him a madman. Mukherjee reads the news of the first spacecraft in orbit [October 4, 1957, Sputnik I]. He's excited that the Russians have sent Gagarin to space. Ishwar angrily throws the newspaper away.



Sita's days At a slum tenement during heavy rains, Sita sings a classical monsoon song. She looks impoverished, with no ornaments and a simple sari. An older woman comes in and tells her to make a profession out of her singing voice. Sita says it's hard to do with a small child and that she still hasn't finished making 500 paper bags. The woman gives her a partial payment for some paper bags.



Happy family The son, Binu, asks for his father. Abhiram soon returns. He says that everyone is ready to suffer but not read about it, just like Ishwar had said. He can't hope to publish his novel. But a friend is offering him a bus driver job and he's rather do that than write syrupy melodrama. But it'll take some time and training.



Sita's pride He hesitantly asks her to write Ishwar for help, but she firmly says that she would rather beg on the streets with Binu, die by suicide or do something even worse than ask Ishwar for help. She says she could sing for patrons as the older woman suggested. Abhiram is shocked and dismisses the idea. Binu asks Sita to sing his favourite Tagore song from her childhood about sun and shade on the rice fields and she enthusiastically sings it.

Haraprasad returns Ishwar walking around in his house. All of Sita's belongings, including her *tanpura* remain in her room. Overcome by emotion, he suddenly tries to hang himself to death but his old friend Haraprasad arrives. He tells Ishwar to go ahead and he's coming right behind—they should shock the villagers with a pair of corpses the next day. Of course, neither man hangs himself. Haraprasad says that he is lost and defeated after fighting for years. But the "deserter, coward" Ishwar shouldn't have a reason to "want to be suspended in space". Actually, neither protest nor cowardice

make any difference— “we’re all disembodied, insubstantial.we’ve been wiped out.



Abhiram’s hopes Some weeks pass. Abhiram happily tells Binu that he is to start work that day in reply to Binu’s question of when they will move to their new home. Abhiram tells Sita that he was given a bus with a water-logged brake system to drive the day before and he was driving outside the city. Today would be his first day driving a city route. He hopes that he doesn’t get a bad bus. He promises to bring back two new saris for her and a train toy for Binu as it’s payday.



Anticipation It’s late but Abhiram hasn’t returned. Binu is excited about going to their new house and Sita tells him her own story from when she was a child. Binu says he wants to go see the Subarnarekha River. He falls asleep, telling her to scold his father for being late and to keep the train toy on his pillow. Sita sings “jhulat jhulane Shyamchanda”/ “Krishna swings on the swing”.

Abhiram is killed A group of people arrive with the news that Abhiram was killed in an accident from a faulty brake, trying to save a young girl. A mob burnt the bus and no one could be saved. Sita faints.



The creed of Indulgence Haraprasad mumbles in his ear while Ishwar looks infuriated. Haraprasad says that they can’t even die by suicide. Kolkata is so much fun: “The way of the herd is the only truth…Indulgence is the way to liberation”. They should go and enjoy themselves after a life of abstinence. They soon visit the horse races and a nightclub wearing party hats and looking ridiculous. Haraprasad, drunk, says that Yama told Nachiketa* “Don’t seek self-knowledge”. Both of them continue getting drunk. Haraprasad passes out after keeping on speaking from the Sanskrit scriptures and Ishwar laughs like a maniac. Ishwar loses his glasses. They ride a cab. Haraprasad says the ancients didn’t know the bomb, the war, the famines, the riots or the Partition— they merely kept on reinventing nature hymns.

*In *a Upanishad*, Nachiketa is noted for his rejection of material desires, which are ephemeral, and for his single-minded pursuit of the path of self-realisation or *moksha*. He was taught self-knowledge, knowledge about the *atman* (soul), and the Brahman (Ultimate Reality), by Yama, the god of death.



At a pleasure house They arrive at their destination, a house with a “fresh singing girl”; the older lady tells them that the girl is from a good family and hasn’t done anything like this before, but they will be charmed; poverty has forced her hand. She wakes up Sita and tells her that they will go away after hearing her sing. She gives her some money, promising more and takes the sleeping Binu away.



Sita dies by suicide Sita puts on some makeup. Suddenly, Ishwar stumbles through her door! She recognizes him immediately and is stunned. He, however, is drunk and without glasses, and can’t see her clearly. Jaunty nightclub music in the background is replaced by jangling. Sita has cut her own throat. Ishwar finally sees her face. Someone says “Hey Ram”. He picks up the *bonti* (a traditional kitchen chopper with an open blade attached vertically to a small wooden board) with which she killed herself and stumbles outside. Blood is splattered all over him. He starts manically crying while the others are stunned.

At the newspaper office Two years have passed. At the newspaper office, two correspondents discuss how the “Ishwar Chakraborty singing girl murder case” has finally been proved to be suicide, not murder. The crime reporter says he can’t do another all-nighter. But his editor assures him that way lies a promotion, since he has followed the case from the beginning. Plus there is mystery— Ishwar always claimed that he killed Sita and he’s known to be a scrupulously honest man.

Haraprasad and Binu The crime reporter unwillingly meets Haraprasad and Binu. He asks Haraprasad why Ishwar was lying. Haraprasad says that during the Independence struggle, there were fighters like Khudiram who willingly martyred themselves; but now, we mistake a struggle for a beating and call martyrdom a dog's death: Ishwar has realized this truth. The crime reporter, baffled and disgruntled, is about to walk away when Haraprasad tells him to take Binu to Ishwar as he doesn't want to burden Ishwar again.



Binu meets Ishwar The crime reporter tries to get Ishwar's statement, but Ishwar angrily says that he didn't lie and everyone is guilty since it wasn't only his sister who faced such circumstances. Binu cries "Maa" and Ishwar is stunned. Later, Binu and Ishwar wait for the train to pass after arriving at Chhatimpur. A peon gives him a letter from Mukherjee. Rambilas has sacked Ishwar and made Mukherjee the new manager, so Ishwar must come and vacate his bungalow immediately.



Binu's excitement Binu remembers asking Sita about how pretty rice fields look while the tune plays in the background over the fields. He starts singing the song. Ishwar is stunned but somehow smiles. Binu smiles and calls him "Uncle". They walk by the Subarnarekha River while Binu tells him that Sita said his new home would be by the blue hills there. He keeps asking Ishwar if that's the truth. Ishwar hesitates, slumping.



Walking to nowhere Then picking up the luggage once more, Ishwar lies that they are going to their new home— it's the honest truth. Binu is overjoyed and starts running, telling Ishwar to hurry up and "why did you grow old"? Ishwar somehow stumbles on as Binu keeps pulling him ahead. They pass out of view. Only the sandy riverbank remains.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Ishwar

Ishwar is an upstanding, if conservative teacher who gets an unexpected opportunity to establish himself in life and ends up ruining his relationship with his sister and adoptive brother in the process.

Honest Ishwar's honesty is admired (and sometimes scorned) by everyone he meets. He initially rejects Rambilas's job offer as the latter was proposing to pay him a smaller amount but log a larger amount for business records; Rambilas praises his uprightness and decides to do away with the discrepancy. When Mukherjee spins a web of fantastic images about their new home to Sita, Ishwar immediately stops him, saying that one shouldn't lie to children. Later on, after Sita's death, the newspapers also make a big deal of the fact that he never lies and the crime reporter even questions him about it. But finally, at the end, he breaks and lies to Binu about going to their new home, when, in fact, there was no such thing waiting for them.

Conventional At the beginning, Ishwar doesn't seem to be too concerned about differences in caste and social status, as he doesn't hesitate to take responsibility for Abhiram after his mother is abducted. But it must have been an unconscious bias, as he sends Abhiram away right after he arrives at his new workplace— first to a boarding school and then to college. Later, when Rambilas loudly proclaims that caste purity is everything and he won't tolerate someone of a lower caste, Ishwar is forced to backtrack and deny the relationship between Sita and Abhiram. Mukherjee advises him to send Abhiram away, and he himself admits that he has worked too hard to lose his position over this, leading to a compromise. But his actions are naught since at the end he loses it all.

Cruel Beneath his upstanding and affable surface, Ishwar is a cruel man— both towards others and himself. Honesty notwithstanding, there was no real harm in letting Mukherjee paint a rosy picture of their new home to Sita. Later, while he loves Sita with all his heart, he also gets angry with her and bangs her head on her musical instrument (*tanpura)* when she refuses to see the prospective groom's family. But perhaps the most striking instance of cruelty is when he tells Sita that she should die; that he would rather see her die than follow the conventions laid out for her. Unfortunately for both of them, that ends up being her fate.

Deranged After Sita's elopement, Ishwar changes completely. Just like the previous foundry manager whose daughter eloped, Ishwar walks around with a frightening, blank expression on his face and seems to be lost in his own world, ignoring those around him and slow in responding to others. Although he manages to keep his job with Mukherjee's help, his grief and guilt take over almost completely to the point that he's about to hang himself.

Sita

Sita is Ishwar's much younger sister who has already lost the rest of her family during the Partition. She is sensitive and caring with a will of steel; even in the most adverse situations, she puts on a brave face and hardly ever shows her emotions.

Sensitive Sita, while not given to excessive and melodramatic expression of emotion, paradoxically shows her sensitive side through her music. For instance, Tagore's song ("sun and shade over the rice fields") is repeated in association with childhood innocence— both when she herself is a child and later to cheer up her son, Binu. When happy, she sings another song ("Aaj ki ananda, jhulat jhulane Shyamchanda"/"Such a joyous day/ Krishna is swinging on the swing"); when sad or dejected, she sings yet another ("Mor dukhuya ka se kahun... aaj" /"Whom do I speak my woes to, today"). And both of those songs are repeated. In fact, even when Ishwar wishes her dead and when she realizes that he's her client, she remains calm on the surface, but does what she needs to.

Caring Sita is very caring towards her immediate family— Ishwar, Abhiram and Binu. Apart from taking care of the household needs, she also nurtures them emotionally. For instance, she often scolds Ishwar for not taking good care of himself and even when he hits her, she agrees to his request (meeting the prospective groom) as getting angry makes him ill. With Abhiram, she grows more serious and less playful once she realizes her feelings for him. She tells him to stay strong in his career convictions, and later on, she tries to hide her torn sari so that he wouldn't feel guilty about not affording to buy them new things. But her most uncomplicated and wholesome relationship is with her son, Binu. She obviously loves him very much and loves to share her own stories and songs from her childhood, leaving her legacy in him.

Brave Sita faces the challenges life throws at her bravely and with pride. It was a difficult decision for her to elope with a lower-caste man before an arranged marriage, but she doesn't hesitate to follow her heart. Afterwards, she faces poverty and uncertainty, but doesn't abandon her husband; instead, she takes on a side job of making paper bags and remains content with her torn saris and no jewellery. After Abhiram's death, instead of begging Ishwar to provide for her and Binu, she chooses to become a "singing girl" (euphemism for prostitute) despite the severe social stigma.

Abhiram

Abhiram, though born to lower-caste parents, remains blissfully unaware of their caste until later and is raised as a good Brahmin boy by Ishwar. He is brilliant in his studies but dreams of becoming a novelist. With a jovial, happy-go-lucky and optimistic nature, he neglects his own well-being, which finally causes his death.

Sensitive Like Sita's music, Abhiram's inner emotions are best revealed in his writing. Ishwar tells him that all the gloomy and depressing things he writes about won't capture the readers' interest, but he argues that it's the reality and only realizes that Ishwar spoke the truth much later when his novel fails to get published. While a little slow on the uptake, he fully reciprocates Sita's feelings for him and is a good father to Binu. For instance, he notices Sita's torn sari and promises to bring back new ones for her and new toys for Binu as soon as he is paid.

Playful We see many instances of Abhiram's playful side. Up until their relationship turns romantic, he constantly teases Sita and undercuts Ishwar's seriousness with his playful quips, balancing their family dynamic. Even after facing hardship and poverty, he remains his jovial self, joking about current affairs, readers' interests, his poor job prospects and so on.

Negligent While trying to keep his family afloat, Abhiram becomes negligent of his own well-being. During his bus-driver training, he became fully aware that the buses were not well-maintained and had mechanical problems. Yet, instead of trying to get the issue fixed or giving it up and trying something else, he risked his life and died while trying to save a child when the bus break failed.

THEMES

A "new home" Search for a "new home" is a leitmotif in the film, as to be expected in a film dealing with the aftermath of the partition of British India into East Pakistan and West Bengal. After being uprooted and orphaned (details of which are not shown), Sita dreams of a "new home" with Ishwar, her only surviving family and much more like a father than an elder brother. She is unhappy in the refugee settlement and tells Haraprasad as much. Ishwar also recognizes his responsibility in shielding Sita from more trauma and accepts his position in faraway Chhatimpur. She is so eager to reach this paradise-like home that she gets very excited hearing Mukherjee's descriptions. Growing up, she makes that her home. Later, she loses her home again when she elopes with Abhiram. But that doesn't stop her from telling her son, Binu, stories about how wonderful it all was: the bountiful, golden rice fields under the sun, gardens and birds and so on. Binu, living in a broken-down hovel, keeps asking his father, Abhiram, when they would go to their "new home", but Abhiram and Sita's deaths dash those hopes until Ishwar takes him in. There, too, it becomes a hopeless endeavour, as Ishwar is sacked and loses his home, but indulges Binu momentarily. Binu is born a generation after the Partition and is therefore personally not a witness to its horror. However, Binu inherits Ishwar's and Sita's restlessness, homelessness and uprootedness in the form of generational trauma. Not only were the physical effects of Partition gut-wrenching, they also got genetically assimilated within the entire generation that survived it and were later passed on to those that followed. As such, "new home" in itself becomes the site of an unattainable and nostalgic imaginarium (much in the mode of Jung's "collective unconscious" which influenced Ghatak), which can never be reached or retained by those who have been already uprooted forcefully by history.

Family We see two families in the film: Ishwar, Sita and Abhiram; and Sita, Abhiram and Binu. Ishwar is much older than Sita and Abhiram; the great difference in their ages makes it a more parental, rather than sibling relationship. Sita and Abhiram respect Ishwar like a father and abide by all his wishes. Ishwar even says that Sita is just like their mother (whom she doesn't remember) in the way she loves and cares for him, and Sita whispers to him that she is indeed his mother. This sort of substitution is actually common (and somewhat unique) in Bengal culture, where parents often call their children "maa" and "baba" ('mother' and 'father') and grandparents refer to their grandchildren as they themselves would be called. Thus, it is shocking that this deep bond between them gets severed by societal dogma and causes them both much grief, leaving Ishwar in a deranged mental state and leading to Sita's death. As for Abhiram, raised in the household just like another son, love and obedience come first; he works hard at his studies to please Ishwar and considers going to Germany to study Engineering though he wants to be a novelist. It does appear that he was hopeful that Ishwar would bless his marriage with Sita, but after the revelation of his caste and Ishwar's caste bias, that was not to be. Even though he musters up the courage to ask Ishwar for his blessing, Ishwar merely ignores it and commands that he leave immediately. Thus, a family once tethered by strong bonds of love and respect is torn asunder.

Sita, Abhiram and Binu's family is more typical and we see it only for a very short time. But that is enough to note the contrast; even though poor, they are happy and have few complaints towards their circumstances or each other. Binu loves his parents equally and always asks when Abhiram will return from work and happily listens to Sita's stories and songs. Abhiram and Sita are also loving, respectful and considerate towards each other.

Caste The introduction of caste as a turning point in the plot seems somewhat contrived. While upper-caste atrocities towards the lower castes remain a ubiquitous truth in Indian society even today, Ishwar himself did not initially subscribe to casteism. Otherwise, Haraprasad's nagging notwithstanding, he wouldn't have taken Abhiram's responsibility given that his birth status was unknown. Ishwar does everything for Abhiram that a responsible father/older brother should do: get him educated and pave his way towards a bright future with a German degree. Ishwar even admits in one early scene that one's birth is of no importance; it's the upbringing that matters most. And in that, Abhiram is a typical Brahmin young man, having being raised as such. However, there was some unconscious bias, as Ishwar sends Abhiram away for his studies. And his defence to Rambilas is somewhat unconvincing and he easily capitulates under pressure from his employer in order to retain his position. Casteism also plays a significant part when Abhiram's mother's death at their train station in the middle of nowhere— another coincidence that seems contrived— decides the matter once and for all. And as a self-respecting Brahmin, Ishwar couldn't possibly have let Sita marry Abhiram; he would rather see them dead or ruined. Once they eloped, however, it doesn't seem that Abhiram's caste was an issue as he probably used Ishwar's Brahmin surname and no one knew them

in Kolkata. They eventually descended into poverty and ended up in an unsavoury part of the city.

But digging a little deeper, we see how the film surreptitiously depicts broad structural inequities in a way as to go almost unnoticed. When Ishwar Chakraborty had lost everything, his casteist, Brahmin friend Rambilas extends him support, and Ishwar, with some minimal college education, is able to secure his livelihood. However, when Abhiram from a Dalit (untouchable) community lost everything, he didn't have the same moneyed caste networks to back him up. As a child, Abhiram was ousted from the Brahmin refugee colony and lost his mother, and as an adult, he was denied the dignity of a family and an accepted marriage. The only job his friend could get him was that of a bus driver, for which he was obviously overqualified with an honours degree. Also, to secure the job as a driver, Abhiram had to undergo multiple trainings and tests, while Ishwar's Brahmin caste networks ensured that he had a job, a house and servants merely based on his "good character", all without any extra training or tests, though he wasn't qualified for it.

Class Class differences are not a central theme but only used to show the contrast between Ishwar and Sita later on in the film. Ishwar, having faced poverty after being orphaned and forcefully uprooted by Partition, accepts Rambilas's offer as he couldn't hope for a better deal. But despite advancing in his job, he doesn't indulge himself and lives a simple, frugal life. It would appear that most of his salary is spent on Abhiram's education, Sita's jewellery and saving for her wedding; there weren't many entertainment options available in the countryside and he was a frugal person anyway. After Sita's elopement, he is so traumatized that he doesn't even think to spend his money until Haraprasad comes along and tempts him to try the finer life that he had been missing. There is no virtue in frugality, Haraprasad says, indulgence is the only way; thus, they visit the races and the nightclub. When they go to the "singing girl's house, the older woman excitedly tells her neighbours that this is a rich client from the village with a lot of money to throw away. But the two-year-long court case, during which it's unclear if Ishwar was imprisoned, whittles away at his savings and by the time he meets Binu, he is reduced again to poverty and homelessness. Sita, on the other hand, abandons a life of relative comfort with Ishwar and her new groom for a life of hardship with Abhiram willingly. Two images show this contrast well— one, when she is dressed in her wedding jewellery and sari while eloping with Abhiram; and second, after several years have passed and she is dressed only in a torn sari and no jewellery. The latter appear to have been sold over time to keep food on the plate and a roof over their heads as Abhiram has been unsuccessful in finding or keeping a job over the years. But despite their poverty, their family life is full of love and laughter—growing richer in contentment while Ishwar's lonely bachelor life grows more deranged.

Gender roles Although this is not an overtly feminist film given its central female protagonist, it does depict varied gender roles, both conventional and otherwise. Just like the mythological Sita, the heroine of *Ramayana*, the film's Sita is initially under the charge of a paternal Ishwar. In the *Ramayana*, Sita is an incarnation of Lakshmi, the daughter of Shiva or Ishwara) and then marries Abhiram (= Rama, but now of a lower caste and far from being a regent). At the beginning and throughout most of the film, Sita is an ideal sister/ daughter to Ishwar, managing the household competently, taking care of his needs and scolding him in a motherly fashion when he forgets to take his medications and so on. She is also sisterly and caring towards Abhiram, her best friend with whom she eventually falls in love. However, we see a sea change in her once Abhiram's caste is revealed and her best-laid plans all fall apart. Like the mythological Sita, instead of taking the disrespect lying down, she prefers to leave it all behind and step bravely into a life of hardship. As a Brahmin girl, eloping with a lower-caste man was scandalous, to say the least. Next, she takes up making paper bags to support the family with her meagre income and even tells Abhiram that she wants to earn money by utilizing her talent for music, without understanding that it was a thinly veiled euphemism for prostitution. But after Abhiram's accidental death, she is made fully aware that it was her only choice— shameful and unconventional as it may be. And of course, *this film* and most versions of the *Ramayana* both end tragically with the suicide of their heroines.

Elopement Elopement itself becomes a leitmotif; earlier, the foundry manager's daughter had eloped, leaving him dazed and traumatized. Early on, we see a tender moment between this manager and Sita at the abandoned airstrip when he rescues her from the street performer (*bohurupee)*. The trauma of elopement of a dear sister-daughter is repeated again for Ishwar after Sita's elopement, though we hardly see her suffering in the same way. Ishwar walks around with a dazed, faraway look on his face, snaps at people, ignores them or is slow to respond, and grieves while looking at Sita's forgotten belongings. He even tries to hang himself.

Hubris Why must Sita die? For that matter, why did Nita [from the first film of

Ghatak's Partition trilogy, *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (*The Cloud-Capped Star*, 1960)] have to die? Ghatak kills off his strong female protagonists in situations where these deaths were completely preventable, but this only underscores the helplessness of these women and the inequalities in the societies they inhabit. In the *Golden Line,* however, the key lies in hubris— the clash of the excessive pride and twisted, resentful love of the two central characters. Ishwar tells Sita that he would rather see her dead than married to Abhiram. While she takes it calmly at the moment, she vows to never return to him. When Abhiram suggests that she should ask Ishwar for help, she tells him calmly that she would rather beg on the streets or kill herself than contact him. The depth of their love has been transformed completely to its opposite, without any space for logic or reason. Thus, in the climactic scene when unbeknownst to the both of them, Ishwar visits Sita's room, she *must* kill herself so that Ishwar only sees her dead face as he had wished and also to prevent herself from being utterly shamed again in his eyes. This conclusion heightens melodrama and explores Ishwar's prolonged suffering and near-madness. Practically speaking and given their long separation, a more reasonable course of action for Sita would have been to escape and make excuses later, especially as she was now solely responsible for her child, Binu. From a woman's perspective, a situation where a woman's depth of emotion for her brother is stronger than that for her child is hard to imagine, especially when it leads to suicide and leaving the child orphaned.

Incest taboo This leads to a lesser-explored angle that some critics have discussed— the incest taboo and the not-so-subtle erotic tension between Ishwar and Sita. There are few world communities where incest is socially sanctioned and Hindu India isn't one of them. There are some notable almost-intimate scenes between Ishwar and Sita. For instance, when they hug and he compares her to their mother, the tension in their body language is almost palpable. In conservative societies like the one shown here, physical closeness between men and women (such as hugging for an extended period of time, barring spouses/lovers or parents and young children) is frowned upon and the scene sticks out like a sore thumb. Later, Ishwar angrily berates Sita for refusing to meet the prospective groom's family, then grabs her by her hair and dashes her head on the *tanpura* (musical instrument*)* in another instance of misguided sexual tension and domestic violence. It is unlikely that either of them clearly recognized this erotic tension and it was mostly from Ishwar's side, as Sita confesses her feelings towards Abhiram soon after. Or it may be that, having recognized it, she sought out the lesser evil even though it was still unconventional. As such, we see Ishwar's suffering magnified almost out of proportion and Sita's not at all. Thus, in a sense, one could read the film's tragic ending as poetic justice for attempting to violate the incest taboo.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1) How does the Partition affect the characters in the film? Discuss any two characters of your choice.

2) What role does music play in the film? Discuss how the use of classical and Tagore songs heightens your appreciation of the characters' emotions.

3) Discuss the intersection of class, caste and gender in the film. You may consider these in the light of a single character of your choice or as broad structural systems.

4) Discuss the use of melodrama in the film by closely reading any three scenes of your choice.

5) In your reading, was the relationship between Ishwar and Sita parental, sibling-like or incestuous? Discuss with two scenes as examples.