HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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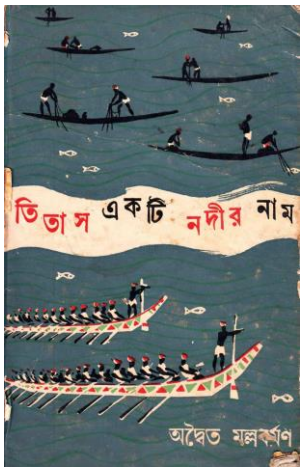
A RIVER CALLED TITASH */ TITASH EKTI NADIR NAAM* (1973)

Ritwik Ghatak

Bengali language

Film link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Mku90VzJ0s





OVERVIEW

Director Ritwik Ghatak was born in Dacca (in present-day Bangladesh), and his family moved to Kolkata just before masses of starving people streamed into the city as a result of the famine of 1943-44 and the Partition of 1947-48. Those two events, along with the Bangladesh war in 1971, which also brought 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 Lining (Subarnarekha)* was listed at 346. Ghatak also received many awards in India, including the National Film Award for Best Story in 1974 and a Padma Shri from the Indian government in 1970.

Film *A river called Titash* is adapted from a 1956 semi-autobiographical novel of the same name by renowned Bengali author Adwaita Mallabarman, who himself hailed from the marginalized Malo fishermen caste we see in the novel and film. Ghatak's penultimate film, shot partly in Bangladesh soon after its Independence (1971), was one close to his heart; he says, "(*Titash*) is an essay on the lyricism of the Bengali countryside, especially its monsoons, and because I think I have been able to portray certain hefty labour-class characters who are intensely Bengali." Exploring the lifeways of different communities on Titash's shores and their eventual, almost natural demise is at the core of the film, paralleled thematically in the cycle of love-union-separation between the leading characters.

Background Like most of his other films, Ghatak faced numerous challenges in shooting *Titash* but dealt with them in his characteristic mock-serious, self-deprecating manner. Ghatak relates an interesting anecdote on the hospitality of these marginalized, poverty-stricken people in *Cinema and I,* which probably inspired the sequence featuring Kader Mian, the Muslim farmer, and his tough love for his son's father-in-law*:*

> In 1972 I was...shooting seventy-two miles away from Dacca town. I shot my film both in a Hindu village and Muslim village by the side of the river Padma. On the last day of shooting, the village chief of the Hindu village asked me to ferry on and have lunch with him, and his family. When I told my unit members to have their lunch they thought that I was going for a booze party, because I am well-known as a drunkard. So I drove them away and relished very simple food that chief's wife dished out to me. While I was going back to my launch, I had to cross through the Muslim village where also I had shot the film. The chief there accosted me and said, "You have to eat with us tomorrow." I told him that my work there was complete, and I would go back to Dacca and then to Calcutta. [As it so happened, Ghatak's departure was delayed due to a camera error.] Next morning when I went to the Muslim village to (re-shoot the sequences), the chief of that village told me, "Sala*, did not I tell you yesterday that you would have to take food with me." I had to sit and eat with that rascal, and he fed me like nobody's business.

* A common expletive, literally "brother-in-law" but connoting sexual relations with the addressee's sister. Brothers-in-law were also often treated poorly in their sisters' marital household and made to be the butt of jokes.

Hyperlink cinema Hyperlink cinema is a term coined by the writer Alissa Quart, which defines a class of films that have a multitude of characters meet during a story with many flash-backs and flash-forwards. In short, think of Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction*, Altman's *Nashville*, PTA's *Magnolia* and so on. Whilst there are numerous films that play with time in flash-backs and flash-forwards throughout cinematic history, one of the most famous examples being *Citizen Kane,* it wasn't until Satyajit Ray's *Kanchenjungha* (1962) that the hyperlink film genre is said to have begun in its present form. This is because *Kanchenjungha* features multiple story lines from individual characters that almost serendipitously, or fatally, come together. Mrinal Sen's *Calcutta 71* (1971) is also considered an early example of hyperlink cinema. *A River Called Titas* is a significant film also because it predates Robert Altman's *Nashville* by a couple of years.

In *Titash,* all the characters' story arcs are only loosely and temporarily connected together and don't even occur at the same location or in sequential time. Rajar jhi, Basanti, Kishor, Ananta, the woman who takes him in, the upper-caste men and a number of random fishermen and other characters all have their own divergent storylines. Moreover, apart from the occurrences in Basanti's village, we also meet Kader Mian, a Muslim farmer from another village on Titash river. His resemblance to Ramprasad is striking; the two roles were actually played by the same actor. That resemblance is possibly the only link that ties these stories together.

What all this says about Ghatak's *Titash* is that it was quite ahead of its time. Hyperlink films somewhat mimic the form of a book whilst keeping a closeness to story through a character-centric movement through space and time, taking advantage of shifting cultures; the changing manner in which we're used to being fed information post-1990's and now in our digital age. When we look to films like *Nashville* and *A River called Titash*, we are seeing experimental forms of storytelling that are a precursor to the normalisation of this new form of cinema.

Critical reception Like Ghatak's other films, *Titash* also garnered much (posthumous) commentary and criticism. Some, like Dennis Schwartz, who gave the film an "A" grade, writes, "It's a passionate film made with great conviction... it signals the demise of a long-standing culture... a haunting and unforgettable film about the joys, anguish and rage of a community". Christel Loar of *Popmatters* (who scored the film an 8 out of 10) writes, "In addition to using the river itself as a character, a metaphor… the main relationships of Kishore, Basanti and Rajar Jhi mirror tales of the romantic life of Krisha [sic], and the lovers' triangle he had with his wife, Rukmini, and his lover, Radha." Jordan Cronk of *Slant* called the film, in comparison to *Dry Summer*, "less tightly coiled, more meditative, an appropriate approach for a film preoccupied with the existential concerns of a gallery of characters living along the

shores of the film's namesake river." Adrian Martin, scoring the film four-and-a-half stars out of 5, labelled the film "in line with Ghatak's Brechtian orientation, a broken, deliberately disjointed melodrama, arranged in two starkly distinct halves, and gives itself the freedom to hop from one character's story thread to another's—an uncommon technique in world cinema of the time." He called Ghatak's "film language every bit as sophisticated and restless as that of Jean-Luc Godard or Lynne Ramsay. Ghatak was a poet of rupture." Others, like Mike D'Angelo of *The A.V. Club*, who gave the film a C−, called it "a clumsily melodramatic tale...the story's most tragic moment is so broadly played that it threatens to inspire laughter rather than anguish." Conversely, Indian film critics such as Mani Kaul have lauded Ghatak's use of "melodrama only as a medium".

CHARACTERS

Basanti	a young widow
Kishor	a fisherman who goes mad
Rajar jhi	Kishor's abducted wife
Ananta	Rajar jhi and Kishor's son
Munglee	Basanti's friend
Ramprasad	Basanti's uncle
Kader Mian	A villager in a different village

Basanti and Kishor's parents

SYNOPSIS

Basanti, Munglee, Kishor and Subal are Malo community fishermen's kids who live on the banks of the Titash river. The entire community ekes out its meagre living from the river's bounty and are oppressed by the upper caste priests, landowners and moneylenders. After a quick introduction of Basanti and Kishor's budding relationship, some years pass unseen. Now Kishor and Subal, grown fishermen, go to a different village. Kishor accidentally saves a young bride (Rajar jhi) from rioters and has to marry her and consummate the marriage. However, on the way back home, bandits try to abduct the bride and she jumps into the river. Kishor goes mad from losing his wife and is returned to the village. Basanti is married off to Subal, who is also killed. Rajar jhi finds shelter with a group of fishermen, where she births and raises a son, Ananta, for ten years. Eventually, the fishermen leave her at Basanti and Kishor's village completely by coincidence. Basanti quickly grows attached to the boy and his mother, finding a sister and a son in them. There is some resistance from the village folk about giving shelter to a woman with no family connections but they settle in. Rajar jhi confesses to Basanti that she feels attracted to Kishor and helps his old parents care for him. One day suddenly Kishor tries to sexually harass Rajar jhi in public, for which he is beaten up. This sparks his memory and he remembers her, but both of them die immediately after. Ananta is taken in by Basanti but her mother is against it, leading to a fight between mother and daughter after which Basanti's mind is poisoned against the young boy. Ananta runs away and is taken in by another woman, who takes him to her home village. Basanti, now a widow in full youth, is harassed repeatedly by a lustful upper-caste man who, upon being beaten up by her, vows to avenge himself with the help of his friends, the landowners and moneylenders. Basanti goes to visit Ananta, but he rejects her and runs away again. Soon after, the upper-caste men's goons set the village on fire and imprison the Malo village leaders. The river Titash begins receding and becomes sandy. Kishor's father dies of starvation, while the fishermen riot with the farmers over ownership of new land that has emerged from the river, and Ramprasad is killed. Basanti, with no food or water left, has a vision of a young boy running in a golden rice field as she dies.

In a parallel/hyperlinked story, we see a snippet of Kader Mian's life on another part of Titash's shores in a Muslim village. He has some trouble with a moneylender and his forgiveness makes the moneylender repent his ways and kill himself. Kader Mian agrees to let his grandson go to school.

SCENES



Opening scene Torrential rains inundate the riverbank. Several people are seen rowing boats. An older women throws puffed rice on a woven umbrella spun by a young girl. Later, they chat about Subal and Kishor, two neighbour kids, being naughty. The girl, Basanti, waits on an abandoned boat by the riverbank. Her friend, Munglee, asks her who she's waiting for, Subal or Kishor and why she painted her lips. The kids have gone fishing.



The Titash river An older man, Basanti's uncle, approaches. He is sad that his daughter Durga left him (probably married off). He tells Basanti that she's growing up fast. He is destined to wait forever by Titash river and can't even die without a sip of its water. Fishing boats dot the horizon and we see some close-ups as well. Some years pass. A fisherman (Kishor) is happy gathering a bountiful catch on the boat in the middle of the river and he and his fellow fishermen decide to return to shore.

A wedding and a riot Back on the riverbank, a customer, the village chief, tells the fishermen and his crew to return home soon as some people were trying to create political unrest. They go to a village wedding where many girls are dancing. Suddenly, a riot breaks out. Kishor rescues the bride, who was injured and had fainted in the stampede, and carries her to safety.



A wedding Later, while Kishor is mending a fishing net on his boat, a villager comes and asks him to marry the girl he rescued. Kishor later goes to the girl's house. The iconic folk wedding song "Leelabali, Leelabali bhor juboti soi mor/ Ki diya sajaimu tore"* plays in the background. The bride and groom exchange flower garlands and the wedding is completed. The older woman locks them inside the room and girl breathes heavily. The marriage is consummated that night.

* A folk wedding song that Ghatak uses in many films: "Leelabali, blooming in full youth/ how do we dress you up?"



Departure The next day, it's time for them to leave. An older villager tells Kishor to marry the girl (Rajar jhi) following all the rituals when they return to his home. "Rai jaago rai jaago, sukosaari dake"* plays in the background. Kishor tells the man his name, his father's name and the name of their village [he shares the same surname, Mallabarman, with the author of the novel]. The girl starts crying when it's time to leave.

* A semi-devotional, romantic song about birds waking Radha up as she sleeps in Krishna's arms, very appropriate for the morning after.

Apprehension At the boat, Kishor jokingly tells Subal to return home and try to marry Basanti. An older man, smoking the hookah and coughing, tells Kishor to hide his new bride lest an evil eye fall on the boat. Kishor says he barely saw her face and wouldn't even know if she were replaced. Rajar jhi smiles. At night, she sleeps under the floorboards, but smiles happily. The menfolk sing folk songs. They all soon fall asleep.

The girl is lost Bandits find and try to abduct Rajar jhi quietly. She jumps into the river. The older man wakes Kishor up and they realize that they've been robbed when they see the bandits row away. Kishor has gone mad, the older man says. Some other fishermen rescue the girl from a sandbank. Boats sail on Titash as usual. Years pass.

Basanti's life Basanti is scolded by an older village woman for wandering around on the riverbank. She is a widow now; Subal, her husband, died the day after their wedding and she's now considered *opoya, alokkhi* (unlucky, unclean). The woman castigates her about Kishor but gets frightened. Basanti leaves. The older woman and another woman discuss how traumatized she is about Kishor.

Rajar jhi's life On a boat, Rajar jhi's rescuers call her a lucky goddess and ask her why she hasn't attempted to return to her home in nearly a decade. She says that no one would have believed that she was abducted by bandits while pregnant. She didn't even know her husband's name or the name of his village and hadn't even seen his face properly. But now that her son is growing up, she wants to give him a father's name and recognition.



Rajar jhi arrives at Kishor's village At the village, several villagers struggle to contain Kishor, who's raving mad now. Basanti walks by silently. Rajar jhi and her son arrive at the shore while his old parents drag Kishor into the river to bathe him. Basanti assures Rajar jhi that they will find a place to stay there as they're of the same caste.

Insanity While Kishor's father bathes him, he laments that he now has to take care of his insane grown son where once he'd hoped for the opposite. Kishor plays in the water, not understanding anything.



A subdued welcome An older woman, a rich villager's widow, proclaims to a group of women her husband's deeds and quirky habits. A younger, chatty new bride, takes up the topic. Basanti, Rajar jhi and her son sit quietly to a side, not participating. The boatmen who were taking care of Rajar jhi and her son leave them in the village and depart. Basanti asks Rajar jhi which village her husband was from, and if they were actually married and if Ananta was born out of wedlock or not. But Rajar jhi only cries and replies "I don't know" to all the questions.

Settling down Some time later, the mother-son duo have found a hut to live in. Basanti comes and tells them to make different kinds of brooms to sell at the local market. Another older woman comes and says that a "gathering of the ten" (a sort of discussion forum) will judge Rajar jhi. She is displeased as Rajar jhi isn't guilty of anything. Basanti agrees.



A judgement At the village meeting, an old man says that no one knows where Rajar jhi came from or her family or where the child came from. Ramprasad stops him, as that was an uncouth thing to say. An older woman accuses the men of taking bribes and speaks out about women's rights and inequality. Her "society" consists of three households and now a fourth will be added, rules the second man, saying that's the end of the topic. Later, Ramprasad speaks with Ananta and tells Basanti that the mother and son would have been welcome in his own home.



A homemade feast The village celebrates Durga Puja. It's Ananta's first puja. The village council sends a couple young men to force Kishor's old father to sell his fishing net, but Munglee intervenes and says she will speak to the council. The men tell Kishor's father to hold a feast and they will all come to enjoy the fried sweets. Basanti tells Rajar jhi to help with food preparation at Kishor's house. Rajar jhi hesitates to meet strangers but finally agrees.



Secrets The women (Basanti, Munglee, Rajar jhi) work hard in the kitchen while chatting. Rajar jhi tells them about her husband's passion and that she doesn't remember anything after that. Munglee says all men are passionate before marriage; the real test comes afterwards. Basanti is mystified. She says she knows why Kishor became mad and why Subal (her husband) died, but she's not telling. Munglee says she doesn't care about the subterfuge and would rather take a nap. Kishor digs holes in their courtyard.

Reminiscence After everyone has gone to sleep, Basanti, still frying sweet fritters in the kitchen, talks to Rajar jhi. She remembers how the madman had made the girl a betrothal bracelet when they were children, but when he returned insane, her parents didn't let them get married. One day the girl was married off to someone else, but he was betrayed and killed by some other people. That girl was Basanti; her former innocent self is dead now.







A tender moment As Kishor digs outside, Basanti continues, saying that the madman got married at a faraway village and his bride was abducted by bandits soon after. Kishor goes to the hut to overhear, but Basanti goes to check on Ananta. The song "Leelabali" plays in the background again, while the camera focuses on a close-up of Rajar jhi's face as Kishor tries to stab her sickle, but he freezes. She offers him a fried snack, which he takes and runs away.

Basanti's advice Basanti returns and tells Rajar jhi to not get attached to the madman as no one knows what drove him mad. Rajar jhi says he must have lost his beloved and the only thing she can do is to try and see if she can fill that void for him. Basanti says Rajar jhi needs a man.



Basanti flirts The next day, Basanti tries to steal food from home for Rajar jhi and Ananta, who haven't eaten in two days, but is caught by her mother, who shouts at her and tells her she can't go to them anymore. She sends Basanti to wash dishes at the riverbank. A young man, bird catcher by profession, is there. Basanti coyly tells him to take her away; her mother is scandalized on overhearing her words and the man gets smiles and licks his lips.

A bid for freedom Basanti then runs back home, only to be confronted by her old parents. Flinging away the end of her sari wrapped around her and baring her naked shoulder, she yells at them that she doesn't care if they are shamed by her actions and she will leave, even squander away her body. She was widowed at such a young age that she didn't get to experience being a woman but was tied up by conventions. Her father tries to beat her, but her mother sends him away.



Basanti gets what she wants Basanti tells her mother that she wanted to lessen her grief with Ananta and Rajar jhi's company, but they won't even allow her to go there. So she will "catch a man" no matter how hard they try to keep her imprisoned. Her mother gives up and tells her to go to Ananta but forget about getting a man. Her mother gives her food and a sari to take to them. While passing by the bird-catcher man, Basanti ignores him.



Love stories Ananta tells his mother that he's hungry. Basanti arrives and gives him a snack and Rajar jhi a sari. Rajar jhi, moved, tells Basanti that women's lives are worth nothing without a man. Basanti tells her to get a man, maybe even the madman. Rajar jhi tells her that she tried, but he didn't respond. Basanti asks why she's attracted to the madman. She says that men run the family while women support them. Basanti (correctly) guesses that the woman the madman lost was Rajar jhi, who is shocked and dismisses the idea, but does confess that she wants to spend her life with him. Basanti tells her that she is also tempted sometimes but has vowed to never lose her chastity.

It's Holi Rajar jhi offers to help Kishor's mother to bathe him in the river. Some other women gossip loudly about that in their presence. A group of street performers pass by with more villagers behind them; it is the festival of Holi. Basanti, her father and Ananta also arrive at the riverbank. Kishor grabs a container of red coloured powder* (*abir*) from Ananta and puts it all over Rajar jhi's face. She does the same. Ananta watches. Kishor picks her up and she faints, paralleling the time when they first met. He runs away with her, with a song about the union of Radha and Krishna playing in the background. He then kisses her chest and lays her down near a broken boat. A group of villagers follow them and beat him up.



**Gulal* or *abir* is the traditional name given to the coloured powders used for some Hindu rituals, in particular for the Holi festival or Dol Purnima.

Recognition and death Kishor loses consciousness and they leave the two lying on the ground. He groans for water. She wakes up and hearing him, crawls to the river to wet the end of her sari, then crawls to him and wets his lips. He wakes up and recognises her. "Leelabali" plays in the background again. But suddenly he dies. She, groaning, rolls away from him and into the river, where she also dies. Basanti and Ananta cry.





Last rites It's raining heavily. Basanti and Ananta perform Rajar jhi's last rites at the river. Some village women comment on how Basanti has practically adopted Ananta and someone who doesn't have a mother is bereft of everything. Ananta sees a vision of his mother as an angry goddess Kali.





Ananta makes some new friends Some men work on a boat in heavy rains. They chat about the older man, Kader Mian's resemblance to Ramprasad (both roles are played by the same actor). They have brought potatoes to sell at the market in Ananta's village. They give some potatoes to Ananta and ask him who died in his family as he's still in mourning clothes. One of the young men goes with him to his house, as they are of the same caste. They invite Ananta to come with them on their boat, but finally leave him behind.



Ananta becomes a burden At home, Basanti's mother complains about how much Ananta eats, and her father tells him to help on the boat. Her mother keeps complaining and cursing Ananta in front of him and wishes that he would die, but Basanti fiercely fights for him. On the final day of mourning rituals, Ananta, with a shaven head, is taken by Munglee and other village wives for the final ritual offering at the river. Ananta daydreams about rowing a boat with Rajar jhi as a prettily dressed bride.







A vision At night, Basanti and Ananta sleep next to each other. She tells him that once a mother dies, she becomes an enemy, wanting to take the child with her and haunting him when no one is nearby. Ananta tells him he's been seeing his mother sometimes and she is always sobbing. We see a dream sequence of Rajar jhi in wedding attire while Basanti looks on; Rajar jhi hands Ananta off to Basanti.



Basanti sends Ananta away After a bout of heavy rains, Ananta's hut is destroyed. Basanti cooks for him while her mother comes and curses them again. Then she tries to burn Ananta with the kindling, but Basanti grabs it and they fight. Basanti strangles her mother, getting her face burnt in the process. When Ananta returns, Basanti curses him for making her hit and kill her mother and rudely tells him to go away and die. Ananta runs away to the river. But Basanti's mother is alive!



Goodbye Ananta hides in a boat in the rain at night. Basanti, weaving thread with some other village women, says that it was good riddance now that all the funeral rituals are complete. Another young wife comes and tells them that Ananta is roaming around like a ghost in the village all night. While she feeds him a meal at her home, Basanti and Munglee arrive. Ananta ignores them and Basanti gets angry. Later, the woman wants to take Ananta back to her father's house where she will be visiting for a few months. Munglee lets Basanti know and she comes to say goodbye, but Ananta again ignores her. They leave. Basanti calls him a *kutta* ('dog' or 'bastard').



Basanti beats up a pervert A man comes looking for Kishor's father as Basanti is making string and flirts with her. Basanti also flirts with him and brings him to her home. But instead of kisses, he gets beaten up by Basanti, her mother and Munglee. They pick him up and fling him into the river. Later, some of his male friends propose ways to get revenge, like burning their grain stores or destroying their fishing nets. One of them even says that they should abduct Basanti, get her drunk and take her to an abandoned temple (presumably to rape her). Another one says none of this will work. Yet another says that he'll get them in debt forever

Kader Mian's false court case Kader Mian visits his son and daughter-in-law and tells them that he's tied up in an annoying court case with a moneylender, Magan Sardar, who lied to him. The daughter-in-law's father (whom Kader despises) has also dropped in and he gives Kader Mian some practical advice about manipulated court cases and how to harass the other litigator. He says that Kader Mian has a "cow's intelligence" and "a tiny fish's lifespan"; he, on the other hand, is well-versed in court proceedings and can even trounce a serial false litigator like Magan. Kader Mian goes out to the village with his bamboo stick and frightens the living daylights out of Magan. Magan begs Kader to let him ruin Kader; that would be Magan's last false case and he'll be a reformed person after that. Kader Mian agrees to be ruined and Magan seems repentant.



Unrest at home Soon after Kader returns home, his son comes and tells him that Magan jumped off a coconut tree and killed himself. Later at night, the son says that he wants to buy a new light boat and also that his son should go to school instead of working in the fields. Kader doesn't want either. The daughter-in-law fights with the son about them disrespecting her father and why didn't they throw her out if her family was so bad. They have a sentimental moment when Kader confesses that she's just like his own daughter whom he married off. He angrily tells his son to buy the boat and that the grandson could go to school, but if he learns to lie and cheat, Kader will break open his son's head.



Basanti meets Ananta An inter-village rowing competition is underway. Out of the blue, Basanti comes riding on a boat and reunites with Ananta. She wants him back, but he says that there's no love for him in her heart. Basanti gets into a verbal fight with the other woman (who was taking care of Ananta) about poisoning his mind about her. Basanti gets angry and starts hitting Ananta while the woman and her husband try to stop her. We see the rowing boats racing and hear men shouting and cheering.

Trouble brewing After the fight, Basanti, with welts on her back, is comforted and tended to by her mother. Basanti says, "Mother is the only truth in life". Two men come to her house to annoy her, but Munglee comes and chases them away. Munglee says that the upper-caste men are spreading rumours about why a widow is cloistered behind locked doors all day. Basanti gets furious and says that she'll burn everything down.



Basanti is harassed At a village meeting, she shouts at the men for being cowards with "Titash's water in their veins" instead of blood. The Malo elders have been bribed and refuse to help her. But a few youngsters promise to come to her aid. On the way back, she's harassed by the man from earlier who shouts suggestive dialogues from a play to her. She beats him up and he runs away, but no one helps her. The man, with some of his followers, makes plans to put Basanti and the village "back in its place" for the disrespect shown.



Ruin Ramprasad tells the others that he had a dream vision that Titash had become bone dry. The upper-caste men begin harassing villagers, ruining fishing nets, taking away their property and finally burning some of the huts. Basanti watches silently. Basanti and Munglee chat about their childhood and Munglee tells her that Ananta has run away from the other woman who was taking care of him. Basanti says that now both Ananta and Titash are equally distant from her. The river has begun receding. An old village woman wails that they took away her husband. Another woman offers them a chance to beg in the city. The older women should be fine, but the younger women's youth would make them slip and fall, she says. Kishor's old parents tell a village youngster that they have had nothing to eat for days. The old man dies.

Ramprasad is killed Basanti, also starving, finds that the last of her water is gone. Ramprasad and another young man tell her that they are going to claim the new land that sprung up

when Titash receded. They fight with bamboo sticks with a group of farmers also laying claim to the land. Ramprasad dies after being hit on the head with a stick.



Basanti meets her end Basanti, sitting despondently, remembers Ramprasad from her childhood saying that there won't even be enough water in Titash to wet his lips before dying. Gathering up her remaining strength, she then stumbles to the now sandy riverbank with a water mug. But there is no water, so she starts digging a hole with her hands. But before she can finally take a sip of the muddy water, she falls. In a vision, she sees a young boy running towards her in the rice fields blowing a trumpet. She tries to touch him but he runs away. She smiles and clasps her hands (presumably dies).







CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Basanti Basanti, the indomitable widow, is this film's protagonist. She is a complex character, displaying paradoxical, puzzling and contradictory behaviours depending on her changing circumstances.

Dutiful As a girl, Basanti would wait hours for Kishor against her parents' wishes, showing her dutiful side as his future bride. Later, as a young widow, she abides by her parents' wishes for the most part, by remaining abstinent in behaviour and dress and not having sexual relationships with random interested men. Her relationship with her parents deteriorates after bonding with Rajar jhi and Ananta. But after they too pass away from her life, Basanti realises her mother's true value.

Caring Basanti quickly takes Rajar jhi and Ananta, complete strangers with a questionable past, under her wing. She tries to steal food for them and has a huge argument with her parents, even threatening to "catch a man" and 'leave their honour in the dust' unless they let her see them. She develops a close sisterhood with Rajar jhi, where they share their sorrows and desires around love, lust and family. She also cares for Ananta though her verbal abuse and beating drives him away from her.

Spirited Basanti does everything with gusto— whether simply weaving some thread or making fried sweets with her friends Munglee and Rajar Jhi or fighting with her parents or arguing at the village meeting or flirting with a young bird-catcher from a different village or even beating up the upper-caste man who harasses her repeatedly. No matter what obstacle, she faces it with optimism and head held high until the end. Of course, when the Titash river itself, the sustenance of her people, dries up, she too passes away.

Angry Basanti is often angry (usually with just cause) with her parents, with Ananta and with the man who harasses her. And she usually resorts to physical violence— another sign that she won't take anything lying down. She physically fights with all of them until anger subsides and regret or fear take its place. Towards the end, when the upper-caste men spread rumours about her chastity, she literally shakes with anger and tells Munglee that she will burn everything down. That, too, comes to pass.

Cruel Marginalized, lower-caste village folk, always on the brink of survival, have no use for gentlemanly niceties of behaviour: both their kindness and cruelty are much more immediate and raw. This goes for all the characters but especially Basanti. Her kindness and love for Rajar jhi and Ananta turns to its opposite quickly and without warning after a physical altercation with her mother, showing her cruel side and confusing and frightening the boy. She even tells Ananta to go away and die (even though she didn't mean it) and is later hurt by Ananta's ungratefulness, not understanding that her cruelty led to his behaviour.

Rajar jhi Rajar jhi is the another central character in the film. Rajar jhi literally means ‘Raja’s daughter’; later, she’s also called ‘Ananta’r maa’ or ‘Ananta’s mother’. Her lack of a personal name points to how easily women like her are marginalized and exploited in patriarchal, poverty-ridden, lower-caste societies like the one shown. Regardless of being shorn of any identity (in name) beyond these two relationships with father and son, she is brave and thoughtful, kind and caring and acts as a foil to Basanti’s exuberant character.

Brave Although her family practically hands her off to Kishor at a moment’s notice, she faces the series of challenges bravely— from consummating their marriage, to jumping into the river when bandits attack, to raising Ananta single-handedly, to coming again to a strange village to search for Ananta’s father, to taking care of the madman and professing her attraction for him. Her every action shows her brave spirit.

Calm Unlike Basanti, Rajar jhi is not given to excessive displays of emotion (though both of them cry a lot in solidarity). She accepts whatever comes her way calmly and with grace, from the villagers’ accusations about her character as a single mother to the madman’s rejection of her advances; from her child’s hunger from having starved for two days to the villagers scorn her for taking care of the madman.

Lovelorn Rajar jhi’s general unhappiness stems from lost love as she longs for her husband and later the madman. She barely knew her husband for a night and doesn’t even remember his face, yet she is tortured by the memories and burdened by the responsibility of raising a child out of that essentially one-night stand. Although married, she has never enjoyed sex or love— unmet sexual desire frustrates Rajar jhi to an extent that she feels attracted to the madman, not knowing that it was actually her husband who had forgotten about her (a “lovers recognize each other even if disguised” type of romance trope).

THEMES

SOCIETY

Caste The author of the novel on which the film is based, Adwaita Mallabarman, belonged to the marginalized Malo fisherman caste. The original novel is much more detailed in depicting caste oppression and conflict with the upper castes; in the film, we aren’t shown much caste-based marginalization (such as untouchability or direct gender violence) beyond what poor villagers have always faced at the hands of upper-caste and upper-class landlords and moneylenders. This is because almost all the film events occur amongst the villagers who are all of the same caste and therefore do not discriminate against each other, though other forms of inter-caste discrimination are common, such as the village's objection to Rajar jhi’s character or Basanti’s mother’s anger at having to feed Ananta. We only hear of them being a Malo villager or Malo fishermen when external threats arise, such as when the upper-caste men attack the village or when they have to fight with the farmers after the river dries up.

Illustrative Moment: At the end of the film, the upper-caste men, spurred by Basanti’s rejection as well as their own greed, gang up and bring goons to destroy the Malo village on some flimsy pretext. They beat up and drag away the Malo elders, harass the other villagers and set fire to many huts. After their rampage, the village is in ruins; with whatever little possessions they had being taken or burnt and no succour from the dried up river Titash, many, like Kishor’s father and Basanti, die of starvation and thirst.

Poverty On top of being marginalized by caste and religion, the communities shown in the film are also very poor. The Malo’s livelihood depends on fishing in the river and the catch is often uncertain, leading to the men having to travel far away and sometimes meet with accidents, as Kishor did. The womenfolk weave twine and maybe earn a meagre income. They are also drowning in debt to unscrupulous upper-caste, educated moneylenders and landowners. Their mud-and-straw huts are mostly run down, and only a small handful of villagers are not absolutely poverty-stricken. Despite that, they make time and space to celebrate and enjoy festivities and don’t let their poverty drag them down, for instance, when the village youth want Kishor’s father to organize a feast for Durga Puja and Basanti, Munglee and Rajar jhi all chip in with making the sweet treats. So dependent is the village on the river that at the end of the film after it suddenly dries up, Kishor’s father and others die of starvation and women are lured to migrate to more populated places for begging and prostitution. With the demise of the river, an entire village is destroyed and the lifeways of its community is lost

forever.

Illustrative Moment: Basanti goes in search of water and drags herself over the now dry riverbank, then somehow digs a hole, but only sandy, muddy, undrinkable water comes up. She then has a vision of a boy running in a lush rice field, symbolizing her hope for love and abundance, before she dies.

Widowhood The lot of widows in India has historically been a matter or great contention (and reform). Unlike Muslim communities, Hindu communities did not allow widow remarriage and even though widow remarriage was sanctioned by law in the 19th century, most marginal and poorer communities continued to follow in their age-old mistreatment of widows. Basanti became a widow just when she entered the full bloom of youth, but instead of being allowed to marry another man and start a family afresh, she is forced to live with her old parents and abide by all the restrictive customs and rituals that widows undergo daily (though these are not the focus). She always wears a plain white sari (white being the colour associated with death in Hindu India) and no ornaments, but even that attire cannot hide her beauty and youth, which attracts upper-caste men like bees to honey. Sexual harassment and abuse are also a common lot of lower-caste, poor widows. But despite this, Basanti defies her widowhood in all areas except her resolve to not "catch a man" (like many young widows did), though that is likely because of her unrequited love for Kishor the madman.

Illustrative Moment: When a scrawny and unattractive upper-caste man, who had harassed Basanti earlier, shows up again and starts shouting sexually suggestive dialogues from a play, she coyly lets him come nearer and then gives him the beating of his life. Following this, the upper-caste men spread rumours about her character and her own village elders refuse to help as they've been bribed.

Disability Just like widows, madmen (or madwomen) were an unmissable part of the cultural landscape in most Bengal communities until recently, so much so that the figure of the "madman/ madwoman" is an established category in Bengali literature. For example, we see a madman in Ghatak's earlier films *Ajantrik* and *Subarnarekha*. Instead of confining them away inside the home or in an institution (that villagers couldn't afford) or abandoning them altogether, communities usually came together to ensure their basic survival in food, clothing and shelter, especially if no family was present. The general expectation was that god-abiding folk should be kind towards madmen, just like animals, especially in an "all-beings-are-Krishna's creatures" cultural ethos. Madmen were also believed to have potent prophetic or holy powers and were sometimes revered, though, of course, mistreatment was and is also common, especially with madwomen who were and are more susceptible to sexual abuse. Neither rural folk, nor urban authors who wrote (predominately nostalgic and tragic stories) about them, approached these madmen/madwomen from a treatment-based, mental health perspective. Most, if not all of these general observations hold in Kishor's case: his ageing parents take the best care of him that they can, physically, emotionally and financially and he is free to come and go as he pleases.

Illustrative moment: Just prior to Rajar jhi's arrival, Kishor's parents drag him into the river to bathe him, which was a weekly or biweekly affair. Kishor, an adult, bearded man, plays in the water, splashing and jumping, without a care for propriety. His old father laments that he now has to take care of his insane grown son where once he's hoped that he himself would be taken care of by his son in his old age.

RELATIONSHIP

Love *Titash* is, at its core, a tragic love story, featuring the unfulfilled love between Basanti, Kishor and Rajar jhi; critics have compared this to the relationship between the mythological Krishna, his lover Radha and his wife Rukmini. That Kishor is one of Krishna's names is a clue that Ghatak wanted audiences to make the connection. Krishna is a "down-to-earth" deity and the last resort for the lowest of the low; in that sense, too, the parallel elevates the love relationship between these human characters to something beyond merely banal or lustful. The tales and songs that comprise the rich, centuries-long tradition of Krishna lore is less about what Krishna does for his beloved or the ways in which he expresses his love, and much more about Radha's love, anger and longing for him. Unlike Krishna in his youth, the very embodiment of divine love, Kishor however has become a madman and Subal has been killed.

For both Basanti and Rajar jhi, their love for Kishor now has little to do with him as an individual and more with what he represents: an idealized love. In fact, we see precious little of Kishor as an

individual; while handsome and brave, he does seem to have a questionable (read lady-killer) character. Basanti waited for Kishor all her life, but her love went entirely unrecognized; if Kishor had truly loved her, he wouldn't have married Rajar jhi (as it seems to be a monogamous community). Even after he became mad, Basanti tried to approach him but he rejected her. As for Rajar jhi, she continually pines for the husband whom she knew for only a single night and recognizes the need for a sexual-emotional connection with a man. Somehow, of all the men in the village, she feels drawn to this madman who is her lost husband. She eventually unites with him when Kishor recognizes her, but both of them die tragically at that moment.

Illustrative moment: Rajar jhi offers Kishor a plateful of fried sweet snacks that she had spent the whole day making. He tries to cut her down with a sickle, but freezes and eventually takes some food and runs away, all while the most evocative wedding song "Leelabali" plays in the background.

Motherhood Mothers and motherhood is a recurring and core theme in Ghatak's films, with "loss" as a common thread: as a village woman comments, someone who doesn't have a mother is bereft of everything. In *Titash*, we see three strong women as mothers (and mother goddesses in visions).

The first is Basanti's mother, who has a love-hate relationship with her daughter. She didn't expect to carry the burden of a widowed daughter into her old age and harbours some resentment, though she is more concerned about Basanti "catching a man" and dragging the family honour in to the dust. As a family on the brink of survival with no robust, earning members, she is also naturally loathe to feed two extra mouths. This leads to several fights between mother and daughter, with a sea change in circumstances after the last one. And after Basanti curses Ananta out and then gets beaten up, they reconcile.

The second is Rajar jhi, who finally embarks on a journey to find Kishor because she wanted Ananta to have his father's name and recognition. While that doesn't happen, she does coincidentally land in the only place where it could have happened, though being known as the madman's son wouldn't have done Ananta any favours. She is caring enough about her son, but sometimes a bit neglectful and distant, as when Ananta begs her for food and she calmly tells him to wait for Basanti. Her identity as a mother is less important to her than finding love, as she confides to Basanti. This is revealed in unconscious visions as well: Ananta has a vision of his mother as Maa Kali, the goddess-destroyer of Time itself; and we see a dream sequence of Rajar jhi in wedding attire while Basanti looks on; Rajar jhi then hands Ananta off to Basanti.

In fact, Basanti appears to be much more motherly towards Ananta that his own mother, right from when they arrive at the Malo village. Basanti makes sure they are fed and taken care of, and especially after Rajar jhi's death, some villager women comment on how Basanti has practically adopted Ananta. However, this bliss is not to last: after a fight with her own mother, Basanti curses Ananta and they grow estranged. Much of Basanti's angst after that moment is because the boy rejects her repeatedly, and she is angry and hurt at his lack of care and gratitude.

Illustrative moment: When Basanti comes all the way to the other woman's village to take Ananta back, he says that there's no love for him in her heart. Basanti gets into a verbal fight with the other woman about poisoning his mind about her. Basanti gets angry and starts hitting Ananta while the woman and her husband try to stop her. After the fight, Basanti, with welts on her back, is comforted and tended to by her mother. Basanti says, "Mother is the only truth in life".

Solidarity *Titash* is an excellent example of solidarity between strong women characters, which is somewhat of a rarity in Indian cinema and especially in a film that is not written or directed by a woman. The practice of female solidarity has been undercut by patriarchy and women themselves: Basanti tells her mother that she wants to lessen her grief with Ananta and Rajar jhi's company, but she won't even allow her to go there. Despite the obstacles, the two women grow very close on their shared pain of losing the man they love, which coincidentally is the same man. Though Basanti guesses that to be the case, Rajar jhi is unconvinced. Basanti and Munglee also share a close friendship from childhood, though Munglee, now with her own family, has less time and patience for Basanti's sentimental, easily provoked nature.

Illustrative moment: Basanti and Rajar jhi, tired after a long day of cooking, share their secrets: Rajar jhi tells them about her husband's passion and her trauma-induced loss of memory; Basanti

says she knows why Kishor became mad and why Subal (her husband) died, but she's not telling; her former innocent self is dead now. Basanti continues to say that the madman got married at a faraway village and his bride was abducted by bandits soon after. She tells Rajar jhi not to get attached to the madman as no one knows what drove him mad. Rajar jhi says he must have lost his beloved and the only thing she can do is to try and see if she can fill that void for him. Basanti says that Rajar jhi needs a man.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1) How does the format of the film (hyperlink cinema) affect your viewing experience and understanding of the plot?

2) Do you think Basanti is an "indomitable widow"? Discuss by closely analysing any two sequences.

3) How much of a role does coincidence (and the melodrama it generates) play in the plot?

4) Discuss the link between the river and the people. Why is it significant? Could things have been any different?

5) Choose any one image/ freeze frame that you remember after watching the film. Which visual elements were most striking to you and why?