HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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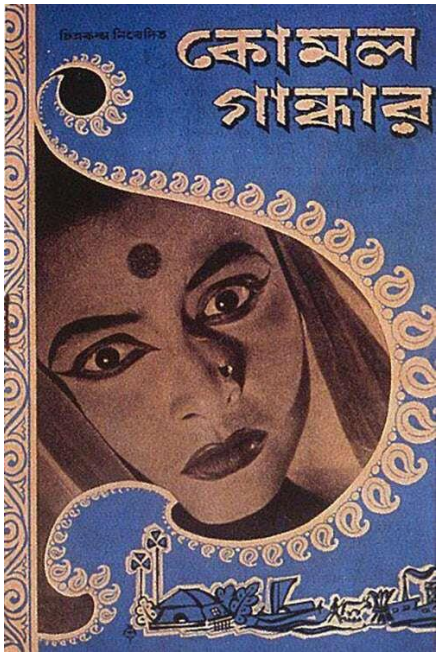
SOFT NOTE ON A SHARP SCALE or E-FLAT / *KOMAL GANDHAR* (1961)
Ritwik Ghatak

Bengali language

Film link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4QUV57E0s-Y



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 *Komal Gandhar* was partly based on Ghatak's experiences of working with the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), one of the strongest cultural movements of his time. Ideological differences led him to leave the group, but it left a profound influence on him. Ghatak crafted a brilliant tale around the travelling theatre movement, rivalries between and within groups, the effect of Partition on art, and a love story. What brings them together is partly theatre, but another reason is the Partition– the main characters, Anasuya and Bhrigu, find peace in common roots. As Ghatak said. 'I

have tried to portray my country and the sorrows and sufferings of my people to the best of my ability. Whatever I might have achieved, there was no dearth of sincerity…In my humble opinion, *Komal Gandhar* probably tried to break the shackles that straight-jackets our cinema. It has a pattern and an approach which may be tentatively called experimental.'

Background *On casting*: "Ghatak had wanted an actress whose features could be choreographed to construct a national symbol of agony and resistance. He felt Supriya's long neck and rough edges in her face could be stripped of their lyrical hangover. "In his writings on *Komal Gandhar*, Ghatak had mentioned he had used Supriya's head and neck in close-up shots to portray her as the great mother figure" said film scholar Sanjoy Mukhopadhyay. "Supriya Devi had a distinctive presence in relation to her peers. With a strongly-built body and a deep voice she foregrounded a sensual yet soothing presence", said critic Moinak Biswas. "In *Meghe Dhaka Tara* and *Komal Gandhar*, Ghatak used her head, long neck and her torso, sometimes her walk, as part of a choreography. He made her dance quietly through these films, which would have been impossible with other actors of the time."

On shooting: In an old interview, Supriya Devi stated that the shooting didn't take place in the conventional sense. For instance, when she was visiting Darjeeling to meet her daughter, all of a sudden Ghatak asked her to come to a particular location to shoot for a particular scene. The shooting took place without any definite planning; the film didn't have any script or scripted dialogues.

Legacy: Posthumously, the Ritwik Ghatak Memorial Trust attempted to buy back the rights of *Komal Gandhar* (*E-Flat,* 1961) and *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (*Cloud-capped Star*, 1959), two of his finest and, in a sense, emblematic films, from a Kolkata film distributor who had bought them from an indigent, alcoholic Ghatak in dire need of funds for only a few hundred rupees each. Pressure was brought to bear on the distributor who was sitting on the two masterpieces, and it appears that the trust did regain the rights. The film did not get any awards and wasn't shown in any international festivals until much later.

CHARACTERS

Anasuya	talented theatre actress
Bhrigu	actor–director of a theatre troupe, who loves Anasuya
Shibu	troupe member and close friend of Bhrigu
Jaya	young woman whose family is against her working in theatre
Rishi	lights technician and Jaya's crush
Gagan	old teacher who joins the troupe
Shanta	middle-aged, gossip-mongering actress
Pakhi	Anasuya's older brother
Samar	Anasuya's mystery boyfriend

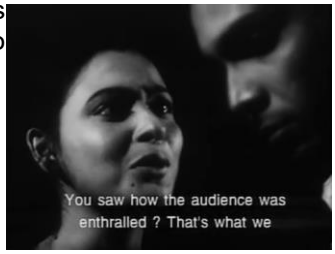
SYNOPSIS

Bhrigu and Shanta lead two feuding theatre troupes. Anasuya, a member of Shanta's troupe, helps Bhrigu at a drama competition and subsequently she proposes that the two troupes work together again. The troupes work on staging *Shakuntala*, a translation of a famous, classical Sanskrit play. They go on a couple of excursions, and Bhrigu and Anasuya grow closer to each other. Other characters enliven the troupe, though they have trouble retaining members and paying for their shows. Soon enough, Shanta, a gossipmonger at heart, starts spreading slander about Bhrigu and Anasuya's character and even sabotages the stage show of *Shakuntala*. After the audience laughs at them for playing a braying noise in place of birdsong, the newspapers print horrible reviews and the groups decide to split. Anasuya now joins Bhrigu's group. They have some success with another play. Through it all, Bhrigu gets more enamoured with Anasuya despite her revealing that she has a long-distance sweetheart, Samar, who lives in France. Finally, Samar gives her an ultimatum to join him in France and she decides to leave, but without informing him. The troupe works hard on another play. Shibu, after hearing that Jaya likes Rishi and not him, snaps and insults Anasuya and Bhrigu for their immoral relationship. Bhrigu also calls Samar a scoundrel for leading Anasuya on for years. Events come to a head when Samar returns for Anasuya and she's reported having left for the airport. However, at their next stage show, unbeknownst to the others, she arrives early and waits, having realized that she could not live without Bhrigu. Jaya also proposes to Rishi and he responds positively. Bhrigu and Anasuya reconcile. The film ends with a melancholy folk wedding song.

SCENES



A play After opening credits, we see a play being performed on stage (Ghatak's own *Dalil* [*Document,* 1952]). The characters, some villagers, argue about leaving their homeland on the Padma riverbank. The old man says that they must be cursed as they're forced to move away for survival and sustenance. It's a drama competition. Three young men and a middle-aged woman (Shanta), members of a rival theatre troupe, mock the director's "experimental theatre" but praise their own lead actress Anasuya.



Helping the competition Shanta gets angry hearing that Anasuya was helping the competition in a crowd scene. The director, Bhrigu, (who's also the protagonist) tells Anasuya what to do on stage. The others badmouth her and her troupe in front of her, not knowing her identity. Bhrigu frantically gets everyone ready for the last scene. Anasuya watches intently. Later, her own troupe members ostracize her for helping the competition. She tries to argue that it shouldn't matter, so long as the audience is enthralled. Probhat, her favourite junior troupe member, isn't convinced.

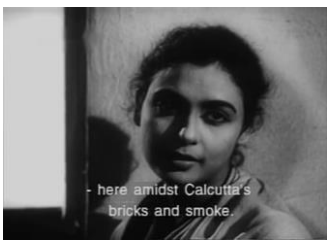


An old feud At the awards ceremony, a former teacher gives a long pompous speech while the spectators get bored and some of them leave. Anasuya confronts Bhrigu, the man who badmouthed her troupe and identifies herself. Bhrigu is taken aback, but explains to her the ego fuelled feud between the troupes. She offers a few critiques of their acting and Bhrigu isn't happy. A refugee gentleman, Gagan, comes up to Bhrigu and asks for a role as he was an actor and he dismissively ask him to come along. Shibu, Bhrigu's friend and troupe member, teases him about getting infatuated by Anasuya.



Working together Anasuya's older brother, Pakhi, dismisses her idea of a new theatrical experiment. Later, while Bhrigu and his troupe are rehearsing, Anasuya approaches him with a proposal for both feuding troupes to work together. Shibu teases Bhrigu again. Later, Bhrigu and Anasuya rehearse a scene from the *Sakuntala* play as father and daughter. The troupe members argue about extra coaching for weaker members.





At a rehearsal Anasuya listens to Bhrigu's mother as she rambles on about his childhood and tells her to bring him the tea she made. They are there for a morning rehearsal. Shanta gossips with some other men. Anasuya looks around in his room and comments on a lonely bird singing in the concrete jungle. Bhrigu tells her rudely to get to work. She calls him a "heartless person" and "You'll never get a friend". Later on, Shanta proposes that they travel to her family's vacant mansion in hilly Kurseong to take a break.



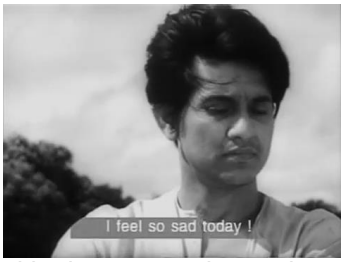
By the Padma river They excitedly sing a song while boarding a bus and then arrive at the Padma riverbank. We see a new face, the lighting technician Rishi, who is the most excited of the group while also being cynical about Gagan getting snacks from Shanta's group. Singing a peppy folk song about fishing, they jump onto some boats and go for a ride on the Padma river. Gagan sings a folk song about Shib Sadagar*.

* the anti-hero from the medieval Bangla epic *Manasamangal*.

Anasuya and Bhrigu Anasuya and Bhrigu watch them, standing on an abandoned, blocked off train track. Anasuya tells him that her ancestral home is on the other side of Padma and that she's suddenly saddened. They will never be able to regain tranquillity anymore; they have become outsiders. The couple walk in the nearby sugarcane fields.



Bhrigu's life Bhrigu says that he can spot his old home across the river but can never return. Bhrigu recounts his childhood, when for him these train tracks were a sign of union, but now have become a sign of separation. The country is split in two there. Bhrigu explains that he was not always so rude and brash. He used to be a romantic, but they were made destitute suddenly (by the Partition). His father died of starvation and he became a changed man. Anasuya says she's also lonely and terribly tired. She starts crying. Bhrigu just watches.





Shocking news At night, the men relax together. Bhrigu admits to Shibu about something going on between him and Anasuya. A junior member tells them that Anasuya's fiancé will be returning in a month from abroad. Before Shibu and Bhrigu can react to the shocking news, suddenly they hear a loud crash. Later, Shibu tells the junior member that Bhrigu has returned home.

Budding romance nipped Anasuya visits a sulking Bhrigu and now addresses him with the second person familiar pronoun. She says everyone is excited to go on the Kurseong trip. The troupe members, including Shibu and Gagan leave the restaurant where they were having tea after seeing Bhrigu and Anasuya step in. Anasuya wants to discuss Shanta's slander about Bhrigu's character and something else. But before they can talk, some other members, including the young woman Jaya (who's frequently beaten up by her conservative family for working in theatre), interrupt them.



A Kurseong trip In Kurseong, Rishi happily sings an iconic song by Tagore'* on the wondrous universe, while walking the hilltops, forests and winding hilly roads barefoot. Anasuya, listening to him, tells Jaya that it was her mother's favourite song. Anasuya's mother was killed in the Noakhali riots where Gandhiji was also present, Anasuya tells Jaya, but is present like a flame within herself. She has seen the same look in Bhrigu's eyes sometimes. Jaya says she cannot understand men.





*"A firmament of sun and stars, / a planet filled with life/ In the midst of it all have I, / my own place, found have I/ In awe-struck wonder therefore, surges up my song"

Wondrous nature Elsewhere, Bhrigu, Shibu and Rishi admire the mountains; Rishi says they're like a tiny little girl, sleeping peacefully with clouds for blankets. Bhrigu says such luxury is disgusting and they should return. Shibu advises Bhrigu, "She is a flirt, avoid her". Back in Kolkata, Anasuya admires the torrential downpour while Bhrigu sternly tells her to get to work. She dreamily replies, "Unless we are touched by such things, how can we create anything beautiful?"



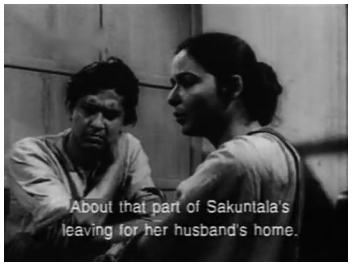
A threat Shanta visits Pakhi, Anasuya's older brother, to slander Bhrigu's character; he has a "has a shady past" and Anasuya is "being taken for a ride...doesn't know how to protect herself" etc. Pakhi dismisses her but she threatens to write to Anasuya's fiancé abroad and put an end to this "dirty flirtation".



Rehearsals continue **A**t the rehearsal hall, Gagan and the other troupe members practice a folk song about boat-rowing. Shanta promises to fund the new play. They practice another revolutionary song. Some days later, there is a general strike on the day of the final stage rehearsal. Bhrigu tells Anasuya that it's the artists' duty to participate in political activities and he's anxious about the new play.



Bringing emotion to *Shakuntala* Bhrigu tells Anasuya to imagine leaving her homeland for the final scene where Shakuntala leaves her father's hermitage; the procession outside could be the creepers clinging to her and a beggar girl pulling at her clothes could be the fawn that Shakuntala raised. He asks her to imagine how she would feel if she had to leave Kolkata and Bengal behind forever. Anasuya gets overwhelmed. Some other members take Bhrigu away to join the procession. Anasuya watches.







Money troubles At the rehearsal, they fall short of money and Rishi berates Shanta for not holding up her end of the deal and selling tickets. Anasuya tells Probhat to sell her gold bangles for money without Bhrigu's knowledge. They borrow money from a notorious and rude Afghani moneylender with high interest rate and commission to the middleman. On the day of the show, Shanta sabotages them by selling tickets worth only 40 Rupees and arriving an hour after the show was supposed to begin. The audience stars leaving after an hour but finally they are able to start after Shanta gets ready.

Shakuntala play is sabotaged We see bits of some key scenes from the play. There are some technical difficulties with playing a birdsong and the audience laughs. Many leave. Shanta keeps sabotaging the play. Gagan goes onstage with his glasses on and the audience mocks them again. After the show, Rishi tells Bhrigu that he'll break their legs before he agrees to have a joint production with Shanta's group again.

New beginnings Afterwards, Gagan brings the newspapers which have printed bad reviews. They are all neck-deep in debt and afraid that they'll be beaten up by the Afghani moneylender. Rishi and Shibu quibble over their last cigarette. They get an offer in rural, flood-ravaged Birbhum but cannot accept it because they don't have enough women in the group. Pakhi brings Anasuya, who has come to join Bhrigu's troupe.



A touching scene Bhrigu's troupe enacts a play featuring downtrodden indigenous folk and their call for revenge. It's well-accepted by the audience. An old woman comes up to Bhrigu and tells him that her son was trampled to death just like a character in the play. She gives Bhrigu a medal that her dead son had once received for singing. Bhrigu tells her that his mother died of starvation and touches the lower-caste woman's feet.

A midnight walk Later, the troupe members enjoy a midnight walk in the moonlit night. Jaya tells Bhrigu that Anasuya was writing a long letter and refused to come with them. But suddenly we hear her singing Tagore's iconic "Aaj jyotsna raate" *. Jaya tells Bhrigu that she's definitely waiting for someone. Later, she also confesses that Shibu wants to marry her but she likes someone else.



* "All have left for the woodland on the full moon night/ In this intoxicating breeze of spring/ I will not go, no I will not; here I lie in the room/ In my own corner I will stay alone"

Anasuya's romance revealed Anasuya walks over sand dunes to Bhrigu. She looks happy but he doesn't. She tells him that her mother wanted to raise her in her own image; only women can raise brave sons to combat rising evil. Bhrigu would be her ideal son. She gives him her mother's diary, her most precious procession. Bhrigu tells her about Tagore's poem "Komal Gandhar". Anasuya tells him that she and her father met Samar right after losing her mother. They knew each other for only three days, then he went to France. They lovingly call each other Ferdinand and Miranda (from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*). He was supposed to return but has kept on delaying it for the last six years. They are of different castes so their families don't support their marriage. She is finding it hard to wait for him for another five years. She tries to show Bhrigu the letter she wrote last night, but he jumps up and walks away.



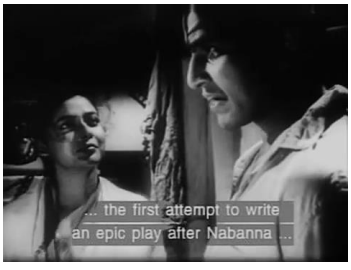
Jaya's crush Gagan helps a new screenwriter, Kunal, write dialogues. Shibu and Bhrigu awkwardly avoid talking about their respective crushes. Bhrigu tells Shibu to ask Jaya directly about getting married. Jaya and other members practice a Tagore song, "Amazing world! I salute you!" Bhrigu dismisses all of them and speaks to Jaya, who confesses that she likes Rishi (not Shibu). Shibu looks very angry when Bhrigu tells him.



Shibu quits the group The group members argue about the group not being democratic enough and money troubles. Shibu also charges Bhrigu and Anasuya for morally compromising their troupe's good name by not marrying. Anasuya leaves, crying. Shibu says that the troupe has no future as it's run on the whims of one man and quits. A few other members also quit. Rishi assures Bhrigu that it's the lot of leaders to be "kicked from time to time".



A new play Anasuya returns. She tells Bhrigu that she feels split in half (between her two romances). Bhrigu says it doesn't matter and that they'll stage a play again. She says that Bhrigu must also be suffering. Bhrigu says that Gagan and Kunal are discoveries and that he's finally getting a grasp of the dynamics on stage. It will be the next best epic play after *Nabanna**, he proclaims.



**Nabanna* (1944) is a Bengali language drama written by Bijon Bhattacharya (who plays Gagan) and staged by the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) under the joint direction of Sombhu Mitra and Bijon Bhattacharya. The play is about the Bengal famine of 1943. The Bengal IPTA took the play to many parts of India as a part of its festival, Voice of Bengal, and it became a major success and collected lakhs of rupees for famine relief in rural Bengal.

Anasuya's plans Sometime later, Pakhi teases Anasuya about the new play and sewing costumes. There is a strike, so he advises her to return home early from rehearsal. Shibu wanders around feeling lonely. Anasuya tells Bhrigu that Samar don't think that they can be together unless she gets a passport and goes to him in France. She has decided to go, though she hasn't replied to Samar's letter. She feels that she's escaping a great duty by leaving all this behind and that Samar doesn't understand how much she is hurting.



Bhrigu's anger Anasuya asks him to look over her letter to Samar. Bhrigu finally snaps and calls Samar a "scoundrel, spineless criminal" and Anasuya should know better. She cries that she will never forgive Bhrigu and rushes out while there is unrest from the strike (we hear a few bombs).



Duty On the street, a young boy asks her for money and another troupe member (Debu) on a bicycle takes her wallet. He says it's their duty to help some of the striking old teachers return home by train. Debu tells her that her way of holding her head to the side reminds him of his dead sister and that Bhrigu has told him everything. Women like her should stay and support Bengal, not leave. She walks away and the boy follows her.



Anasuya's choice She arrives home and breaks down to Pakhi, saying that she can't live without Bhrigu and she was about to make a grave mistake. Pakhi sternly tells her that a man named Ferdinand is waiting for her upstairs.



Moving on Rishi and the other members disperse after a rehearsal. Shibu is back to the troupe, repentant. Jaya brings news that Anasuya has left for the airport with Pakhi and someone from abroad. Later, the troupe arrives at a train station to their next stage show where Rishi is waiting for them. He tells them that Anasuya arrived hours ago. Jaya follows Rishi; Shibu walks away. Bhrigu and Anasuya meet.



Reconciliation Anasuya tells Bhrigu that she left Samar and asks him if he will take her back. But before he can reply, Rishi jumps in and shouts at the top of his voice that Jaya proposed to him and that he loves her and will marry her. Gagan gives him a fake slap for embarrassing Jaya.



All's well that ends well Bhrigu and Anasuya hold hands. The sound of ululation (traditionally performed by married women to welcome the groom for the wedding) resounds over sand dunes, mountains and the city skyline with a folk wedding song, "Aamer tolay jhamur jhumur" playing in the background.





CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Anasuya

Anasuya, played by the ethereal Supriya Devi, is the protagonist of the film and an accomplished theatre actress. A refugee in Kolkata, she lost her mother during the Partition riots but gained a sweetheart who left her to relocate abroad. She slowly falls in love with the stoic director-actor Bhrigu and decides to remain with him.

Creative Anasuya is a superb actress and cares little about inter-troupe feuds. She willingly helps her rival troupe at a drama competition and tells Bhrigu that his ego-fuelled petty-mindedness is meaningless; the goal should be to perform the play such that the most intense emotions are evoked in the audience. She also puts her heart and soul into the performance in the role of the mythical Shakuntala, likening her experience of uprootedness during the Partition to a key scene from the play where Shakuntala leaves her father's hermitage.

Romantic Anasuya is a romantic at heart. She finds beauty and wonder in the most commonplace of occurrences, like a sudden torrential downpour or a lonesome bird singing in the city. She says, "Unless we are touched by such things, how can we create anything beautiful?" She also sings Tagore's evocative song ("All have left for the woodland on the full moon night") at a critical point when it's revealed to Bhrigu that she has a lover elsewhere. Even the fact that she has a six-year-old, long-distance relationship only through letters also points to her romantic (if naive) nature.

Sensitive Instead of desensitizing Anasuya (as they do Bhrigu), the horrors of Partition have made her more attuned to the unspoken feelings of others. In two sequences, which parallel her role in the *Shakuntala* play, we see random little boys pull at the end of her sari, just when she was about to make life-altering decisions. But these boys, her figurative children and the nation's future, literally and metaphorically prevent her from making grave mistakes.

Patriotic Anasuya is deeply patriotic to her homeland, Bengal, even though it has been split apart. Much of this is instilled in her by her mother, who Anasuya says tried to build up her daughter in her own image. "Only strong and spirited women can raise brave sons to combat rising evil", she believes. She tells Bhrigu that her mother would have approved of the revolutionary fire in his eyes. Later, after confessing her other relationship to Bhrigu, she laments that Samar doesn't understand how much pain she is in at the thought of leaving her homeland behind again (to move to France with him).

Mysterious Anasuya doesn't feel the need to explain herself to anyone, even Bhrigu, until much of the film has elapsed. Her comings and goings, evocative expressions (critics have compared the many close-up sequences of her face to Botticelli's work) and a general aura of mystery always surround her, making her seem just slightly beyond one's grasp and not a flesh-and-blood, next-door girl like Jaya. Her entire affair with Samar is also shrouded in mystery and gives rise to unsavoury rumours about her reputation.

Bhrigu

Bhrigu is an actor-director of his own theatre troupe and slowly gets enamoured by Anasuya. He is a typical thorny-on-the-outside, soft-on-the-inside, laconic yet sensitive kind of man.

Serious Bhrigu never cracks a smile, whether on or off stage. He even complains that the mountain villa is too disgustingly luxurious for rehearsals! Shibu is correct in accusing him of running the troupe in an almost dictatorial manner, taking all major decisions himself with little input from others, while Rishi assures him that it's the lot of leaders to be "kicked from time to time". His relationship with Anasuya also progresses slowly because of his nature; she calls him a "heartless person" and says he'll 'never get a friend" as he shows little sympathy to her dreamy observations.

Sensitive Despite his stoic exterior, in one emotional scene by the Padma river,which was a site of childhood nostalgia for him, he admits to Anasuya that he became a changed man after losing his father and home in the Partition. After a rural performance, when an old woman comes up to Bhrigu and tells him that she identified with the play and gives him a medal that once belonged to her dead son, Bhrigu tells her that his father died of starvation and touches the lower-caste woman's feet. And in a climactic scene, when Anasuya asks him to look over the letter she had written to Samar, Bhrigu finally snaps and calls Samar a "scoundrel, spinless criminal" and that Anasuya should know better, thus revealing his true feelings towards her.

Creative As the director of a troupe, Bhrigu brings all his creative talents to fruition on stage, whether directing Anasuya's emotional expression at a key separation scene in *Shakuntala* or supervising the rehearsals or delivering heart-warming acting during the plays that they stage. He quickly recognizes the talent of the new recruits (screenwriter Kunal and actor-singer Gagan) and even movingly tells Anasuya that he's finally getting a grasp of the dynamics of stagecraft– how the actors should move and express themselves and so on.

THEMES

The Partition *Komal Gandhar* is the second film of Ghatak's (posthumously named) Partition trilogy. Though we are not shown any actual footage from the Partition itself, its aftermath looms large from the very beginning of the film when Bhrigu's troupe is staging a play. A close-up depicts an old, confused looking man– his hair and beard dusted with white powder, his plaintive gaze stressed by the thick black paste around his eyes– directly questioning the camera: 'Where should I go? Tell me! Leaving my fertile land– the Padma river– where should I go?' A younger man behind him delivers an abrupt, gruff reply: 'It's time you became a refugee! Time you became what the journalists call you.' Unable to reconcile whether to go with this new appellation– a refugee– the old man shuts his ears and runs to the stage's edge; everything he knows is forever behind him. It's a curse that cannot be evaded. Later, we see an old woman, an audience member, so moved by the same play that she offers Bhrigu her dead son's gold medal as a prize for a heart-wrenching performance; her own son was trampled to death just like a character in the play. In between, we see how deeply Partition has affected two the main characters of the film, Bhrigu and Anasuya. Bhrigu's father practically died of starvation after they became refugees in Kolkata and Anasuya's mother was killed in a riot. Needless to say, these events became formative in each of their character trajectories. While Bhrigu doesn't mention his father's influence, Anasuya idolizes her mother and one of the reasons why she chooses Bhrigu is because her mother would have approved of the revolutionary fire within him.

The theme of partition is furthered by the *Shakuntala* play. In fact, the only reason such an archaic and anti-revolutionary play gets so much screentime here is because one of its key scenes focuses directly on Shakuntala's grief on being parted forever from her home, a hermitage, when she leaves for her husband's palace. All around her, the forest flora and fauna attempt to halt her departure, especially the fawn that she had raised from infancy. Bhrigu and Anasuya passionately discuss how to perform the scene, drawing on their own experiences. Later, Anasuya tells Bhrigu that leaving Bengal and Kolkata (for Europe, to join Samar), would be akin to being ripped apart again leaving her homeland once before. The theme of Partition in the sense of being torn in two (in her own words) is also paralleled in Anasuya's own love life, in her competing desire for Samar and Bhrigu.

Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) and Bengal theatre IPTA is a pan-Indian theatre association that subscribes to a revolutionary Marxist ideology; it was established in 1942 with major chapters across India* and mostly petered out by the late 1960's. Though only a few chapters (Bengal, Assam, Mumbai) survive today, IPTA laid the foundation and template for postcolonial theatre in India, with most contemporary theatre troupes following in their footsteps.

Two of their core practices are central to *E-Flat.* Firstly, theatre workers have a moral and social obligation to uplift the ailing populace and confront oppression whenever they encounter it. Part of this was involved massive fundraising efforts for disaster-struck areas. For example, the troupe practices singing many revolutionary songs as part of their plays; in fact, their only play that *isn't* revolutionary in nature is *Shakuntala*. Whenever there is political unrest on the streets, the members gladly join in to protest oppression. Even though bombing and other violent acts make it unsafe to travel, Anasuya is confident that no harm will come to her and she even gives her money to see that some protesting teachers reach home safely.

Secondly, the true essence of Indian theatre is its people and their performative arts (versus Western, dialogue-heavy, drawing-room theatre). Many folk theatre performance templates and folk songs are used by Bhrigu's troupe, and most of the characters also belong to the downtrodden classes. As such, it's not at all coincidental that the elite *Shakuntala* play performed for an urban middle-class audience gets booed off the stage, while the play (Ghatak's *Dalil*, though not named here) performed to a rural, impoverished, oppressed audience generates impassioned reactions. The true core of Bhrigu's beliefs and convictions about the purpose of theatre lies in the latter, not the former.

* There are many freely available and excellent articles on the history, practices and ideology of the IPTA.

Politics Bengali theatre remains plagued to this day by petty politics– jealousy, bickering, backstabbing, disagreement and miscommunication. From the very opening scene, we see Shanta gossiping about the competition; sometime later, Bhrigu explains that he and Shanta were originally in one troupe and they split because of in-fighting and ego battles. With that chequered history behind them, it shouldn't have come as a surprise that Shanta sabotages the staging of the *Shakuntala* play: she takes a large swath of tickets but doesn't sell them and arrives after the play was supposed to have started, then takes another hour to get her makeup and costume on. As she features in the very first scene, nothing could move without her. Later, she badmouths both Bhrigu and Anasuya and even comes all the way to Anasuya's home to complain to her older brother about the scandalous goings on between her and Bhrigu while she has a fiancé abroad. She even threatens to write to this fiancé, exposing Anasuya's unfaithfulness.

In the Indian subcontinent, "politics" usually refers to party politics and ideological underpinnings of particular political parties, in this case, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and its allies. Members who don't subscribe to the dominant ideology of the theatre troupe either leave or are dismissed, as Ghatak himself was from the IPTA. Petty politics of the sort discussed above are a completely different phenomenon.

Financial survival In a film themed around the Partition, we certainly see glimpses of refugees' struggle for physical survival, for food, money, a roof over one's head and other basic necessities. That is a much boarder topic. But for the theatre troupe here, finding a way to financially survive is an almost insurmountable challenge, as it remains the case for a large majority of Bengal theatre groups to this day. The costs are many– renting rehearsal space, booking stage shows, arranging for all the technical aspects of a show, like lights and sound, props and costumes, printing and publicity and so on. We see Bhrigu's troupe face and try to overcome these challenges, but not always successfully. Moneyed patrons like Shanta are few and far between and usually fickle and have their own selfish agendas; most costs are borne by members themselves and more recently, by grants and endowments, though these are also scarce. Dedicated theatre workers often have to sell their belongings or go into debt to support their passion and usually the profit margin is razor-thin, if any. For instance, Anasuya asks Probhat to sell her gold bangles and another member arranges for Bhrigu to take out a loan with an exorbitant interest rate from an Afghani moneylender. Even after the show and ticket sales, Bhrigu has to give all the money to a creditor, leaving nothing for himself and his troupe members.

Attraction Psychologists tell us that proximity is the one of the biggest factors for attraction, and love and physical proximity certainly exists within theatre groups. At the core of *E-Flat* is not one but two distinct love triangles: the relationship between Anasuya, Bhrigu and Samar, and that between Jaya, Rishi and Shibu, though the latter is introduced somewhat abruptly and remains undeveloped. In fact, it is almost unheard of, even today, for theatre actresses to be romantically unattached to another troupe member, though these configurations change often. As Shibu says in a climactic scene, the couple having an affair without any stated intention to wed was morally reprehensible– this is an attitude that Bengali theatre workers hold even today to some degree.

Of these, Anasuya and Samar's long-distance, letters-only relationship confounds physical proximity in that they met only once for a mere three days, but were able to sustain their relationship for six years without meeting again. Their relationship seems to be overtly dreamy and somewhat naive, what with calling each other 'Ferdinand' and 'Miranda'. It is also somewhat strange that they developed such an intense connection immediately after Anasuya's mother's death. In contrast, her working relationship with Bhrigu doesn't take too long to blossom into unstated romance given their shared interest in theatre and politics, their background as refugees and having lost their parents. Despite Bhrigu's thorny exterior, Anasuya is able to see the creative, sensitive man beneath. But there is certainly a strong attachment to both that Anasuya feels "split in two". This is a parallel movement to the Partition itself, of being split in two and having to leave one half of oneself behind. In a twist (that's not really a twist), Anasuya departs for the airport with Samar, but ultimately returns to Bhrigu. Of course, polyamory, that is, Anasuya continuing her relationships with both men, isn't an option in this context.

The love triangle between Jaya, Rishi and Shibu is more conventional and unilateral; Shibu likes Jaya while Jaya likes Rishi. Rishi is in fact quite snappy with Jaya in their few interactions, falling back to a common trope, that being mean to the person you like is an indicator of attraction (in young people). Shibu also quite suddenly confesses to Bhrigu that he likes Jaya. We are not shown many interactions between these characters to fully fathom the hows and whys of their attraction, but Jaya's background as a girl who is often beaten by her family for working in theatre but continuing to return to the troupe may certainly have something to do with it. In any case, Rishi's acceptance of Jaya's proposal is an unconventionally comic scene– instead of keeping it between the both of them, Rishi, in his excitement, throws himself on a bale of hay, interrupts Bhrigu and Anasuya's reunion and proclaims to all within earshot that Jaya proposed to him. Jaya, of course, is mortified!

Transience Transience, while not being a core theme, permeates the lives and days of the characters. For one, Bengal theatre troupes are notoriously transient entities; with a high turnover rate and lack of funds, troupes form and disappear often. The very nature of a staged play is also transient and ephemeral in that it can never be replicated exactly in another performance. But the most visually striking example in the film occurs when the troupe visits the Padma riverbank. The focus in that scene is a train track that is suddenly barricaded right before it reaches the river; we see many minutes of footage of the track accompanied by the chant "Dohai Ali" ("Save us, Ali"). Bhrigu explains that this used to be a bustling line when he was younger; they had to take the ferry from that last station to cross over the Padma to travel home. But now only the abandoned train track remains, leading to nowhere; the other shore is forever beyond reach.

Contrapuntal use of music Contrapuntal sound in film is a technique that uses music or sound effects that contrast with events on screen, creating an unexpected or jarring effect. This can be used to create irony, heighten emotions, or add meaning to a scene. Ghatak effortlessly switches between three distinct and major musical traditions in the film to achieve a contrapuntal effect: Tagore songs, folk songs (particularity wedding songs and songs related to livelihood like fishing) and revolutionary songs. *E-Flat* is best known today, in fact, for its varied and excellent use of music.

The impact of Tagore: "I cannot speak without Tagore," said Ghatak in an interview, "That man has culled all my feelings long before my birth. He has understood what I am and put it all in words. I read him and I find that all has been said and I have nothing new to say." It is thus not surprising that Tagore's songs are seamlessly integrated in Ghatak's films. For instance, as the team travels to Kurseong for the rehearsal of a play, Rishi sings a Tagore song ("Aakash Bhora Surjo Taara"/ "A firmament of sun and stars"),which is a celebration of the escape from the cacophony of the city. Anasuya sings another ("Aj jyotsna raate"/"All have left for the woodland") at a melancholy moment. Even the name of the film is borrowed from a Tagore poem, "Naam rekhechi Komal Gandhar mone mone" ('I've named [her] Komal Gandhar in my heart').* This usage is more parallel than contrapuntal, as events on-screen directly correlate to the songs.

Revolutionary songs: The members of the theatre troupe often break into songs like "Esho Mukto Koro" ("Come, liberate us") and "Bidroho charidike bidroho aaj" ("There's revolution everywhere today") throughout the film – songs of hope in times of trouble. Their theatre is not 'art for art's sake'; there's a greater cause as they travel across the length and breadth of Bengal and speak of the lives of its people. Bhrigu, who leads the team, encourages everyone to march at a protest rally because "it is their duty", even though there's a play to be staged the next day. This brings forward Ghatak's philosophy with greater force, of art as "a means of expressing my anger at the sorrows and

sufferings of my people." Most of these songs however are in a rehearsal or another setting not directly depicting a political protest, and hence contrapuntal in nature.

Folk songs: Throughout the film, "Aamer tolay jhamur jhumur/ Kolar tolay biya" ("Music under the Mango tree/ Wedding under the Banana tree"), along with another folk song featuring Sita leaving her father's house, are used in the background. Both are melancholic and traditionally sung at rural weddings but flow through the veins of a film that has little to do with the village or dominant feelings of sadness. Ghatak explained that "Aamer tolay" reminds us of unification – marriage, the archetypal opposite of partition, of a nation, of a theatre troupe or of one's love. But there is also the undeniable grief of separation from the woman's own natal family, often involving months, years or even a lifetime. The song "Epar Padma, Opar Padma" ("Padma's near and far shores") is also beautifully used in the film when Anasuya and Bhrigu stand on the bank of the Padma river. On the opposite side are their homes, but a place that is now beyond their reach. Gagan, Rishi and several other members either sing or feature on-screen with another major type of folk music– that describing the trials and tribulations, joys and successes, hopes and fears of the common hard-working people like fishermen, boatmen and farmers. A common subtype features the Majhi (boatman), who is one's guide trough troubled waters (a literary figure used also by Tagore). The refrain, "Dohai Ali" (Begging Ali/ Allah for mercy on stormy voyages) is used strikingly in a few scenes, heightening the impeding possibility of separation.

*I have named her Komal Gandhar
in my mind.
She would sit stunned if she learnt about it,
would ask smilingly, "What does it mean?"
That the meaning is unfathomable is its most certain meaning.
The world is about work and vocation,
It is about good and bad–
Things with which she has made acquaintances with others.
I watch, sitting by her side
how she has infused her surrounding with a peculiar melody.
She knows not her own self.
At the spot where her Beloved's altar is placed
an agony-incense burns by His feet.
From there, a shadow of smoke engulfs the eyes,
like clouds masking the moon–
Covering the smile a little.
Her voice carries a fading strain of melancholy
She is unaware that is the strain which
binds the strings of her life's tanpura.
The notes of Bhairavi permeate all her
words and actions.
I cannot conclude why.
That is the reason I call her Komal Gandhar–
It is hard to comprehend why
teardrops glide into the heart
when she lifts her eyes.

–Rabindranath Tagore (c. 1893-1900, translated by Bishwati Ghosh)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1) Why do you think the film is named *Soft Note on a Sharp scale*? [this is a quite literal translation of the original Bangla name. Komal=flat / tender; Gandhar is the third word/sound in the Classical Hindustani musical octave (Ga)]

2) Discuss the impact of any three distinct musical pieces/ songs/ background score that influenced your experience of watching the film. Were these integral to the plot? How so?

3) Analyse the love triangle featuring Anasuya, Bhrigu and Samar. How plausible do you think such a situation could be in that context?

4) How does your prior knowledge (or ignorance) of the 1947-48 Bengal Partition affect your appreciation of the film?

5) What is your impression of Bengal theatre troupes after watching the film? Can you find any parallels from your own experience?