

Concept Note

To think of Ritwik Ghatak in his centenary year is to think of a rich legacy. This consists of many strands and multiple ideas that have developed around the man and his works. His legacy includes, but is not limited to, the different concerns encountered in his films and the scholarship built around them. The broader cinephilic practices, particularly the early contributions of film societies and film criticism, have also substantially added to the aforementioned idea of legacy. Alternative cultural spaces, such as little magazines, have also advanced serious discussions and arguments in building the Ghatak discourse.

There is, of course, Ghatak's own writings, both fiction and nonfiction, resonating with ideas that are personal and political in equal measures. His strong Marxist inclination and the ambivalent relationship with the Communist Party have informed his distinct notions of praxis and pedagogy, marked by an unmistakable sign of activism. This in turn has given rise to a limited but cult-like following among practitioners of film and theatre, which includes luminaries such as Kumar Sahani and Mani Kaul, who were his direct students, as well as a long line of artists, including contemporary filmmakers who are deeply influenced by Ghatak. It has added another recognisable shade to his legacy - that of a maverick male auteur whose appreciation borders on unapologetic hero worship within the alternative cultural spaces of Bengal and India.

If a legacy exists, everyone wants to claim it. Interestingly, there have been few recent developments that further endow Ghatak's legacy with a rather curious saffron hue. In the wake of the proposal and implementation of NRC-CAA by the Indian Government, there have been sustained attempts to claim Ritwik Ghatak within their own ideological ambit by the Hindu right-wing forces, particularly in Bengal. The assertion from these quarters was predicated on the fact that Ghatak's films engage (or rather simply document and depict) the plight of Hindu refugees in the aftermath of the partition of India.

In his centenary year, we thus intend to reevaluate and re-examine the legacy of Ritwik Ghatak - the personality, the artist, the political figure. In other words, we aim to scrutinise the legacy itself to arrive at a broader horizon of ideas, leading to a critical and holistic appreciation of Ghatak's footprint on our aesthetic, political, and cultural terrain. The objective of the seminar is to widen our academic lens, aiming for a more conceptual and interdisciplinary understanding of Ritwik Ghatak. Ghatak's artistic output has been distinguishably local, which precisely allows for a universal reception and engagement. His films, read in the context of language, style, theme, practice, and extending on to his own writings, his activism, his engagement with theatre, and his significant pedagogical efforts, reveal to us a broader framework of thought, moving from specific to more general. Like any notable artist, a systematic enquiry into Ghatak's works can unravel a philosophical dimension — that is, a methodical and disciplined structure of thought that not only informs his own body of work but can be approached as a distinct method to think through further questions and problems pertaining to the humanities in general.