

# ‘The state’s dread of cinema is huge’

Interview with the film historian Ashish Rajadhyaksha about his book, *John-Ghatak-Tarkovsky: Citizens, Filmmakers, Hackers*, an analysis of the nature of cinema and the politicisation of student protests. **SUHRID SANKAR CHATTOPADHYAY**



► **Ashish Rajadhyaksha** BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

**A**shish Rajadhyaksha’s book *John-Ghatak-Tarkovsky: Citizens, Filmmakers, Hackers* provides a nuanced insight into the historic protest carried out by the students of the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII) in 2015, and examines the socio-political impact of the movement on the much larger, nationwide protests that followed in the next five years, such as those against the CAA and NRC.

Rajadhyaksha spoke to *Frontline* about the book, which is a lucid exploration of, among other things, the state’s reaction to protest, and the concept of a filmmaker and her role. Excerpts:

**You have written that for the first time, a campus whose history of agitation has been both too small and too outré to have been part of any larger national student politics, became central to a larger narrative. How did that happen?**

When one thinks of John Abraham or Ritwik Ghatak, one thinks of them as political filmmakers; and then there are these iconic images of John and Ghatak looking down on the students in their protest, which may well make you wonder what John and Ghatak would have said to them. This threw up a very interesting problem that I wanted to go deeper into.

Remember, this is a film studies book, not

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a book of political theory, nor a history of student protest. But when you have a campus that is not known to be a political campus in the way Jawaharlal Nehru University or Jadavpur University are, you may wonder how this strike and this kind of issue could become so much larger. The only way that was possible was by foregrounding the symbolic fact of cinema in a way that at one level would not have surprised either John or Ghatak, or any of us who knew that cinema always had a political edge in India. But the fact that it could be politicised in the way that it was, was something new. That particular intersection between cinema and politics took a turn that was quite unpredictable. For the FTII students, it was a survival strategy because it was the issue of cinema that compelled people to rally around the cause. The level that they took it to was to me genuinely baffling and awe-inspiring. To address that was the original intention of the book.

What we have is an astonishing saga. For me, the saga would be bookended by the S. K. Patil Committee (1951) and the way the early Nehruvian state amended the idea of cinema; and also the way, in 2021, the Modi government brought a closure to that imagination first by the Cinematograph Amendment Act, and then with the merger of institutions such as Films Division, the Children's Film Society India, the National Film Archive of India, and the Directorate of Film Festivals with the National Film Development Corporation. These essentially signalled the end of that post-Independence conception.

I was always interested in the Emergency in cinema and exploring the connection

*Apart from Chauhan, FTII students also protested against the contentious appointments of Sangh Parivar propagandists Anagha Ghaisas, Narendra Pathak, Rahul Solapurkar, and Shailesh Gupta in a reconstituted FTII Society.*

**John-Ghatak-Tarkovsky: Citizens, Filmmakers, Hackers**



By Ashish Rajadhyaksha  
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between cinema and some of the major political moments in post-independent India. This book is a part of that story.

**The book also explores the nature of the power of the state and totalitarian practices. The selection of an insignificant actor like Gajendra Chauhan to head FTII became a centre of discourse on the nature of “grotesque” state power. Was Gajendra Chauhan’s selection an immediate precipitant of the 139-day strike? Or was it the proverbial last straw that broke the camel’s back?**

It was clearly building up for a while. The fact is that institutions like these have often functioned in a manner resembling a gharana in classical music—an idea of knowledge being handed down from senior to junior. This kind of informality has allowed such institutions to survive beneath the authorised way. What has always fascinated me is the way FTII students have argued for something much larger than their immediate cause. Time and again, they have argued for future batches and did not settle for quick-fix solutions.

There were crises within the institution from the 1990s and certainly from 2010 onward. The Chauhan issue at one level was not a very significant issue—earlier, there have been actors like Vinod Khanna and others who were chairmen of the Governing Council of FTII; the role of the chairman was a fairly marginal one; and FTII had also offered an olive branch to the students and said that Chauhan will only remain a figurehead and that Jahnu Barua would be the deputy chairman. Though many senior filmmakers had advised the protesters to take the offer, the students did not compromise. The fact that they did not compromise on the basis of their commitment to something as vague as cinema, and the future of the batches that were to come after them, was very significant. This was at the cost of a lot of personal sacrifices made by many of them. There are legal cases going on against many of them, and many have suffered setbacks in their careers. It was a kind of symbolic idealism that one was taken aback by. It also refers to the question of how films have been taught in India and how they have been studied. Kumar Shahani used to say of Ritwik



Ghatak that his lectures were more like an initiation rite than mere teaching. It was said that if you asked Ghatak a complex question, he would first gauge your ability to receive his answer, before he answered. The other thing is that much of this was related to the celluloid; and when you had the shift into the digital era and the era of social media, and the accompanying shift from filmmaker to hacker, you had a very different sociality associated with it, which was relevant to the prevailing situation.

**You mentioned that as the names of Eisenstein, Pudovkin, Tarkovsky, and others found themselves on the walls of the institution and were chanted in processions, they became the “unlikely” inclusions in the pantheon that accompanied Dalit agitations. It was as though cinema and not just Indian cinema had gone to war. How do you explain this? Do you also not think that such a thing was restrictive in making a**

▼ **Police officers** clash with FTII students outside the institute’s main gate during TV actor Gajendra Chauhan’s first day as FTII Chairman in Pune in January 2016.

JIGNESH MISTRY

**“This is between me and Bergman. You have nothing to do with it.”**

**Ritwik Ghatak**  
Indian film director and screenwriter

#### **movement truly a mass movement?**

There is a huge history here. Names like [Jean-Luc] Godard and [Sergei] Eisenstein are part of a covert password between groups and collectives in different parts of India who grew up with this particular counterculture. It is very interesting to note that the National Film Archive of India being next door to FTII, allowed the students to have a kind of untrammelled and unauthorised access to European art. So, you could say there grew a bond between, say, a Kumar Shahani and Robert Bresson or Kim Ki-duk, or Kurosawa. I remember Ghatak once saying, “This is between me and Bergman. You have nothing to do with it”—as though he and Bergman had a communion. These covert collectives are not very small either. There is a sense of identification that comes with it. With the advent of digital technology, there came a circulation of pirated copies of films, which created a different kind of community of



audience. Now, these covert communities have become politicised and have come together in protest. We have seen similar movements abroad also. In Argentina, they came up with the idea of ‘Horizontalidad’, which was a kind of leaderless, community-driven protest, with these kinds of independent groups involved. At such times, names like Tarkovsky, Godard, assume an important significance.

**The book suggests that the very nature of protest has undergone a change, and that change can be perceived from Arijit Chakraborty’s video series of the *maha michils* (mega rallies) of Jadavpur University’s Hok Kolorob movement in 2014; and Abhirup Halder’s YouTube channel. Please talk about this change.**

It was in 1996 that a series of strikes emerged with the demise of celluloid and the arrival of a new technology. At that time, television still dominated and the VHS technology was still prevalent. In 2000, when the big strike happened in the FTII over Mohan Agashe’s introduction of a new system of elimination in the second and third year in the institution, the Handycam had just arrived on the scene; and I have hours and hours of footage that Satya Rai Nagpaul, who shoots for Gurvinder Singh, had taken of student protests. Between then and 2015, we have a number of documentaries that students had made of what was happening around them. By 2015, social media, in the current sense of the term, was fully in place, and a lot of the research I did was going through Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, SoundCloud and other such sources that students had used. These students were extremely active on social media.

It is often said that the Hok Kolorob hashtag was believed to have got one lakh people to take to the streets and saw the resignation of the then vice chancellor of Jadavpur University (Abhijit Chakrabarti). This means that Hok Kolorob may well claim to be the first proper social-media-driven agitation in modern India.

Also, in March 2015, there was the Shreya Singhal judgment on the Information Technology Act, 2000, and the striking down of Section 66A (relating to punishment for

*The film is about a university student who writes letters to her estranged lover. From these, viewers get a glimpse into the drastic changes taking place around her. Merging reality with fiction, dreams, memories, fantasies and anxieties, an amorphous narrative unfolds.*

**“I was always interested in the Emergency in cinema and exploring the connection between cinema and some of the major political moments in India,” says Ashish Rajadhyaksha.**

sending offensive messages through a computer resource or a communication device), which is significant for the developments that followed. At the same time, social media has also been an instrument of digital surveillance and control. When we see the incidents of 2019-20 following the Jamia Millia Islamia protest, we are already seeing a substantial change in the environment, because the state has also grown much stronger. So, we cannot say whether the protests of 2015 can be replicated now. Again, cinema as we have known it, has also changed. Payal Kapadia’s documentary, *A Night of Knowing Nothing* (2021), is an example of the kind of shift that takes place in the filmmaker’s identity from what it was as recently as in the early 2000s.

**The book also refers to Mahatma Gandhi’s antipathy to cinema and the state’s rather wary attitude, which still persists, towards cinema. How real or justified is the state’s “dread” of the social impact of cinema?**

It is absolutely huge [the state’s dread of cinema]. One cannot understand the FTII protest of 2015 without the history of the state’s fear of cinema. One of the quirks and anomalies of Indian cinema is that contrary to other colonised states, who were utterly reliant on the colonial power for their cinema, India had a film industry almost from the origin of cinema. Whether it was the colonial British or the independent Indian state, there was a kind of wariness and fear of cinema, just as there was a kind of wariness and fear of the masses taking control of power. This explains why the role of the filmmaker and the freedom of speech attributed to the filmmaker become so conditional; and why the censor board and related legal apparatus is so important in India.

Gandhi’s hatred for cinema can be linked to his hatred for modernity; and this has been theorised upon by many people. There is a line which I have quoted, where it says that being in a film theatre would make Gandhi feel suffocated. So, it was not that Gandhi was against bad films; he was against cinema itself. It is something we have not really discussed much in Indian cinema. ■