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Lust for life

Dwando director Suman Ghosh and Soumitra Chatterjee discuss their films and friendship with June, just for t2



Amartya Sen to awards, loneliness to the love for filmmaking.... **Soumitra Chatterjee** and **Suman Ghosh** settled down for a free-wheeling chat with **June** at the veteran actor's Golf Green residence a week before the release of Suman's *Dwando* (July 24), which features Soumitra as a flamboyant, arrogant doctor.

June: Suman, isn't filmmaking completely different from what you teach or have studied?

Suman: I was always interested in filmmaking and when I was in Delhi School of Economics, I went through this phase of wanting to leave academics and doing films. I met Goutamda (Ghose) one day and told him that I wanted to take up filmmaking as a career. He suggested that I shouldn't give up going to Cornell and filmmaking was something I could take up later. I came away feeling quite irritated and angry. Now I realise that it was perhaps the best advice one could have given me at that time. So even as I pursued my Ph.D, I took courses in filmmaking. Subsequently I made a documentary on Amartya Sen and then I made *Podokkhep*.... Apparently these are distinct fields but there is a commonality between them that I discover while delving into unanswered questions and quenching my curiosity for both.

June: You say both Amartya Sen and Soumitrada are your mentors...

Suman: I consider myself very lucky to have met such legends. In the US Amartyada is my mentor and here it's Soumitrakaku, but they're very similar people. They're roughly the same age, they're truly international and what I try to imbibe from them is their zest and curiosity to always look forward. At 75, Amartyada still talks about removing world poverty while Soumitrakaku talks about the plays he's going to make. I feel rejuvenated after a conversation with them.

June: Soumitrada is a die-hard romantic. How much of a romantic is Amartya Sen? He can't beat Soumitrada for sure!

Suman: No, he's quite a romantic. We should probably hold a competition for them one day!

June: He can't write poems like Soumitrada so he's already one up!

Soumitra: Well, well, well... these are two different kinds of activities. Maybe he (Amartya) can write something on history which I would never be able to do. I agree with Suman. It's true that we've been able to retain some of the zest for life even in our 70s... although I'm forced to battle on with my ailments now, I am a little depressed and sometimes I start thinking about the end. But then, not really.... You can't go on thinking about how you are ending. You have to think that you're going to live and do something to justify your living. This great man Amartya Sen is a big inspiration for everyone. I used to know him when he was a student at Presidency College. I wasn't in that college but he was a classmate of my elder brother. We haven't met for ages but somehow we're in touch. We have common friends who update us about each other, and it's easy to keep track of him because he writes books!

Suman: Amartyada has expressed to me an extreme desire for an adda with Soumitrakaku. I wish to get Amartyada and Soumitrakaku together. It'll be a historical moment!

June: Soumitrada, you did not know Suman when he approached you for *Podokkhep*, did you?

Soumitra: No, I knew him for quite a few years before that. I had met him on the sets of (Goutam Ghose's) *Dekha* where he was more of an observer and naturally we bonded because you're so thirsty to meet intelligent, sensitive people. Particularly you (*pointing at June*) would realise that we hardly come across such people everyday on our sets. So it was a very refreshing encounter with Suman, which continued and one thing that would come up in each of our encounters was his desire to make a film and I encouraged him. Then he came up with the idea of me

interviewing Amartya Sen and I said, 'No, this isn't my cup of tea' because I know nothing of economics. Later on when he really thought of a feature film, he sent me his first draft and I sent him whatever little corrections I thought were necessary.

June: How much did you relate to your character in *Podokkhep*?

Soumitra: As a man ageing and finding it hard to cope with the new reality.

June: Which isn't true in your case...

Soumitra: Yeah... However much you look trim and energetic, when you've crossed 60 you certainly feel that old age is looming large.

June: Are there moments you feel lonely?

Soumitra: What you may develop is a kind of desperation... life is ending, so I must do something. That can prompt you to make a new play, do a new film or write a new poem. But deep down in your heart, you feel depressed. I believe this happens to all mortals.

June: While shooting for *Podokkhep* I remember telling Suman not to listen to the technicians too much otherwise we'd never finish our schedule. Did you overcome that with *Dwando*?

Suman: I was working in a new environment during my first film. As the director, one of the most important things you need is human resource management... a concept from economics but it's actually about balancing your actors, cinematographers and musicians.... A constant state of efficiently managing your people. These were things I was tense about in the first film, but with *Dwando* I had no inhibitions and I enjoyed every bit of the making. *Podokkhep* is not a very good film. I would have done so many things differently now. I was surprised when *Podokkhep* got the National Award because it tells about the state of Bengali cinema but I was overjoyed for Soumitra *kaku*.

June: Soumitra *da*, you have a volume of work behind you. What was the first thing that struck you when you got the National Award for *Podokkhep*?

Soumitra: I had to decide whether I would accept it or not. Had it been two years earlier I would have certainly said 'Thank you. I don't need it.' I had already rejected the special jury award for *Dekha* once. *Tokhon mental obosthatai emon chhilo eshob bhalo lagto na*. I had crossed four decades in cinema and been the principal character in 14 of Ray's films.

June: Did you feel that some kind of injustice had been done to you?

Soumitra: Yeah... and I was disgusted about the way these selections were made. Somehow I mellowed and matured in the meanwhile, and the moment this announcement was made I started thinking about those who love me. Most Bengalis I know adore me. I felt I would be hurting them if I did not receive this award. Also, what if instead of this film they would later give me an award for one of the commercial films that I go around doing. That would turn out to be much more insulting.

Suman: I remember the day of the award, when he got a standing ovation for five minutes from the luminaries of the film world, the likes of Vidhu Vinod Chopra and Madhur Bhandarkar. It was a proud moment for everyone in Tollygunge.

June: Suman, you received a lot of flak after the National Award. How did you handle all the criticism?

Suman: I don't belong to the so-called Tollygunge film industry but my acceptance has been far greater than the antagonistic comments, so I don't take it seriously.

June: How different is Soumitra *da*'s character in *Dwando* from *Podokkhep*?

Suman: It is diametrically opposite to the character he had in *Podokkhep* where he was a lonely old man with a subdued performance. In *Dwando* he's a flamboyant, arrogant doctor bordering on eccentricity. Since I have the privilege of working with such a great actor, I love to exploit as many facets as I can find in him!

Soumitra: As an actor my artistic principles grew with a conviction that it is not sentimentality that is good for art but genuine emotions that is most essential. You have to demarcate while generating strong emotions.

June: How would you differentiate between Suman the filmmaker and Suman the friend?

Soumitra: As a human being it's difficult for me to say since he is almost a member of the family and you don't go about commenting on family members. As a filmmaker he's very promising and that's what matters to me now. He's been at it from the very beginning, he's developing and since he's not dependent on filmmaking for a living I expect him to make better films.

June: As a friend, Suman, I don't expect you to start a (film) factory like many others have and I'll round it up by saying that Soumitrada, in the next lifetime you're all mine!

Text: Mohua Das

