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Q&A: 'I have no right to hurt my viewers'

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When Soumitra Chatterjee was shooting for Dekha and Abar Aranye, young Suman Ghosh would constantly watch him. Some years down he sent Soumitra a script. Soumitra won his first National Award for Ghosh's Poddokhep. Ratnottama Sengupta met the icon:

Q Fifty years after Apur Sansar, you're still the lead actor!

In 1958, i started acting on-screen. I began as a child actor in theatre, got close to Sisir Bhaduri in his final years, and was with AIR when i portrayed Satyajit Ray's Apu. I didn't have to look back although the formidable Uttam Kumar was at the peak of his career. I went on to do 300 films that include 14 Ray's plus gems from Tapan Sinha, Mrinal Sen, Asit Sen, Ajoy Kar, Tarun Mazumdar.

Q Name the high points of this career.

Apu was a huge break that became a classic. Abhijaan and Zinder Bandi established me as a hero distinct from others. A divorced husband in Saat Paakey Bandha, an ageing poet in Dekha, the protagonist of Wheelchair, a swimming coach in Koni, teacher in Atanka, thief in Sansar Simantey... I dreaded getting stereotyped. Perhaps that explains my popularity.

Q Are natural portrayals a high degree of performance or simply being yourself?

Can natural behaviour give you a range of characters like Sandeep (Ghare Baire) and Ganga Charan (Ashani Sanket)? Both have negative tones. Ganga exploits fellow villagers for sheer survival. Sandeep is a cunning flamboyant who exploits Bimala through nationalistic speeches. You can't portray them if you don't have the craft of acting to go deep inside a character and draw out its complexities.

Q Is the character important or the director?

Both. If you don't have a character, what'll you portray? And if the director is weak, the best of performance can fall flat. The actor is a collaborator in cinema which is a director's medium.

Q Every artist thrives on applause. So why did you refuse the Jury's Award for Dekha?

In 50 years of acting i've been feted (by Sangeet Natak Akademi) for my contribution to stage, (with Padma Bhushan) for contribution to Bengal's cultural life. But the National Awards overlooked my performances in several powerful roles.

When i did Koni, Shashi Kapoor was adjudged the best actor. Anil Kapoor was feted for Pukar while Dekha was awarded a 'consolation' prize. I felt insulted that stars were favoured rather than actors. This feeling was strengthened when Rekha (Umrao Jaan) was awarded and Jennifer Kapoor (36 Chowringhee Lane) was overlooked.

The President's Award is a big thing. But the democratic process that decides it does not always help artistic merit. However, the Padma Bhushan has changed my approach. Now i feel i don't have the right to hurt my viewers by rejecting an award.

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