

# Spectrum

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## Man of many acts

**Shoma A. Chatterji** on Soumitra Chatterjee, who has been honoured with the National Award for Best Actor

**F**OR 50 years, from Satyajit Ray to Tapan Sinha to Mrinal Sen to Gautam Ghosh and Aparna Sen, all major directors have utilised Soumitra Chatterjee's enormous talent that creates unforgettable cinema.

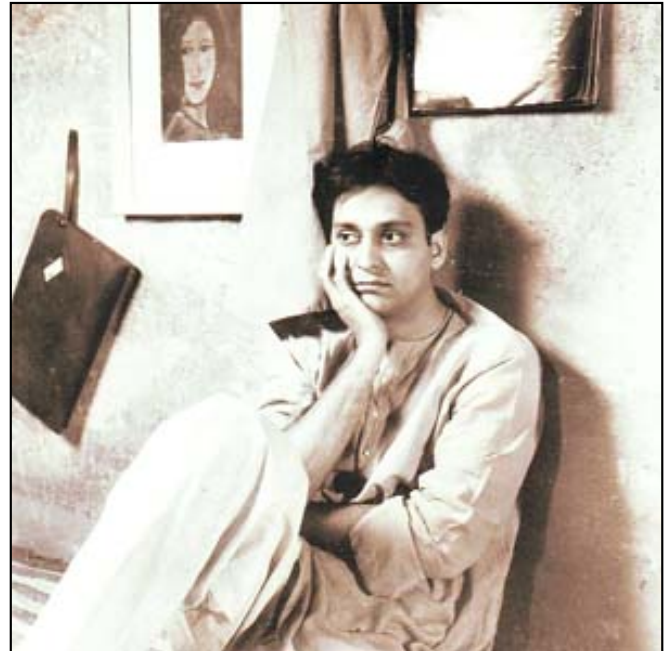
The peerless thespian was nominated for the National Award once, for his performance in Gautam Ghose's *Dekha*, but had declined the award while other awards, titles, felicitations and tributes kept flowing in. This includes the Padma Bhushan, a BBC documentary on his life and works called *Gaach*, meaning 'tree' and the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award for his contribution to theatre. He has directed and acted in more than 10 significant plays with some successful shows abroad. He has authored more than 10 books on poetry, beginning with *Jalapropter Dharey Dandabo Bole (To Stand by the Waterfall)* in 1975.

Today, he takes the National Award for Best Actor for his performance in Suman Ghosh's *Padakkhep* in his stride with the quiet calm that is this actor's hallmark. "A serious interest in cinema started with the first Film Festival held in Calcutta after my parents shifted to Calcutta from Howrah. For the first time, I watched *Bicycle Thieves*, *Miracle in Milan*, *Fall of Berlin*, with friends equally interested in cinema. These films changed my entire thinking about cinema. We saw Renoir's *River*, shot completely in India. Then came *Pather Panchali*. Ray made four films before he did *Apur Sansar*. I now feel for me, those films were sort of a preparation for what was to come — my first film *Apur Sansar*," reminisces the actor who is in his seventies.

He has acted in around 300 films of all kinds, ranging from 14 films of Satyajit Ray and crassly commercial potboilers like Swapan Saha's *Baba Keno Chakor*. He held on to his own even when Uttam Kumar was the reigning superstar mainly because he had a different style, approach and method in acting and the audience simply loved him. Commenting on the award, he says, "I am happy for my fans, my audience, who love my work and keep me going. The President's Award is no mean achievement. If I refused it earlier, it was because I sometimes saw it going to stars instead of actors. But the Padma Bhushan changed my mind. I now feel I cannot hurt my viewers by rejecting the award. They, in fact, are happier than I am," he says.



Soumitra Chatterjee has acted in about 300 films



A still from Mrinal Sen's *Akash Kusum*

Ironically, Soumitra was rejected for a role in *Neelachale Mahaprabhu* after a screen test a few years before he was chosen to play Apu in Ray's *Apur Sansar*. About his work alongside Uttam Kumar, Chatterjee says, "Uttam Kumar gave me a tremendous sense of competition. I had to deal with it on my own terms, without either imitating him, or being influenced by him. We were more like the East Bengal and Mohan Bagan football teams. Calcutta would always be divided into two warring groups when it came to choosing between the two of us. And we acted together in quite a few films. I did have my own box office potential as hero. I would not have lasted this long if this had not been so."

About his role in *Podokkhep*, Chatterjee says, "I play Shasanka Palit in the film. *Podokkhep* deals with how Palit constantly has to re-negotiate with himself, with his daughter, and with a little child Trisha, whose parents, the Sens, move in as neighbours. Though *Podokkhep* focuses on the slow-paced loneliness of the aged Palit, it offers an insight into the lives of the grown-up daughter and her permissive relationship with her Muslim colleague, the young Sens, pressurised by the pretence of being affluent NRIs. Little Trisha is the happiest of them all, hobnobbing with her new friend Palit and expressing herself lucidly through her pastel drawings. The Sens leave, Palit has a heart attack and the daughter takes care of the father. The film closes with Palit on his hospital bed, coiled into a foetal position, with Trisha's sketches lying beside him. It was a good film, low-key and subtle. But I have done very powerful characters in many films in my career. The National Awards overlooked them all."

When asked to recall a few of these, he mentions Tarun Majumdar's *Sansar Seemantey*, Raja Mitra's *Ekti Jeebon*, Tapan Sinha's *Jhinder Bondi*, Kshudita Pashan, Atanka and *Wheelchair*, Ajoy Kar's *Saat Paake Bandha*, Mrinal Sen's *Akash Kusum*, another film called *Kony* where he played a swimming coach trying to establish a girl in her struggle against poverty and sports politics as a champion swimmer and, of course, the Ray masterpieces.

His latest play, the Bengali adaptation of Mahesh Eklunchwar's *Atmakatha*, premiered in Kolkata recently. He has directed and acted in the main role of a 78-year-old award-winning writer Subhankar, who is trying to put back his lonely life in shape by making a telephone call to his estranged wife Uttara portrayed by Lily Chakraborty. The two have come together 30 years after *Naam Jibon* which, like every play directed and acted in by Soumitra Chatterjee, was a big hit. The National Award does not seem to have changed his life in any way.

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