



“The film got completed somehow and I was happy about it”

A professor of economics; Suman Ghosh's journey from teaching in the Atlantic University of Florida to winning the National award for his first movie seems like a fairytale. His choice of coming to study in America, his first film and his future aspirations – all unfold in this open talk with Pinaki Dutta. The interview is translated by Shawan Sarkar.

Congratulations on the tremendous success of “Padakhep”. Is this transition from Dr. Suman Ghosh, a professor of economics in the Atlantic University of Florida, to Suman Ghosh, an award-winning film director, preconceived or incidental?

It is a bit preconceived I could say. I was always interested in filmmaking but lacked the technical faculty for undertaking any film project. I had come to Cornell to do my doctorate in economics and during my stay here, I decided to pursue film studies from the department of theater, films and dance within Cornell. It was all about the theory and art of film making from scratch. I didn't do a degree course but took all the basic classes for a masters in film studies. I completed my PhD and took up a job. During that time, I made a documentary on Amartya Sen and that is my first piece of work in the line of filmmaking. Soon after, I had the opportunity to assist Gautam Ghosh for a film in Kolkata. That is when I got acquainted with Soumitra kaku (Soumitra Chattopadhyay) and we have stayed in touch over the past few years. It was keeping him in mind that I prepared the screenplay for “padakhep”.

Did you have any notion then as to how things would shape up?

Of course I knew that I wanted to make a movie. What I wasn't sure about was the entire process of going to India, meeting up with the artists there, negotiating with the producers and all the other steps involved in the nitty-gritties of making a film.

For all those non-resident Indians in America, the biggest challenge in undertaking a film making enterprise is finding an enthusiastic financier. How big a challenge was it for you when embarking on “Padakhep”?

It was a really big challenge. I had been talking to various financiers for almost a year to get them interested in “Padakhep”. There wasn't much going in favor of the project – a first-time filmmaker, an NRI on top of it, coupled with an off-beat subject. Some even suggested that I add a few song and dance routines to jazz it up. It was finally Bangla Talkies that agreed to finance this film.

What other hurdles did you encounter in going from here to make a film over there?

The main problem was taking leave from my teaching profession for a long duration. That apart, gathering a technical team in Kolkata for this project turned out to be a big challenge. However, my earlier experience as an assistant director as well as having friends and connections in the field of television and films, made things less difficult.

“The Curious case of Benjamin Button” - F. Scott Fitzgerald. “Padakhep” is based on this short story. Any particular reason behind the choice of this story?

I think every man comes full circle, wherein, reaching senility, he returns to childhood. As a subject, this has always fascinated me. To me, the first phase and the last phase of one's life seem pretty similar. The locale of the film, Kolkata, has itself evolved many folds over the last few years, and it continues to do so. The changed city, its chaos, its changing populace, its value system – have created a foggy aura for the geriatrics living in it. A bit of nostalgia, a little feeling of being neglected – combine together for a unique way of life. Wanting to desperately hold on to petty things, they seem to act the way they did as children.

While contemplating on this subject, I happened to read “The Curious case of Benjamin Button”. In the main story, the protagonist's life is shown in the reverse cycle – his life starts at old age and ends inside the mother's womb. The screenplay of “Padakhep” is inspired from this cycle that forms the crux of the story. That apart, the feel of “Padakhep” is typically bengali, uniquely our own. If I were making a Hollywood movie, “The curious case...” would definitely be my subject of choice. Actually there is a movie being made in Hollywood based on this story, with Brad Pitt as its lead.

You have said before in an interview, that it's always wise to make a movie in the language which complements the subject. Is that the main reason behind the choice of bengali in making your first movie?

That is definitely one of the reasons. However, this movie could also have been made in hindi or any other language. Since I come from Kolkata, my affinity for the bangla language, my affiliation with the city and with my friends and relatives living in it, all influenced my choice of the language in which I made the film.

You mentioned having worked with Gautam Ghosh. For a professor of economics living in America, how did you make it happen?

It was quite some time back – I hadn't come into this country yet. I was having a tête-à-tête with Gautam da and happened to mention that I aspired to study at the Pune Institute of films and television. When he learnt that I had got a chance to do my doctorate at Cornell, he advised me to not let this opportunity slip away. There would always be scope to work on films later. His advice worked wonders for me. Coming to America, I gained a lot of experience which honed my perspective.

Year later, when I had started working and my documentary was nearing completion, something prompted me to give him a call. A kind of a COLD CALL, if you ask me. By then, he had started working on the film “Dekha”. He invited me to come to India to work with him. I didn't

have to think twice about taking up his offer. I've mentioned before about meeting Soumitra kaku during the filming of this movie – which progressed over the years to form a close bonding. It wasn't too difficult persuading him to do "padakhep" after reading out the script.

And Nandita Das?

For that, I'd like to accredit Soumitra kaku. The kind of films Nandita has worked in, are different in some ways from "Padakhep". This movie's story revolves around Soumitra kaku's character. Apart from liking the script, the fact that Soumitra Chattopadhyay was also working in the film, worked in getting her consent.

Any special experience or memory of working with the great actor Soumitra Chattopadhyay, that you might want to share with us?

"Padakhep"'s first day of shoot – I still remember the date – 15th feb, 2005 – near Dhakuria Lake. We had Soumitra Chattopadhyay along with Bibhas Chakraborty. People teeming around us. I was extremely tensed. Soumita kaku took me aside and asked, "Are you nervous?". I shook my head and said no. He had had an inkling. He said, "it's your first shot - being nervous is quite normal. If you get the first one right, you'll see that everything will fall into place gradually". I've spent many moments in his company before and after that incident, but those few words of encouragement, on that special day, gave me tremendous motivation.

This is about Soumitra Chattopadhyay as a person. The actor Soumitra Chattopadhyay never once made me feel like a novice, considering that he is "The Soumitra Chattopadhyay" – the most favored actor of Satyajit Ray. In case he had to say something, he would put it as, "what if I said this line in this way?". He was extremely sensitive about not making me feel awkward.

Upon completion of the film, did you have any intuition that it would do as well as winning the 'National award'? What exactly were your expectations?

I really didn't think as far as the national award; just felt happy when the film was completed. There were many hurdles in its making and there could have been more. I had applied for six months' leave to pursue it. Just within days of the film's completion, there was a strike started by the technicians of Tollygunge. Had it begun a few days earlier, my film could not have been completed. That's because Nandita had plans of going to New Zealand soon after. So you can imagine how relieved I was when the project was wrapped up. The thought of the audience's acceptance or winning an award hadn't crossed my mind.

Soumitra Chattopadhyay has won his first national award for your film. How special is that for you?

It is definitely a special feeling for me. Some even went so far as to suggest that his not having won a national award so far was, in some ways, because of me. (smiles) So there is a different kind of satisfaction. Most of his other films are legendary in that respect. His work in this film, is outstanding, according to me.

When I got into this venture, my initial challenge was to prove that the actor Soumitra Chattopadhyay, at this age, still has a lot in him to contribute to Bengali films. When he agreed to do the role after reading my script, half the goal was accomplished. The rest of the credit goes to him alone. Even at the age of seventy four, his enthusiasm, his sincerity, his warmth or his dedication to work, must only be seen to be believed.

Can you tell us something about both your forthcoming films, one in Hindi and the other in Bengali (comedy) ?

I had initially planned to work on both films in parallel. Now I'm thinking about making the comedy later. At this point of time, I've plans of making a bengali film with Soumitra kaku. Following that, I'll focus on the hindi movie. Its based on the trials and tribulations of a marathi family caught in the midst of the riots in Mumbai.

What did your students opine about this other side of you?

They were really astonished. They were used to seeing this man taking their classes. The same man, on going through google, had made a film that won the national award; it was quite overwhelming to them. I never discussed my intentions of making a movie with anyone before venturing into this project; so you can imagine their amazement.

If you had to choose between Suman Ghosh - the professor, and Suman Ghosh – the filmmaker, who would it be?

I really don't have an answer to that; that is an ongoing turmoil within me. In some ways, both aspects complement each other. My research work in economics and my work in films – starting with the conception of the story to the completion of the film – both have tremendous similarities. And because I'm in this teaching profession, I can afford to devote time to my creative inclinations and also draw some reprieve between films. However, post 'Padakhep', the offers have been pouring in. The demands on my time have increased. I'd have a hard time choosing between the two professions – the reason being that both are dear to me, and I enjoy doing both. If not, making a choice between the two would have been easier.

What do you think about this effort on the part of Sreeshti members, to bring out a bengali magazine, inspite of living abroad?

I'm very happy to know that such a magazine is being brought out in America. And I want to tell all the members of the organization and all those involved in this grand venture – whatever you wish to do, whatever you aspire, no obstacles should impede your progress. I'm myself a strong believer of this. My undertaking of films is solely based on my desire to make them. The members of "Sreeshti" or those associated with this magazine must be involved in different professions. It is certainly possible to focus on this magazine or whatever you wish, staying within the realms of your professional domain; don't let that hinder your creative aspirations in any way.

Thank you for your valuable time and our best wishes for your forthcoming films

