'Nobel Chor': A poor man's discovery of Tagore

New Delhi: Director Suman Ghosh's Nobel Chor, starring veteran actors Soumitra Chatterjee and Mithun Chakraborty, has opened mostly to good reviews. The director, who won acclaim for his award-winning films Podokkhep and Dwando, said it was his way of exploring the relevance of Asia's first Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore and a man whose towering presence still dominates Indian culture.

"My original objective was to touch people's emotions," Ghosh said in a telephone interview from Kolkata. "The response was unbelievable," said Ghosh who refers to himself as a part time filmmaker. Ghosh completed his PhD in Economics from Cornell University in 2002.

Ghosh said he has tackled the larger socio-economic through his film and explored the transformation of Tagore (Thakur in Bengali which translates to 'god') from God to man. Drawing parallel with Tagore's nickname Bhanusingha, Ghosh named his protagonist Bhanu.

"I have unmasked Kolkata's so-called civilized society through this film. What does the poet laureate mean for Bhanu, a poor farmer in Bolpur, who is almost Tagore's neighbour. To him, Tagore is god. The film is about how he discovers Tagore in his travel with the medal he found on his doorstep to Kolkata."
The self-confessed Mithun fan said he knew he had to cast him for his Bengali film Nobel Chor. The popular actor who ruled Bollywood during the 80s and 90s, plays the role of Bhanu, a poor farmer in Bolpur in Shantiniketan, the seat of Tagore's vision and philosophy.

"I saw Tahader Kotha and Agneepath in college, and I remember thinking about the unbelievable range he had as an actor. Then I saw Guru and he stunned me. I saw Sukno Lonka next. I started writing Nobel Chor two years ago and I knew he was a busy actor and would probably not take up the role," Ghosh said.

He was ready to scrap the film if Mithun did not agree to play the lead role. "I met him at his bunglow in Mumbai and seeing his excitement I knew right away he would do it."

Ghosh got into a head-on battle with the Viswa Bharati University that Tagore himself established in 1863 over his film. The university was apprehensive that highlighting the robbery of Tagore's Nobel medal will being negative publicity to both the university and to his place of birth. Also, 2011 marked the 150th birth anniversary of Tagore and the Visva Bharati had applied for the World Heritage Status.

"They wanted to see the script. I wanted to shoot in the main hall where the medal was kept but was denied permission. They did not even allow us to shoot anywhere inside the campus," Ghosh said.

"What they did not understand is that the film is a homage to Tagore."

Ghosh trained at the Department of Theatre, Film and Dance at Cornell University. His film Podokkhep (Footsteps) was his debut feature which was world premiered at the Vancouver International Film Festival and since then has been screened at many international festivals worldwide. His made Dwando in 2009 starring Ananya Chatterjee and Soumitra Chatterjee which talked about one of the tenets from the Ten Commandments. Podokkhep won the Silver Lotus Award for Best Regional Feature Film (Bengali) and the Best Actor for Soumitra Chatterjee at the 54th Indian National Awards announced in 2008.

'Nobel Chor', which had its first world premiere at the 16th Buan International Film Festival and was an official selection for screening at the 55th BFI London Film Festival, has also been screened in the Indian Frame section at the MFF, a Reliance Entertainment initiative. It is organised by MAMI.

In 2004, Tagore's Nobel prize medallion was stolen from Bichitra, the Tagore museum in Shantiniketan and director Suman Ghosh's film shows what happens when someone stumbles upon the medal. In the film, Mithun's character Bhanu finds a Nobel medal and decides to sell it.