One step at a time

After bagging a national award, Suman Ghosh’s *Podokkhep* is all set for a re-release on July 18 at Nandan

His debut film *Podokkhep* is suddenly in the news, 18 months after it came and went quietly, thanks to a National Award for Soumitra Chatterjee. It’s a bittersweet feeling for this professor of economics at Florida Atlantic University. Suman Ghosh, 35, tells *t2* about the irony of delayed recognition, juggling work and passion, and what he plans to do next...

What does the National Award mean to you?

It was more about winning a challenge than a National Award when I set out to make *Podokkhep*. I wrote *Podokkhep* with Soumitra kaku (Chatterjee) in mind. People had warned me that he had nothing more to offer to Bengali cinema but I felt that this man could deliver even at 75, if he got the right role. More than the award, I’m happy for him. I’ve always considered him my intellectual guru.

But most people came to know about the film after the award was announced...

It’s ironic that the city is rejoicing now that the film has won an award but it wasn’t acknowledged when it released last year. Being a first-time director in a city where I do not live made it difficult for me to garner enough audience support. I was new in the circuit and went personally to various outlets for a little bit of publicity, but the film was ignored. Now I know that content alone is not enough. *Anuranan* is an example of what good marketing can do. Next time I’ll be more alert. Now I’m looking forward to the re-release of *Podokkhep* at Nandan on July 18. It was Bumbada (Prosenjit) who called me and instigated a re-release of the film for the sake of Bengali cinema. I’m happy about it but I won’t be around when that happens. I can’t go through the same process again!

What prompted you to make *Podokkhep*?

*Podokkhep* is about a retired old man and his unusual bond with a five-year-old when he drifts away from his daughter (Nandita Das). The subject was very personal to me. The city is undergoing enormous changes but there’s a generation which is in a state of flux that Soumitra Chatterjee represents in *Podokkhep*. I have a lot of friends in that age group and I wanted to portray their plight without making any moral judgment.

You’re an academician. Why take up the challenge of making films?

Well, I completed my graduation in economics from Presidency College before moving on to the Delhi School of Economics and then to Cornell University in New York for a PhD. But I always nursed a passion for films and didn’t want to limit myself. So I went ahead with a diploma in filmmaking from Cornell’s film institute. Before *Podokkhep* I had already made some short films and a documentary on Amartya Sen, titled *Amartya Sen: A Life Re-examined*. I had also worked as assistant director to Goutam Ghose for *Dekha*. Back in Miami, my time is divided between teaching and publishing papers for the university and
writing scripts.

**Being an NRI, isn’t it difficult to write and direct a film about and in a city where you don’t live anymore?**

Geographical dislocation has not affected my connection with the city. I’m very much in touch with Bengali literature and films. I spend four months in Calcutta every year when I meet different people and see a lot of changes that are in-your-face.

**So what’s next?**

I’m writing another script with Soumitrakaku in mind. It’s again a story I need to tell. You’ll see another facet of him. It’s the same genre as Podokkhep. But right now I’m ready to direct two other films. One is a comedy with Prosenjit playing the protagonist’s role of an industrialist. It’s not an outright comedy but about the larger perspective of globalisation and its effects on society. I wrote the script with Prosenjit in mind, just like I had done for Soumitrakaku. He seemed pretty excited about his role and has agreed to produce the film. It’ll be shot in Calcutta sometime in early-2009. The second is a Hindi film titled Kalista Mushta with an out-and-out Bollywood cast.

**Why Hindi?**

It had to be in Hindi because it’s based on the Mumbai riots and dwells on one day in the life of a Marathi family. The focus is on the tension in people’s lives at a micro level. I have Shahid Kapoor and Irrfan Khan in mind but it’ll depend on their availability. The film will be shot in Mumbai next year.