Who stole the nobel?

Suman Ghosh gears up for a satirical thriller on the nobel theft

Come March and Suman Ghosh will start to steer his third film Nobel Chor, a satirical look at Tagore’s stolen medal, with Mithun in the title role. A chat with the Miami-based economist-turned-director about the urban-rural divide and more...

When and where do you begin Nobel Chor?

The theft of the Nobel happened in Santiniketan and our protagonist Bhanu, played by Mithun, is based in Bolpur. We went to Bolpur twice, saw a lot of places. Given the story, I wanted everything to have that feel, his house to have a certain structure, and ultimately identified a hut that belongs to someone else where we will shoot.

We have a lot of outdoor all over Calcutta and that’s a huge tension because of the logistics and permissions involved in filming at Gorky Sadan, Dharamtala, south Calcutta.... It’s Calcutta in 2004 because that’s when the theft happened. The character roughly remains the same but I have to be careful not to bring in the new malls and flyovers. It’s not about capturing the city but to bring out the stark contrast with a village in the interiors. How Bhanu is almost like fish out of water when he comes to Calcutta.

There were some changes in the final casting...

The film is entirely centred around Mithun Chakraborty. I try to keep track of actors but when I’m in Calcutta I don’t get time to watch too many television serials. I go for a lot of plays and that’s how some actors catch my eye.

Saswata (Chatterjee) and Sudipta Chakraborty play a couple. Saswata is another villager who had come to Calcutta long before Mithun so Mithun stays with him when he comes to the city. There’s Harsh Chhaya and Roopa Ganguly playing a wealthy couple belonging to a business family. I was looking for someone who would look good next to Roopa Ganguly — sophisticated and not too young. I couldn’t think of any younger heroes here and it was Roopa who suggested Harsh. I knew he was a television star and I had seen him in Madhur Bhandarkar’s films so I also felt he would be very good. Being married to a Bengali (Sunita Sengupta) Harsh speaks pretty good Bengali although he does have a slight accent. But even Bengalis these days speak mostly in English so the dialogues are very mixed.

Soumitra Chatterjee plays a mastermoshai in the village with whom Bhanu shares a bond and depends on for advice.

In the smaller roles we have Soma Chakraborty playing Mithun’s wife, Paran Bandopadhyay, Shankar Debnath and Kaushik Ganguly. I became a big fan of his (Ganguly) after watching Chalo Let’s Go.... He plays a shady antique dealer in the film.

Are you nervous or excited about directing Mithun and Soumitra together?

The excitement level is quite high since I’m going to be working with actors of such calibre. I want them to have their space so that their soul comes into the performance. There’s also a sense of responsibility I feel because a separate level of communication is what you need with different actors. I’m just excited and waiting to see the magic when both come together on the floor.

Was it tough to convince Mithun for the role?

I had Mithun Chakraborty at the back of my mind when I was writing the character of Bhanu but I had no idea if he would agree. Most of the time, he’s busy in Bombay or with television shows and hardly does many Bengali films. Aami dhorei niyechhilam that I wouldn’t get him. Apparently he’s become very choosy about the films that he wants to do, so I was also looking at other people who might fit the character.

But after watching Shukno Lanka last summer, I was reminded of how Mithun is someone who can just break the mould. I stepped out of the hall and thought, it would be a terrible loss for me if I couldn’t have him for a role tailor made for him. I went and met him in his Bombay house. His first reaction was ‘Bah shanghatik naama niyechhish toh!’ I felt a positive vibe and he was very excited after reading the script. That was 50 per cent of my job done.
Why did you want Bickram Ghosh to do the music?

I wanted percussion-based music because the genre of the film dictated the need for that and Bickramda was the ideal person for it. Also, aesthetically we agreed a lot. He’s very modern in his approach and won’t use a sitar or a flute if it’s not required. He knows how to capture the thought process with his music. The film swings through all the layers of society from a rustic village core to the poshest of urban lifestyle. That gives a lot of range to music as well as cinematography.

You've always been drawn towards serious cinema...

Yes, but Nobel Chor is not a serious film at all. I have nothing against an outright slapstick comedy. I enjoy watching Govinda films but I don’t think I’ll attempt making one because it’s not easy. Since I’m investing so much of time coming all the way I want to have an underlying serious angst regarding some issue which I want to pour out. That’s my main motivation for doing films. Nobel Chor is a combination of satire and thriller with a touch of humour that is not slapstick. It falls into the same genre as a Peepli Live.

Do you hope to reach out to a larger audience with Nobel Chor?

When I was doing Podokkhep, I was a newcomer. The national award for Soumitra Chatterjee earned it some attention. Dwando got it (attention) for the wrong reasons but there is a class of audience that wants to see serious films. Nobel Chor is not a serious film. Not because I’m trying to attract a larger audience but I’m in a state of flux as a director. It’s too early for me to say ‘my audience’, which a Rituparno Ghosh or an Aniruddha Roy Chowdhury can certainly say. This third film is crucial for me and will show whether I’ve found a footing.

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