

INTERVIEW: The Power of Small Stories—Suman Ghosh Speaks About His Labor of Love, SHYAMAL UNC OFF THE LIGHTS

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Director Suman Ghosh

Rob Avila talks with director Suman Ghosh about leading a double life...

In the United States he's a respected economist and academic. In India, he is better known as the award-winning movie director whose box-office successes as *Podokkhep* (Footsteps), *Dwanda* (The Conflict), and *Nobel Chor* (Nobel Thief), starring Mithun Chakrabarty, a Calcutta native discusses below, his early passion for films grew up right alongside his doctoral work in economics at Cornell University's eye-opening studies conducted concurrently in Cornell's film department.

Nevertheless, Ghosh's fifth film, **SHYAMAL UNCLE TURNS OFF THE LIGHTS**, is something of a departure from the dual trajectory he has navigated thus far. It's a small-budgeted, 65-minute, often candidly shot, and unabashedly independent work that eschews the constraints and requirements of mainstream industry moviemaking. In this sense, it harkens back to the boldly experimental work that was his horizon at Cornell, while confirming his need to make films himself. It is doubly personal in being based on a real-life incident involving an old family friend—the eponymous gentleman who he convinced to star as himself in this humble tale of principled social activism. It's a small story but one that resonates with much larger social and political themes in Calcutta and in contemporary India as a matter, throughout a world dramatically shifting and straining under globalization).

Just a few hours prior to its American premiere at New York's Museum of Modern Art, where it screened in January as part of the Initiative's **2013 Global Lens** series, Ghosh spoke about his calling to make films, his experience as a major director in India's film industry, and the hard-to-categorize yet quietly stirring little film he says he absolutely had to make.

Rob Avila: It must have been a demanding commitment to take on both economics and film as primary subjects and to have a strong compulsion to make films early in life?

Suman Ghosh: Yes. You see, in India, the way the academic curriculum is structured, it's very difficult to follow two interests. Even in undergrad, you more often follow one subject. I really wanted to do filmmaking, but coming from a middle-class background, it was not very encouraged because it's a risky profession. I was quite good in my academic performance; I got into Cornell. I really wanted to go to film school at that point.

But Goutam Ghose—he's a very popular director—he actually encouraged me to go to Cornell, because he said it's one of the best universities and you can do filmmaking later. So with a vague idea that I still wanted to learn filmmaking, I came to Cornell. With my fellowship I could take courses in any field, so slowly I started taking one or two classes in the film department. I was intrigued, and it followed from there. It was difficult to do my PhD in economics and my film studies, but if you're crazy about something I guess you find a way to do it.

RA: What films or filmmakers initially inspired you?

Suman Ghosh: In India, you are definitely exposed to a lot of Satyajit Ray films; he's a very big influence. But I remember, at Cornell, I took a class in film theory. And I can tell you exactly the film that shook me first was [Ingmar] Bergman's *Persona*. Then we saw [Jean-Luc] Godard, and [Alfred] Hitchcock, and all the greats. That gave me an exposure to cinema that I didn't have before. Of course, the standard Bollywood fare and Satyajit Ray, those were influences from the very beginning; then you got to see [Akira] Kurosawa and the entire gamut of what films had to offer. But there are certain films that I didn't know existed. In Cornell, there was a course in experimental films, where I got to see Maya Deren, and Michael Snow, and so on. That was, I would say, more intriguing than getting exposure to Bergman and Kurosawa and [Federico] Fellini, and whatever, because I saw an extreme range of films—Stan Brakhage, and so on—which affected me a lot, with the power of cinema. So these were some of the early influences when I started becoming very serious and I confirmed that I wanted to be a filmmaker.

RA: The range you just sketched there, from the completely non-narrative to the great narrative films of the age, suggests a powerful set of influences. Do you try to keep an experimental edge in your filmmaking?

Suman Ghosh: Not really. What happens is that after you go on to make films in a professional environment, you get to understand that a professional filmmaking career is not just about—there are a lot of things within that world you have to, in a sense, fight on to make the kind of films that you want to do. I had done films, of course, which I liked very much and wanted to do. One of the biggest actors in the country, but with *Shyamal Uncle*, this was my first break into totally uninhibited filmmaking. In this film, there is no "name" actor; almost all of them are facing the camera for the first time. I didn't think about what the audience for it. I still doubt [if I will] in India. But given the attention that it got in film festivals—and luckily GFI picked it up and the MoMA is screening it—it's getting a lot of [exposure] and there's a lot of attention. But in a sense, this was my first, if you can call it, experimental attempt at a different genre of film than what I usually do.

RA: There must have been something very compelling in the subject to pull you in so different a direction. How did you first come upon the subject, and what about it made you need to make the way you did?

Suman Ghosh: As a human being, I love interacting with the older generation of people, for many reasons. For example, you know that for the last 20 years or so India has gone through a drastic change with globalization. This generation, of which Shyamal Uncle is a prototype, is a class who are bewildered by the changes that have been going on in India. From the state where I come from, West Bengal, there has been a huge political change in the last five years. The leftist government that had been there for many decades, they were voted out of power [and replaced] by a new government. So this type of people, Shyamal Uncle is an example, they are a breed that we are losing as a country, I would say. They are very principled; they have strong ideologies; they are very compassionate; they have very strong morals.

And in India's changes, they actually can't see a place for themselves. [The protagonist of] this particular film, he's a very good friend of mine. Whenever I go to India I have long conversations with him. "How are you?" He said, "I'm fine, because a very small incident, which nobody will care about, happened in my life."

Then he told me this story, which was later fictionalized in this film. I found it a metaphor [for something larger]; in the sense that in India, particularly in the larger metropolises like Calcutta and Delhi, this way of life is dying. And this generation just can't take it. So turning off the lights, he didn't tell me that, but I could sense that angst—he wants to "turn off the lights." Through this story I could touch upon the ideologies, the dedication of this generation. I thought, wow, this is a very subtle way of getting to a larger issue, which India is currently facing. You can think of this as a very trivial incident, but it has a connotation. This is the ideal type of film that I want to make. I thought I have to make this; it was a compulsion. Even to the extent of breaking off from [the pattern of] previous films that I had made, [but] I had to go to that guy to portray [himself in this story]. Immediately that implies—the market immediately goes away, because I could have had any top actor [making the film more commercial]. But I thought that I'd approach it in an extremely raw way.

RA: Watching the film, you sense the metaphor, or the reflection of a larger reality. It's not simply a metaphor, of course. An example is being set that is in danger of being lost, as your dialogue mentions Anna Hazare, the great Indian reform leader. So it's almost a comical mirroring between this small figure of your protagonist and the larger-than-life figure on the stage. They're joined somehow.

Suman Ghosh: Right, exactly.

RA: In pursuing this work, did you have a hard time convincing your friend to do the film and how was it working with him in this capacity?

Suman Ghosh: When I first told him he was kind of shocked. But I knew that he had done theater in his younger days. He's a friend of my father's. I knew he had good potential for acting. But film is a different altogether, and people get scared about that. I said you don't have to act anything, you just be yourself. My job in this film was to just make him comfortable. Our cinematographer is a very famous cineaste who has won many national awards, but he's done a lot of documentary shooting.



A scene from Shyamal Uncle Turns Off the Lights



In Suman Ghosh's latest film, an 80-year-old Kolkata retiree is determined to get the streetlights turned off after sunrise, but finding someone to take him seriously proves a battle against an indifferent bureaucracy and a complaisant status quo.

One thing I told my actor, Shyamal Bhattacharya (who's named as in the film): Forget about the camera. He had once come of mine, which I did just prior to this, and he was very confused about the camera angles and the lights and choreography. I to forget about all those things. It is the responsibility of the cinematographer to capture you, so forget the camera, you don't ha camera; you don't have to look away from the camera—just behave normally.

Later on, after the completion of the film, he told me that was a great relief to him. You'll see [in the film], a lot of the time he's was the flavor of the film I wanted. I didn't want extremely choreographed shots, because I wanted that *cinema vérité* approach answer your question, convincing him was not a big problem. But for him to do a good job, I thought to tell him not to act at al yourself, and the camera and I will do the rest. So I guess it worked out fine.

RA: Some of the location shots are extraordinary, so realistic that they seem almost improvised. How did you approach these scenes given that this is a departure from the kind of filmmaking you've done in the past, how naturally did this kind of shoot come to you?

Suman Ghosh: Actually, a lot of the characters didn't know they were being shot for the film. For example, you mentioned the guy in the street mentioning Anna Hazare, who was reading a newspaper. I remember, we were adjusting our camera, I saw this guy at the lamppost reading a newspaper. I told my cinematographer that he's our character. I told Shyamal Uncle, "Why don't you go and ask him about the lights?"



So we also didn't know what would be the response. And that was the shot. I can tell you that in a lot of instances the reactions we got from people, I couldn't have scripted that. Forget about me, I'm pretty sure very big directors a don't want to script it, because I want that direct feel. Somehow everything fell in place. And a lot of credit for this I would give to Shyamal Uncle, because after all he is not a proper actor, but it was ent to approach these people. And, of course, my cinematographer. I intentionally chose a documentary cameraman who knows how to pick up those clues. Often times he doesn't have time to do proper I has to get started because he'll lose the moment. So somehow all these things fell in place.

Similarly, the scene where the conversation is going on between the five older gentlemen: I told the other people there that we're going to shoot some still photos because I'm doing a still-photo docume they didn't know it was a running camera and they're being shot on film. I know Shyamal Uncle's schedule and every evening they have those very informal gatherings where they talk about their life anc there; the two cameras were placed there. Only Shyamal Uncle was told, at some point, you will mention something about the lights in the conversation. I didn't know what the reactions would be. We reactions. Somebody's talking about [Parkinson's] Law, in which bureaucracy generates more bureaucracy; somebody says do you know how Calcutta runs in the morning, do you care about that? In I could palpably get that class distinction. Rich people don't feel cold; or executives are like crows.

RA: Working in so independent a fashion, I wonder what you anticipated would be the opportunities for presenting the film in India?

Suman Ghosh: This is going to release in summer in India. I don't know how people will take it at all, whether they will be at all interested in going to see the film, which doesn't have any famous cast again planning to trick the audience a bit in this case. For example, the press wouldn't typically cover such a film. But what I tell my press interviews is that I will talk about my big film—I am making ar superstar there next year—but I will talk about this film first. So in a sense I'm coupling those two films together. I'm trying to plan the marketing that way. I will use it as a marketing tool that it has a c cast. But definitely after it got into festivals and stuff, and was picked up by GFI, there's a lot more interest in India also. It's completely uncertain terrain that I'm diving into for the release also, but we'll



Uncle Shyamal Turns Off the Lights

RA: The character of Shyamal Uncle leads you to believe that his obsession with the lights is partly born, especially at first, of his circumstance as a retired patriarch with little to do. V

Suman Ghosh: True. When I started thinking about the character, I thought of a character by one of my favorite authors, Italo Calvino. There's a book of his called *Marcavaldo [or the Seasons in the City]* who obsesses about small things in life. He goes to the office and on the playground he sees that some mushrooms are growing. He has a dream that one day he will feed his children with those mush those mushrooms so that nobody tramples over them. It's about these minor obsessions. Obsession, I always think, is a degree, in the sense that we might obsess about very big things in life, but to t obsession is really—as you rightly said, it might be that he has nothing to do.

That's why in the initial part of the film I languidly just focus on his lifestyle: He takes his time to brush his teeth, he slowly walks to the playground; he spends a lot of time [doing very little]. He has no which to engage himself. So this [issue with the street lights], in a sense, starts off as a hook, but then slowly all his beliefs, his principles, ideology, those actually now filter up. What initially started o becomes a life and death issue for him. At the very end, I interpret that as a dance of death, in a sense, that is his liberation towards the end. It starts off with the micro level, and then it involves many p obsession grows in him and then it [peaks] in a crescendo or ultimate liberation. The way I structured the film, also, was like an Indian classical raga.

First of all, the length of the film is a bit odd; it's 65 minutes. It's too short for a full-length feature; it's longer [than a short subject]. But it was dictated by the format I had in mind while I was thinking about the first part will be like in an Indian classical raga: The first part is an introduction, which is called an *alap*, which is slow, languid, bringing in talk to the audience. Then it picks up, reaching a crescendo towards the end—if you listen to a Ravi Shankar sitar recital, for example. So the first part is like a very longish *alap*, and then towards the end it's the ultimate liberation. So those things played in my mind while structuring the format.



Suman Ghosh talks to us about his film at the Global Lens 2013 Premiere in New York City.

RA: It sounds like your collaboration with your actor/protagonist was very specific. You took his story and then brought him into the film, rather than a more back-and-forth dialogue. When did you see it when he finally saw the finished film?

Suman Ghosh: He saw it for the first time at the Mumbai International Film Festival, in a huge auditorium with a huge crowd. You can imagine, a person who is almost 80 years old, and there was not then suddenly this attention. So he was perplexed, he didn't know how to react in front of that audience. Everybody was coming up and congratulating him on his performance and things like that. He had he didn't know what is happening, because a film is typically not shot chronologically, for many reasons, but I tried to do it chronologically so that he has the arc of the film. But at the end, when he saw it, he understood what you were aiming at, and why you asked me to do that dance. What I primarily tried to do was be extremely close, personal, and friendly to him through the process.

Before a scene, I would talk to him about his personal life and things like that, and I remember before that last dance, he asked me, "What am I supposed to do?" Well, I had some basic ideas, in the sense that I remember, he takes off all his outer clothes. I told him, Uncle, this last dance is the climax of your entire life. Typically, you have lived life under shelters and a lot of hindrances, so those winter clothes—cap, as it's called, and all those layers—we as human beings are similarly always clothed. But at the end, he's liberated: he's going back to the womb, in a sense. I just talked to him about these aspects of life, about how you shed off all your worldly belongings, because you're going off. You'll see that the camera holds on him as he dances and goes out of focus. "But the way you'll do it: I want you to keep this conversation in mind, follow your mind, whatever you will do."

And that amazing thing came out from him. And I was worried that he's almost 80 years old and has to do so much running and jumping. But it was like a trance, believe me, when he was doing it. All his anxieties in life, all his frustrations—in a sense, he also got a chance to get liberated. Again, I shouldn't take credit for that scene. It was so impromptu and it came from within him.

RA: It appears the film was a real journey for him...

Suman Ghosh: For his life—because he also knows that; that it is his journey. You know, nobody much listened to him throughout his life, and through this film he has, actually, a mode of communication with the world. Because he's otherwise a very interesting person, I know; very sensitive, and very well read. But as happens to all of us in life, a lot of cloaks, so to speak, can hinder us from the person we truly are.

Rob Avila is a San Francisco-based writer, and film and stage critic. He is a regular contributor to the San Francisco Bay Guardian, among other publications, and has worked with the Global Film Initiative on various projects and programs, including Global Lens educational resources, filmmaker interviews and the Initiative's Granting Program.



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