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IN TODAY'S PAPER

- Front Page
- Nation
- Calcutta
- Bengal
- Opinion
- International
- Business
- Sports
- Entertainment
- Sudoku
- Sudoku New BETA
- Crossword
- Jumble
- Gallery
- Horse Racing
- Press Releases
- Travel

WEEKLY FEATURES

- 7days
- Graphiti
- Knowhow
- Jobs
- Careergraph**
- Salt Lake

CITIES AND REGIONS

- Metro
- North Bengal
- Northeast
- Jharkhand
- Bihar
- Odisha

ARCHIVES

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THE TELEGRAPH

- About Us
- Advertise
- Feedback
- Contact Us

Front Page > Entertainment > Story

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The sci-fi black comedy

SUMAN GHOSH ON THE FILM HE SHOT HUSH-HUSH LAST YEAR AND THE SCI-FI BLACK COMEDY HE'S PLANNING WITH PROSENJIT-ARPITA



You quietly shot a film all of last winter. What was it about?

I have to start with the protagonist — a man named Shyamal Bhattacharya — after whom the film is titled *Shyamal Uncle Turns Off The Light*. He was a close friend of my father who would love me and scold me as a child. As I grew up, he became more of a friend. He is the prototype of a learned, genuine Marxist with ideological principles, but now a bit frustrated with a sense of hopelessness... in a state of flux yet very optimistic. When on one of my recent visits I asked him how he was, he said: '*Khub anandey achhi!*' Then he went on to narrate an incident that springs from where he lives in north Calcutta.

Every morning he used to walk down Raja Manindra Road to fetch milk from a booth when he would notice that the streetlights would be on till 9 in the morning. This kind of waste started bothering him so much that he started talking about it to others. Nobody paid much attention, while he grew obsessed about turning the lights off. I found it quite metaphorical. The disillusioned man and his Kafkaesque

journey of going from one place to another, the bureaucracy and little things that reveal a lot about today's India.... I don't want to give away the ending but I found his story extraordinary.

What inspired a film on it?

I have been in this industry for five or six years now and what I seriously felt was a big gap between world cinema and Bengali cinema. After Aparna Sen, Buddhadeb Dasgupta, Goutam Ghose or Rituparno Ghosh, the connect with world cinema is totally lost from Bengal. If you want to make a film, which is experimental, not mainstream or without a big star cast, it is derided as a festival film. I have a few such stories I want to tell that people might not want to hear. But why keep it to myself?

Back in Miami, I was talking to one of my university friends, Arindam Ghosh, an economist and now a big corporate guy living in Washington DC, about Shyamal *kaku's* experience and he suggested that I make this the theme for my next project. Although I knew that I could, it was doubtful if I'd find any producer or distributor for it. It would be a big gamble. I don't want to make a film just for myself. That's when Arindam decided to turn producer and asked me to go ahead. He was here with me for the 10-day filming as my assistant, still photographer. We had a very small unit but things fell into place.

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Why did you keep it so hush-hush?

Because it seemed to have no marketing value. I was working with non-actors and I was uncertain about how the film would turn out. Perhaps I was embarrassed about it but now that it's got selected at the Busan International Film Festival in Korea and I'm getting very good vibes from other international film festivals, I feel more confident. I have shown the film to some people here in Calcutta and they were very effusive. So here I am talking about the film for the first time!

Is it a full-fledged feature film?

It is 70 minutes long. By international standards, it is a full-length feature film but short by Indian standards. I have tried to play with genres. It's a personal, poignant story. I've recreated the entire series of events and fictionalised some parts towards the end. It was shot real time, sometimes surreptitiously. During the making, I wasn't sure of what would emerge but characters and experiences evolved impromptu that did justice to the philosophy of the film. For me it was also a challenge to work with non-actors. When I decided to make the film, I wanted Shyamal *kaku* to play his part. He has never acted or seen a film being shot either. But the performance I got from him is comparable to the best of actors I've worked with.

Who else did you have on board?

We had a crew of five people. I got a lot of help from others in Tollywood too. Ranjanda (Palit) agreed to do the camera. The camera on which we shot was Tony (Aniruddha Roy Chowdhury) and Indrani's. They gave it to me for a month, gratis. I was doing the sets myself but for a sequence that I wouldn't be able to manage on my own, Indranil Ghosh came over for a day and helped out. Sudarshan Chakraborty, the dancer, came and choreographed a sequence. Archanadi, who works in our house, to the *paan* shopowner and Shyamal *kaku's* friends, are a part of the cast. It was like a student project and now I'm no longer embarrassed about it.



(From top) Shyamal Bhattacharya, the real-life protagonist of Shyamal Uncle Turns Off The Light; Suman Ghosh with Ranjan Palit

What about releasing it for the Indian audience?

Colin Burrows (CEO of Special Treats Productions based in UK that promoted *Peepli [Live]*)

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has seen the film and liked it very much. He has associated himself as an executive producer who is marketing and producing the film abroad because he felt that it was something new to come from Bengal. In Calcutta, hundreds of good films are awaiting distribution. So I think I'm going to go on a begging spree because I don't think people here have watched a film like this and might not even appreciate it but I want to at least give them a taste of it.

And you're also preparing for your next film after *Nobel Chor*...

Yes, it's tentatively titled *Ringtone*. It stars Prosenjit and Arpita. The International Film Festival of India in Goa has a script competition and two years ago, this script was one of the 12 chosen ones from India. I wanted to make it then but *Nobel Chor* seemed more timely because of Tagore's 150th birth anniversary celebrations.

***Ringtone* is an interesting title. What is it about?**

This film is a black comedy/science fiction. *Bumbada* (Prosenjit) and Arpita play husband and wife. They're very upper middle class and newly married. *Bumbada* is a marketing guy in a cellphone company who gradually gets obsessed with the cell phone... to the extent that he starts visualising the recorded female voice that speaks to him when a call is waiting. He falls in love with that fictional character and we see how his relationships get affected. It starts off as a comedy and goes into science-fiction mode when the main character (Prosenjit) comes into the purview of a scientist who has a different view of the world. He becomes a guinea pig to the scientist's experiments and things begin to go awry. I have written the scientist's character with Anjan Dutt in mind. I'm very tense about whether he'll finally agree to do the role or not.

This is the first time after their marriage that we'll get to see Prosenjit and Arpita as a couple on screen. What made you cast them?

With *Bumbada* and Arpita I've had a wonderful relation for a long time. But *Bumbada* wouldn't do a film with me just because we share a nice relation. I've been wanting to work with him and was looking for a script that I could present as a challenge to him. Something that would bring out his hunger. I was working on the script in Miami and just before boarding the flight to Calcutta, I emailed it to *Bumbada*, quite apprehensive of whether he'd like it. I wasn't expecting to hear from him before a month but when I got here, he had already read the script in 24 hours and also written me a very effusive email. As far as casting Arpita goes, I had seen her in Koushik Sen's play *Notir Puja*. I see a lot of Bengali theatre when I'm here and do a lot of my casting from stage. To find Arpita in such a performance had me floored. My story needed a husband and wife, and since both liked the script, things naturally fell into place. Otherwise I don't believe in any marketing gimmicks. In fact, after I cast them I got to know that they had not acted together in a film after marriage.

You consciously changed your narrative style in *Nobel Chor* and people loved the humour. Will *Ringtone* take that genre further?

Yes, there is again a lot of humour in *Ringtone* because the basic concept is humorous... a guy who fantasises about a cell phone voice. It is in the genre of *Nobel Chor*.

Why science fiction?

It wasn't a predetermined choice. The narrative emerged organically from my imagination and took me into the genre of science fiction. I understand that making a science fiction in Bengal with our budgetary constraint is not easy but we're astutely trying to plan in a way that we can pull it off successfully. There is a thriller element, too, like in *Nobel Chor*.

Who is producing *Ringtone*?

Rana Sarkar.

You've had a different producer for each of your films. Why?

See, my first two films weren't successful and what I've realised is that in Calcutta, I will work with a Calcutta producer. Making a film is not enough. It's about distribution, marketing... so someone like Rana who's established himself in Calcutta would have a different vision on how to sell a film.

When does the action begin?

Depends on *Bumbada's* dates... he's very busy and I can't start before December because I'm teaching (at the Florida Atlantic University in Miami) till then. So probably around February next year.

Tollywood, that you are now a part of, has its volatile side. What is your perspective as an insider and an outsider?

Yes, I do get a snapshot of the industry that you wouldn't, being within the industry all the time. I have a lovely time whenever I come here. New talents from whom I imbibe a lot and take

back with me. We have positive addas, which are encouraging. This time I was here for a month and a bit saddened by personal matters between a few established people that have caused a stir within the industry. Some of the brightest minds have come together to make some great films. It's sad to see that break and what irks me is the pleasure some others take when fiascos happen. Antagonism isn't healthy.

Do you enjoy your safe space?


See, America gives me my intellectual nourishment. It is truly an international place with the best of world literature, cinema and theatre. I try to use that influence in making films in Bengal and in a way reverse the brain drain. Also, I like taking my breaks, get back to teaching, take that time and settle on a fresh script, sleep on it and come up with new thoughts and ideas.

Mohua Das

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