

RAMANANDA SENGUPTA

My father worked in Madras Southend Maratha railway as permanent way inspector. He had to look after the laying of the railway tracks. He was a civil engineer from BE college, Shibpur. My brothers studied in Dhaka. Once my mother asked her cousin Kshitimohan Sen if he could admit me in Shantiniketan. When I was around nine years old, Kshitimohan Sen and my mother took me to the Jorashako house of the Tagore family. There I was introduced and then admitted in Shantiniketan in 1926-27 in Shisu Bibhag. I was born in 1916. When I was admitted, I did not know Bengali, I knew only Tamil and Telegu. Within 5-6 months I learned Bengali. My father died in 1928 at the age of 53. I had to leave Shantiniketan and return to Dhaka. My brother, father of Yashodhara Bagchi, was in Germany to study botany. He returned in 1929-30. After two years I returned to Calcutta when my brother got a job in Presidency College.

While I was in Shantiniketan, I started developing some kind of liking for art. I was not a very good student. I passed my matriculation and got my admission in a technical school. For an admission in technical school, you have to find an engineering apprentice which I could not. In the meantime, my mother had cancer. She sent me for the railways examination where my father used to work. The students who appeared for the exam were all qualified B.E. So I could not fare there. In Madras I went to stay with another maternal uncle. From there I went to Motion Pictures Combine which was later known as Gemini, to meet Dhiren Dasgupta, a technician. There were other Bengali technicians as well like Shailen Bose, Ram babu and many others. I asked Dhiren Dasgupta to take me into films and he said that already many Bengalis have entered; now the south Indians would not entertain any more Bengalis. He asked me to go to Film Corporation of India, a studio which was opening in Tollygunge. Bimal Roy also

asked me to try there. I went there many days but as I did not know anybody, I could not do anything. Then one day one of my brother's friends came to our house and said that he was returning from the house of the Film Corporation's managing director. He went to his house because the MD was not well. Then I told him that I wanted to enter the film studio and be a cameraman. He gave me a letter after which my work was done. The studio took another three four months to finalise and start.

Balladay Thompson and Mathews was the architect who helped the studio to buy equipment. This was set up in 1938. In January 26, 1938 my mother expired. I joined as an apprentice whose work was to carry some camera boxes, trolley and power velocilator, which worked as a small crane for the camera. Power velocilator was available only in Calcutta then and my work was to clean and maintain them. There was an Anglo-Indian assistant who complained against me to the British cameraman, Peter D' Bradley, who never allowed me to touch the camera. I used to learn loading from an old person who came from East India Studio. Perry Davis, who was the production manager in his unit, was asked to direct the film. The cameraman knew his job but the director knew nothing. This I understood much later because then I was just a fresher. I used to look only after the trolley movement as I was asked not to touch the camera.

Ajit Sengupta, a cameraman in Film Corporation was the younger brother of Ashok Sen and also my cousin. He learnt camera work in Munich, Germany. He was then the operating cameraman, I looked after the trolley and Bradley was the lighting cameraman. I learned the trolley movement so well that many units later called me to operate any difficult trolley. There was no zoom at that time. The working atmosphere was very good. Our name was not focussed nor were we paid any money. I worked without money for almost two and half years. My first film was *Asha*, a Hindi film, then *Dil Hi To Hai* where I worked as

an assistant. I also did some camera work in my second film. I went with Kedar Sharma and took some outdoor shots in Lahore. That was in 1939-40. I also did a two-reeler film called *Hari Kirtan*. This was just after the death of my mother. Slowly the studio packed up. Ajit Sengupta made a separate unit and before G K Mehta there was another cameraman called Malhotra who came just after Bradley. Bradley died during the war while he was shooting from the air. Even Perry Davis left and his work was completed by his then assistant director Ranjit Sen. I became the second assistant of G K Mehta. He used to love me very much.

In 1940, when war broke out, the studio was closed and all its equipment was taken by Bharat Laxmi studio as a repay of debt. The film *Kurukshetra* was being shot for a long time where I was the assistant of G K Mehta. In 1938-39, I became an assistant cameraman from a trolley operator. I watched the tests being done but I did not learn any laboratory work. During the war Sharmaji took the unit to Pune but I did not accompany him. That was a mistake on my part. There was a gap in my career. Then Satyen and I started supplying small engineering goods. In 1941, Rameshwar Sharma, manager of some Maharaja, started the film *Kurukshetra* which took a very long time. Then we completed the film *Bhakt Kabir* which was started when the studio existed. I was then the first assistant of G K Mehta. I used to handle the lighting part. At that time we used the Mol Richardson's light. Two-three shadows used to fall and hence we had to place the lights from the top. We also used the wash light in a way that there were no shadows on the walls.

During the film *River*, there were some technicolour tests conducted. The test was done on my skin and then it was also done on the skin of a foreigner and then photographed. This was done because Remal did not like any makeup. But women should do some makeup because their colour changes due

to sunrays. But no Indian females were used any makeup only white skins were given a base on the face. Claude took me to Paris and his assistant kept me in a hotel and I used to roam with them. I also went to watch the shooting of a film shot by the cameraman of *La Bella Elabeth*. The assistant cameraman of this film developed every shot in his own dark room and kept one copy with him and the other copy was sent along with the film. When I asked him, he said that laboratories are very unreliable. When I said that I had watched the film *La Bella Elabeth*, the first thing he asked me was if the print was a good one. I said the print was not good. That's the reason he said that they never believed in laboratories. So a representative from the cameraman's side always checked with the laboratory about their baths. Even in India laboratories are unreliable. There is always a difference between the laboratory work of Satyajit Ray's film and that of a small director's film who cannot dictate. Even the artists do not care about a small director because he cannot dictate. Nobody could dare tell Satyajit Ray that he has some work. These are the disadvantages the cameramen have to face while working with a big and small director. If the actors and actresses become famous, they start dictating.

I experimented with some cheap aluminium glasses and fit holders into them with 50 or 100-watt bulbs for lighting. In black and white films, black distracts you because you would like to see the black part to find out what is there inside it. But if you make the black part slightly grey, then it would not distract you and one can carry on his acting. For this I used to apply these lights inside haystacks, below furniture, etc. I started these techniques much after I worked for *River* when I was quite matured with my work. At that stage one can understand where to use light and where to avoid.

In the film *Nishithe*, there was a scene when Uttam Kumar's ailing wife is waiting for him and he moves in the dark as he talks to her. The expression which he gave near his wife, if it went in the dark, I do not think that public would lose the sense of it because every person has his own thinking. After doing few works like this, Uttam Kumar got angry with me. He did not work with me anymore. Once I also scolded him for some reason. It happened so that a shooting had to be done in another studio for some date problems with Uttam. I had to do a moonlit night with new studio people for which I faced problems and that took some time. Uttam sent his people several times inquiring about the set and finally he came personally and asked Agragami about it. As he heard about the moonlit night he commented very sarcastically. As I was working over the set for a long time, it hurt me and I quickly said that, "So, Uttam you have already learnt everything about the camera also. Now you need only the actors and the actresses." Perhaps he was not so sarcastical about it as I thought, and my words hurt him too. But later on he took my son in a film called *Ban Palasher Padabali* for the role of Bikash Ray's younger age.

These cases also happen elsewhere too. Once Claude wrote me a letter saying that Audrey Hepburn took him out of an American film. A cameraman has always to think that the focus should never move out of the protagonist. Even in colour films, there should not be any bright colours used for the sets that draw too much attention. This will disturb the spectators. In India number of people working in a set are few. I have seen in England that lights are hung with numbers hanging to them which makes it easier for a cameraman to decide and say which number of light he wants. This is not the case in our country. The same person looks after the light and also works in the shop floor. The artists are given more money while there are only five lighting men and two assistants. Work cannot be done with so few people. The number of technicians should be increased. More

money should be spent on the technicians to change the entire look of the film. There should be a union to decide that if there are so many lights then the number of electricians required should be accordingly.

I worked as a first assistant in *Kurukshetra* in 1941. After this I worked with Mehtaji in many films like *Protishodh*. I first started with focussing and then also checked that if any light fell on the lens which was very difficult. Exposure was given by the cameraman. Once I happened to work with Sanyal moshai for some reason I forgot. His first assistant did not tell me about the exposure when I asked him because I would learn otherwise. At that time meter was not available and only eyes gave the final exposure. I used the meter when I worked in 1947 but also used my eyes which was otherwise quite perfect as a system because I learnt from people who worked only with their eyes. For indoor-outdoor matching we used the X1 and 23A filters. Mehtaji used to use these two very much. In these the diaphragm is opened slightly and hence the focus is not very sharp.

Operating cameraman were not there in our country- there has never been any separation between the lighting cameraman and the operating cameraman. But G K Mehta used to give me the opportunity to operate as he became quite senior. He used to give me full charge of the camera and stood beside me giving me some suggestions. Thus my training was very good. Though I was not responsible for the faults, but I learnt everything. I cannot forget him. Later on I used to work and he used to sit beside me. My first independent work was in *Purbaraag* by Ardhendu Mukherjee. He was an actor and also a director. Hemant Mukherjee started as a music director and Asit Sen was my assistant, Jawahar Roy entered as a comic actor, Deepak Mukherjee also had his first film and Nabendu Ghosh also started as the first assistant to Ardhendu Mukherjee.

When working with Michelle camera, we can only see half of the actor. So there has to be much guess work done for which the composition suffers many times. In the Super Parbo, you have to look through the film. In Bharat Laxmi I did the indoor with Super Parbo and the outdoor was done with the Mitchell camera. The camera is covered with a cloth and after sometime very slowly you can see a dim line. Doing night scene like this is very difficult. Today you do not face these problems with Arriflex and your eyes are saved. In our times, the directors used to rely upon us. But for any difficult scene, the whole script was discussed over and over again. The story was first discussed with the entire unit along with the actors. Then it was again discussed with the director, cameraman and the technicians. Then again the dress code was discussed separately. There were many experiments done like white clothes were soaked in water with tea leaves to give them the crispy effect or they were soaked in water of shells of boiled green coconut. This gave some tint to the white colour which was otherwise called technicolour white. For outdoor shooting we used a fine white cloth as a shade to prevent the sunlight to fall directly so that there were no shadows on the nose or below the eyes. The framing and the trolley shots were done by the director as well as with the help of the cameraman. When I worked with Ritwik Ghatak in *Nagarik*, I generally tried to maintain his movement though they were different from normal shots. If I faced any problems I tried to sort them out with the director.

We opened the technician studio with Ashutosh Nag and Kalyan Gupta. Ritwik used to come there very often and then he started *Nagarik* with a very small finance. But he could not finish the film. Every scene was first enacted by Ritwik to show the actors. He had a theatrical acting style. I liked his camerawork very much. He always kept the angle from the low or the top. This was very much different from other directors. He always insisted for either low or top angles. We

never used to discuss every shot earlier because if anybody praised any particular shot, he would definitely change its style the other day. I used to tell him later that “You think that if I understand a shot then your intellectual level goes down.” Though he came from the theatrical background, but he watched many Russian films which influenced him very much.

I did my best work in *Aragami* where Saroj Dey and Nishit Banerjee were there. We always started working together from the script writing itself. Then the script was heard or changed and while shooting Saroj Dey used to continuously tell me about the dramatic side of the story which helped me in fine tuning my lighting. I had taken shots with lanterns, a cloudy monsoon scene just before the rain, etc. The rainy scene was shot in Shantiniketan where Shantideb Ghosh acted as a baul in that film. If the director wants good camerawork, then only good work is possible. That was always given by Saroj babu to me. We did many films together like *Nishithe*, *Headmaster*. Chhabi Biswas was the headmaster. I used to put a brown foundation on his body to make him slightly dark because his skin was very fair. In *Dakharkhara*, Binoyda told me that my work outnumbered the story. I said that it was my luck because every time a cameraman does not get to have a shot of such a cloudy sky and even the directors do not cooperate so much that he will allow you to sit at three o'clock with the unit and wait for the light to come so that you can shoot. But he told me that my work was better than the film which I should not do. Camerawork should not overshadow the story. When I showed him *Headmaster*, he liked it. If God helps you while shooting outdoor, then any cameraman can deliver a very good work which I could do in *Dakharkhara*. In *Headmaster*, I tried to keep the depression of the storyline by putting a light used for the sky at the top and used only some face light on the artists. The result was very good. If you are not a renowned director, the laboratories do not show much interest in your work. But

Aragami, though started from the scratch and became big, used to come and sit in the laboratory to make sure that their work was done perfectly using fresh bath.

A cameraman should have a sense of trolley movement and suggest a director to take a full screen close up of the artist when he speaks to someone to catch his expression. The cameraman should understand the rhythm of the shot and also think about the editing part. In River, the new artist could not give the expression required for the moment. So the director used the back of the artist and the expression of the experienced artists opposite her were given more exposure. Thus an abstract form was created by taking the glimpse of the reaction of other artists. Finer works can be done more if literacy level increases. In developed countries where literacy level is much higher, finer works can be carried out more. This is not always possible in our country keeping in mind the larger section of illiterate people who do not have the same power of thinking.

If a cricketer forgets about the game and thinks only about the money, he can throw the game. Similarly, if the laboratory people start thinking that photographs are coming anyway though the negatives may not be very crisp so what! That will be managed in the print. This not only harms the cameraman but the attitude harms the country as well. There was an association of cameramen called Eastern India Cameramen Association where we discussed all these issues but they never pressurised any laboratories on such issues. This was because they did not want to annoy the lab in-charges. We had to face many problems in our times. We used to shoot in one way but the negatives of the same lot would differ. This was due to the fact that one was developed in old bath and the other was developed in new bath. This itself shows the lack on the part of the laboratory. They used to say that they would manage in the print but that can never be done.

I always answered the queries of my assistants. Sometimes I also asked them to handle the lighting. I became the director of the Technician Studio without paying any money. So I did not charge anything for my camera work. Even in *Nagarik* I worked free. The rent of the studio was used to buy the equipment. I used to ask my assistant to do the background lighting or asked to use a diffuser or even sometimes asked to cut my light, etc. Thus they learnt as they worked. My assistants were Dinen Gupta, Kesto Chakraborty, Sadhan Roy, Pinto Dasgupta, Bishwajeet Banerjee, Alok Kundu, Dulip Ranjan Mukherjee, Soumendu Roy, Jagamohan Mehrotra.

After *River*, Ashutosh Nag told that we would open a studio. Kali films was owned by Preranath Ganguly whose son's name was Kali. He closed down his studio and through an attorney Ashutosh Nag, Kalyan Gupta, me and Durga Das Mitra, the sound engineer took over and started the Technician Studio. Then we brought Ajit Sen, the cameraman, Madhu Sil, the sound engineer, Debesh Ghosh, the sound engineer and Mrinal Guhathakurta. A camera of Kali Films was auctioned and we got it for around Rs 2500 which was otherwise Rs 30000-Rs 40000. The lens of that camera was bought for Rs 10000. Thus we started the studio. We bought the lights from Patel India. We paid them Rs 20000 and the rest was settled for instalments. RC sound was got from Fazal Bhai whom we paid some amount as premium. The rent of the studio was spent in repaying our camera and sound loan. Sometimes when the parties did not pay us in time, we could not repay our debts either. There was section 163 in high Court for dissolving the company if the lenders put a case against you. Then we used to go to Ashok Sen, the law minister who used to give us shelter by asking them to avoid such a situation and wait for little longer. Government at that time did not take any interest in film making. It was only when Satyajit Ray won the award that Bidhan Ray gave him money. If at that time Satyajit Ray had said Jawaharlal

Nehru to finance the studios of Bengal, then things would have been different. But he never said that. He himself got all the facilities so he thought why should he bother about the conditions of the studios. The problems of the studios should always be told and portrayed to the government by the big people of the industry who are close to the government. If these people do not take interest then we are helpless.

We had an ancestral home in Dhaka. We sold it and I got my share as Rs 7000. After the amount was over, I had to take up the job as a cameraman because otherwise I could not survive. So I started taking money for my job which all these years I did not. Slowly the studio of Atragami survived but its land lease was over. The owner of the land won the case against the studio and hence we gave the studio to the government. It is now doing well and the people are well paid. The name remained the same. The old equipment is still there and many new ones are still bought by the government. The Mitchell camera is no more working. Now even TV serials are also done in the studio and it is running quite well. When we worked in Technician Studio, we did not have enough money to buy wires. Once we had to place the lights much above the catwalk on the verandah surrounding the studio. The wire required was less. We then placed the switch board on to a stool to bring it closer and decrease the length of the wire. Thus we faced many difficulties like this while working.

Mr Renowa had much contribution in making of films like *Pather Panchali* which had the feeling of one's own soil. Chidananda, Satyajit Ray and Kamal Mazumdar used to go to Renowa and discuss things over. Renowa never appreciated shooting of any bad things which would give bad name to India—like herd of cows in the middle of the road. Once he was shooting on Indian Ghats where Arthur Shield was supposed to pray. Kalyan Gupta got some disabled people to sit in the ghat. Renowa seeing them said "I am making this film for

America and I will show that Indians are like this!" He refused to shoot them and asked to bring normal people.