

SOUMENDU ROY

Can you begin by telling us something about your childhood and your family background, as well as how you got interested in photography and filmmaking?

My father worked in a small native princely state in Madhya Pradesh called Udaipur. I stayed there till I was 10 years old. There were no good schools there and so I came to Calcutta to stay for my schooling with the rest of the family members in a joint family. I joined the Tirthapati Institute just near our house in Calcutta and passed my matriculation from there. My brother had the hobby of taking photographs and it was from there that I developed an interest for photography. But then, I did not have a camera.

When I was in the ninth standard, a new boy joined my class named Ashit Raha. He became a friend of mine and I learnt from him that his brother had a photographic studio named Avenue Polyphoto Studio in Lake Market. Once he took me to the dark room of the studio and told me about all the chemicals used, etc. This made my interest grow even more. My sister promised me a camera if I passed my matriculation exam in one go. Fortunately I was successful. My sister bought me a Kodak Brownie camera of 127-film size. That was my first camera. My cousin brother opened his own dark room and there I used to assist him. Also, Ashit Raha's had relatives who were connected with the film industry. One was an editor; one was an asst. cameraman, and so on. Because of these connections I had the opportunity to sometimes watch films being made. At the same time, it must be said that, watching films was not very permissible when we were young, it wasn't considered a good thing to do. I had

an uncle who lived in north Calcutta. He used to take us to Talkies House to watch films like *Tarzan*. I also watched Chaplin's *Gold Rush*.

By then we were in college and we had decided to become cameramen. In the middle of his college career, Ashit Raha went abroad. All my family members were in very decent, respectable professions. Everybody thought that I should study jute technology after my graduation. So, it was not possible for me to say to my family that I wanted to choose a career in films. But that is where my real interests lay. Then I told my mother, whom I thought I could confide in more than I could in my father, about my choice. But my mother had no idea about films and so she had no idea as to how she could help me either. Even my friend Ashit's brother did not show much interest in my career prospects as a cameraman in films. This was in 1953-54.

Fortunately, at that time one of my cousin sisters was getting married and somebody from my brother-in-laws house was a director of films. He was Hironmoy Sen and his cameraman was Ramananda Sengupta. My mother availed of this opportunity and when Hironmoy Sen came for the wedding, my mother asked him if he could help me. He then asked me to meet his cameraman. Thus I met Ramananda Sengupta in his Technician Studio where there were other people like Satyen Chatterjee, Durga Das Mitra and others who were sound recordists. When I went there, Ramananda Sengupta asked me whether my parents were dependent on me. I said no as I had three elder brothers and because my father was still working. Hearing this he said that I could join, as filmmaking was such an unstable and insecure profession, and because there was no one dependant on me it was still alright for someone like me to work in films.

This was how I entered films. For six months after I joined, I used to just stand and watch things happening. I had two seniors at that time—Dinen Gupta and Jagmohan Malhotra. My work was only to observe. Though I did not understand much, I did pick up a few things. For instance I saw that people to be shot never wore white cloth. They either wore light blue, green or cream clothes. I asked Dinen Gupta about this colour scheme and I learnt that white colour reflects light and hence does not give a good result in black and white films.

After six months, there occurred a problem between the landlord and the lessee of the studio and it closed down. But the equipment was all there. Then Satyajit Ray started *Pather Panchali* after the government of West Bengal funded him. At that time there was no Arriflex camera. LC camera was used for outdoor shooting. Dinen Gupta used to go for outdoor shooting with the camera. I requested Dinen Gupta to take me along with him for the outdoor shooting. He said he would have to ask for permission from Satyajit Babu's unit. Fortunately, everybody agreed and I started accompanying them on the shooting of '*Pather Panchali*'. My first work was to put the camera in position. I used to handle the Mitchell camera for masking and at the end of the day I had to sign a register. This was my daylong job. Slowly I started handling the trolley, doing reflector adjustments and thus became part of the team. While I was on that unit I realized the difference between indoor and outdoor shooting. In indoor shooting there were no artificial lights. Reflectors were used to bounce lights on mirrors or white cloth. There were no make up for artists. Any white dress was dipped in the water of tealeaves to dampen its whiteness. Thus my outdoor experience started from *Pather Panchali*.

Did you ever face any problems while assisting in your relationship with senior cameramen?

I personally never had any difficulty with my senior cameramen. Though I heard that people did face lots of problems learning about apertures and exposures. I was lucky in that respect. It was however, normal for a cameraman to use some code language with his first assistant. For instance, if he asked for 28 as the aperture, it meant that he was asking for 2.8. This was done so that others would not understand. But I was taught everything. We used to work with 1000-ft. roll. Once I had to unload an exposed film and load an unexposed one. I went to the dark room and as I took up the roll from the bobbin, it slipped down. Dinen Gupta understood that there was some problem. He immediately came to my rescue and switched off all the lights in the room and slowly rolled the entire exposed roll and saved me.

What kind of Cameras did you work with at that time, when you had just started?

At that time we generally used Mitchell or Super Parbo. Back projection was only there in Super Parbo because it had a sync facility. When Ajay Kar did his film *Harano Sur*, he used Mitchell with the projector and sync and Subrata Mitra used it with Arriflex in *Nayak* for the train scene. I never worked with Imoh but have seen it. This was sometimes used for outdoor shooting.

How did your career, and your learning curve develop after the beginning with *Pather Panchali*?

I worked with the Technician Studio for at least six years. There I got the opportunity of working with many well known cameramen of those times like Ajay Kar, G K Mehta, Bimal Mukherjee, Bishu Chakraborty, Anil Gupta and Ramananda Sengupta. Everybody helped me a lot and always tried to answer my queries. I used to place the lights for these cameramen and also did lighting on the catwalk. G K Mehta had a lot of knowledge about black and white films and I learnt a lot from him. Once a director asked for certain pattern of lighting be done and told me the dimensions he wanted. I asked Mehtaji to place the lights so that I could watch and learn. But he called me instead and asked me to do the lights so that I could learn from hands-on experience.

When I worked as an assistant to Subrata Mitra, I learned how to use exposure meter and also to judge my eyes. I worked with him in all films of Satyajit Ray except *Jalsaghar*. I sometimes used to do the background lighting and he used to do the foreground lighting. When I became a cameraman, I had a GE meter. It could be used both as a reflected and also as an incidence light meter. I learnt how to use this from Subrata Mitra. He gave me the real training about exposure, intensity, etc.

Since you did not have any formal training in cinematography, how did you learn about laboratory work and other technical aspects of filmmaking?

I never learnt any laboratory work in a theoretical sense. In our times there were tests prints made in black and white. Suppose there was a 1000 ft exposed roll. Suppose, after 5-6 day scenes there were some night scenes to be shot. After the day scenes ended we would give in a test strip of 5-7 ft to the lab. Then the night scene would be started and after it ended, another test was given. After seeing the density of the tests, we used to finalise with the laboratory in-

charge before making the negatives. Our grader was *Abanida* and before him there was *Kestoda* who graded *Pather Panchali*. *Pather Panchali* was graded in Bengal Film Laboratory and the rest of the films in which we worked (even with Satyajit Ray) at that time, were graded in the Indian Film Laboratory. R B Mehta was the lab in-charge and Abani Roy was the grader. *Abanida* used to tell us to keep the density of the negative in a range between f 8 and f 11. This will yield a normal negative with which you can always play with later as you wish. Below f 8 you would not get the black and above f 11 there's always a chance of having high contrast negative.

Most of my colour films were done in Madras. I used to first work in Gemini Labs and later on I started working in Prasad labs. I learned a lot from Ramananda Sengupta and also from the Madras film industry people. They taught me many things especially, when I started working with colour film for the first time. These people took great care in handling Satyajit Ray's film. As I got the opportunity of working with Satyajit Ray, I also received special attention in the laboratories. I still get that advantage.

How did you get your first independent break as a cameraman?

My first independent break came in 1960. 1961 was Rabindranath Tagore's centenary. Satyajit Ray told me that on this occasion the government of India had asked him to make a documentary on Tagore and he was also interested in making a film called *Teen Kanya*, to be based on short stories written by Tagore. He asked me to shoot the documentary and Subrata Mitra was to shoot for the film. I was very nervous. He wanted to release both the films in 1961 and so he started the shooting of the film first. But unfortunately, Subrata Mitra had some problem with his eyes. Doctors advised him complete rest for six

months and told him not to expose his eyes to any kind of light, not even sunlight. As a result of this, Satyajit Ray asked me to shoot for the film as well.

In *Monihar*, most of the shots were taken indoors. The three short films of *Teen Kanya*, - *Monihaar*, *PostMaster* & *Samapti* had different themes and I had to develop a visual style for all these. But I cannot take the credit for this all to my self because Satyajit Ray and Bansi Chandragupta, our art director helped me a lot in developing my style. Bansida made the sets so well and discussed every detail about it. There was a very good understanding between the cameraman, art director and the director, which helped me a lot in doing my job successfully.

Can you tell us how your work with Satyajit Ray developed?

It was a tremendous learning experience, there was a constant opportunity to try things out, to take risks. Let me give you an example. During the shooting of *Ashani Sanket*, the stock had only one speed and that was 50 for outdoors and 88 for indoors. I had a little white cloth, and some reflectors and mirrors for use in outdoor situations. Satyajit Ray wanted to show a scene set during a twilight in which the actress would come and stand near the door, in mid shot and then the sun would set. This would be the background.

While shooting, I found that the needle of the light meter never moved. I did not have any light to boost the illumination either. Satyajit Ray thought for a while and asked me to go ahead anyway. Though we knew that the negative would be underexposed, I took the shot anyway, and went back to Calcutta and asked Mandy in Gemini to make a good print of it, after explaining to him the effect we were looking for. You would not believe it; I was amazed to see the results. It was properly exposed and whatever Manikda wanted was there in the

print. This was the best lesson in exposure latitude. We had the opportunity to experiment and learn new things in our days. Today, when there are various equipments available, the credibility no more exists.

Till *Aranyer Din Ratri*, I used Kodak. All the three films of *Teen Kanya* had Plus X. In *Monihar* we used studio lights. In *Samapti* I used 72B and 30 per cent neutral density. We did not have to make our own apparatus much because as we worked with Subratada, we took his things and continued working. It was much later when I developed a **Scamac**, which I saw in foreign countries. It had a white cloth at the top with a frame where the lights can be hung and the other sides are covered with black cloth, which can be adjusted. Single lights can be used only where there is fantasy like in *Goopi Gyne Bagha Bayne* or also in *Satranj Ke Khiladi*. But if you want to depict reality, the lighting should be done accordingly. I always try to maintain the source of light.

After these films I did *Abhijan*. This film was not supposed to be directed by Satyajit Ray. He was to do the script and music and I was to do the camerawork. We went to Birbhum district to see the location. When we were in Shiuri, we saw a very interesting hill called Mama Bhagne. Manikda was so excited seeing the place that he decided to direct the film himself.

The camera was inside the car and the road was shot with the head light of the car. But the light was not enough for the shot. We discussed a lot over it and then we had an electrician Bhabaranjan in our studio. He gave us a light which worked with 24 V batteries. These lights were used in airports for airfield lighting. We place this light in between the two headlights and thus the shot was taken and it came out very well.

In *Ashani Sanket*, the famine was due to war. That was man-made famine but nature did not change. That's the reason why so many colours were used. Manikda never asked us to view certain films to understand his thoughts. He used to sit with every person in the unit including the artists and discuss minutely all the details of his film. Sometimes it also happened that he had to change his decision about shot division while shooting in location. Like in the film *Ghare Baire*, there was a shot in a big room with full size mirrors on three sides and the source of light was mainly from below. Very few lights were hanging up. There were many camera movements. When I started shooting, I had many difficulties in hiding the lights from the mirrors. But I felt very shy to say that I could not handle it.

Manikda understood that I was facing some problem. After hearing me he asked to do the lighting as I was doing and asked the actors to perform as he said. He made slight variations and that made my work very easy. He was not very rigid and was technically very sound. I learned a lot about lens and composition from him. He used to tell me about the effect he wanted and showed the source of light. Then it was on the cameraman to decide how he would place them to get the desired effect. Sometimes he used to suggest about the field light.

When I take a rehearsal after my final lighting and I find that the movement of the actors are perfect, I feel that my lighting is final. I always think about the whole sequence while doing lighting. I normally do the lighting with my eyes and rarely use meter for it.

South Indian films are very different. Whenever there was any song or dance sequence, they insisted to use some coloured papers. I never liked it. *Goopi Gyne Bagha Byne* was divided in two parts. There were two kings—

Shundi and Halla. Shundi king was good and so there was a soft good effect as everything was in white. In case of Halla king, the set was very rich with complicated designs. The ghost scene was more of an optical work. In Satyajit Ray's films, the colour scheme was entirely done by him dress, set design and its colour. In *Hirok Rajar Deshe*, the chamber of the king was entirely black and he did the whole colour scheme of the set. But in films of other directors, I used to sit with the director and discuss the entire colour scheme. Like in Tapan Sinha's *Ek Doctor Ki Maut*, I decided the set with light grey walls which is a neutral colour and can go with any dress colour. In his film *Wheelchair* also I decided the colour of the dresses that were not very gaudy. In commercial movies I do not interfere much until it hurts me too much.

Once I was shooting a south Indian film where the protagonist was a poor widowed mother. The director took me to buy the costumes. I was searching for some white sari with thin border. Suddenly the director asked me as to for whom was I looking for such white sari. I answered, for the widow protagonist. He said that in south India nobody wore white sari and I should look for red, blue, black and any other colour. I was so surprised.

Suppose, when I am working with a candle source, there is always a warm tone in it. But many use gelatine paper and warm it but I do not do so because if it becomes too much I cannot reduce it. If I use the analyser I can do the gradation according to my requirement. I do not use colour paper to warm. When I do the frame, I generally think about the natural colour. The frames depend on scene. It is basically a director's medium. In *Abhijan*, there was a running shot, a perspective shot taken by me. In *Sonar Kella* there were few shots taken by me as well as by Manikda. From 1964 onwards, from the film *Charulata*, he started operating the camera.

My style is to bring reality into films. Though it depends upon the story, but I try to maintain the realism. I never faced any problem from any artist about my frames. Mamata Shankar for example has some problems with her left side. But these artistes cannot say this to Tapan da, so they come and tell me. Men do not have any such problems.

We are all artists and so we cannot be satisfied with our work. So when we watch foreign films we think that if given the opportunity, we too can do such work. Even cameramen in Bombay get much more opportunity than us. Today, definitely people have understood much about the work of a cameraman and media has helped a lot in doing so by giving awards and writing about us. But if I talk about West Bengal, there is not much improvement in the work of the cameramen.

When we started working, we did not have much equipment nor we had any advanced technology. But the cameramen of our times did much better work than today after having all facilities. Even when I analyse my own work, I find the difference. I do not know the reason, may be the directors do not much urge to do a better film. Now the directors feel that if there are lights, it is a night scene and if the lights are not required, it is a day scene. This is their level of thinking.

Today, sets remain the same and it is given a different look by changing only the furniture or the curtains of the room. When I face such a situation, it becomes very tough for me to digest. Most of the time I sit with the architect and decide about the set in advance.

Even shots are not taken in different ways. There are very rare trolley movements and panning of the camera. The directors do not think much about the shots, lenses to be used or about the set. For a close up shot I can use 25,

50 or 75 but the directors of today do not have the idea about the difference between these three shots. Sometimes they have ego problems. If a cameraman suggests some shots to the director, he might think that the cameraman is crossing his limits. As he is the director, he is always right and whatever he suggests shall be applied. Then the cameraman faces the problem. Today there is no director who can conceive the entire scene himself. Sometimes the artist also makes problem. Though the director goes according to the cameraman's thoughts, but the artist comes late and the director is in a hurry to finish the job fast. You might have thought of a certain movement but due to time shortage everything has to be changed.

In 1996 I did a workshop in Pune, and have done many in Calcutta and in Assam where I demonstrated a lecture during the inaugural. I think practical training is more needed than theoretical knowledge. But theory is also needed. My assistants also get the opportunity of doing wrong things in the process of learning. We used to ask many questions but today students do not ask as many questions.