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You have had a long career in cinematography. Can you tell us what you feel when you look back to the beginnings of your career?

There is a contrast in the lighting of today and yesteryears. The scene of lighting has gone down. Previously, scenes of marriage and death were different. Today, people working for serials can view every scene in the monitor of the computer and view the movement of images. Thus no technical brilliance is required. There are many serials where the photography is excellent but that does not go with the scene. Photography cannot be separated from a scene but that is not given much priority these days. The close-ups shot in earlier days took a lot of time because the screen with full blown up face had to be accepted by people and for this, much work had to be done. Nowadays, more work is done in flat light. If the cameraman is quite perfect in his work, he would use some strong backlights and the face light would be average. But the contrast of lighting is somehow very much missing today. I have photographed about 250 films in several languages like Oriya, Assamese and Bengali. Today, unfortunately we cannot see cameraman's contribution towards a film or serial. He is rather simply an operator in the world of moving images...

I started my working life as an assistant lightman in the year 1949-50. But my interest in photography goes back further than that. When I was 13 or 14 years old, I began to have an interest in still photography. I took many photographs with my uncle's camera. I always wanted to catch a moment or get some sense of life in those photographs. My father P N Gupta was associated with films and had directed three films. My uncle Dhiren Ganguly was a pioneer of Bengali films during the silent film era and had made films like *Bilet Pheret* (England Returned). But I was not even born then.

Anyway, to come back to how I started with photographs; I used to think that if I continue taking photographs, I could choose this as my profession someday. From my childhood I tried to develop negatives and also to enlarge photographs in my own room. It was with a lot of difficulty that I started the whole process in my own room. You could say that in one sense this was the beginning of my photographic career. I used a 35-mm Argus camera with one lens. I used to like shooting portraiture. I used the 35-mm film cassette and also processed them in my house. One of my cousins, Anil Sen was also staying with me and he had a lot of interest in photography, he encouraged me a lot. He was a very good photographer, but later he became a geologist. Dhiren Ganguly gave me the opportunity to enter the film industry. Ahindra Choudhury's brother Panchi Chadhuri was my uncle's cameraman. I began by assisting him.

The cameras used those days are no more in use. We used to have cameras like **Mitchell, Imoh & Super Par-Bo**. In the Super Par-Bo camera when you were looking through the viewfinder, you were actually looking through the film itself!

Recently I was watching the film *Rajat Jayanti* directed by Pramotesh Barua. There was a trolley shot of a vehicle taken from the top of a terrace. The camera used was so heavy and it is amazing that how Bimal Roy, the photographer could such a beautiful job. I used to watch many films to see the development in our times. But there is no comparison between today's films and the old ones. Once I shot a complete scene in candlelight using a 500-speed film, which came out very well. But this kind of experiment is dying out slowly. In **Imoh** camera there was variation in speeds with 16, 24 and 48 frames. It was generally operated with a battery but if used with a 100-foot spool then it would have to be operated with a spring action.

In earlier times, the director used to think through his story line and discuss it with the cameramen, makeup man, and everybody related with the film to know whether it was realistic. We would try out back and front projections. This is not even possible any

longer in any Calcutta studio. But these are very important. The front projection was beautifully done in *Saptapadi* by Ajay Kar. The balance, dimensions and separations were excellently done.

I watched especially the photography of silent films. This helped me a lot when I worked in a film called *Purir Mandir*, which talks about the birth of the temple in Puri. Probodh Das photographed this film almost as if it was a silent film. First a piece of wood came drifting on to the seashore, then a plate was brought and a double print of sea waves was taken. The camera was tilted up and then down perfectly to show the temple arising from the sea. This was done in 1952-53.

Previously, the cameramen never used to reveal everything to their assistants. Even I came across these problems. It was the cameraman who used to give the final exposure. Unlike today, light could not be measured in those times. It was all done with the accuracy of the eye. The same light was used with various apertures like 4, 3 or 2.8. This was never done by assistants. This I later felt was not the correct process. One should measure with exposure meter. I first saw a cameraman called Bidyapati Ghosh using the exposure meter, but I also saw a cameraman like Suresh Das use his eyes, with great accuracy. I got an opportunity to work with Ajit Sen, brother of minister Ashok Sen, who had worked in the UFA studio in Germany. He made feature films there and then came to India. From him I learned how to use 75 mm lens which we use for close-ups and long shots. At first I was worried about the focus. He told me the exposure and slowly I learned to focus and the 75 mm lens gave me more depth because of the exposure. There was a film called *Noromer Yogya*, a mythological film shot in 1957-58 where 75 mm lens was used for long shots. In those days outside shots were taken very rarely. Most of them were taken indoors with backdrop made.

If I get a good script I can volunteer my work but they should utilise me properly. I do not like to work in the confused working environment that is prevalent today.

Even in my own films I find that I am not doing justice to camera work because I have to look after so many other areas as well. The Camera should be treated as the equal of the other departments of filmmaking, be they acting or music. If we cannot place the camera properly, with the right amount of light and against a proper background, then the whole magic of camerawork gets lost. If there is no proper backdrop then the whole suspense is lost.

Another thing which I do not like in films is too much use of bright colours like red car, green dress, yellow hair band, etc. These attract more than the actors and actresses. The whole thing looks like a picture postcard. Today films are no longer created. They are based on facts like murder and so on. After the murder has been done, the story does not have that strong movement. Like *Mahaprasthan Path* is a film that makes you wait for the end along with its photography, song sequence, performance of actors and actresses and their make up. Now the art of creating life in cinema is no more. It is more a game of light. It is like watching a disco dance performance. Too many coloured costumes, different hair styles with the absence of theatrical mood and technicalities. It is far from actuality. A scene where a boy is playing a piano on the seashore with his shirt torn off and then riding on a bicycle is quite absurd in reality. If it is a dream, it can still be accepted. There is just no logic. The song may be good but it is quite mechanical with no touch of life in it. Nowadays even Bengali cinema is deteriorating. The glamour of Hindi films cannot be afforded by Bengali filmmakers but they try to copy some parts which give worse results. Backdrop, background and lighting are all lacking. I recently shot a song sequence of a Bengali film which was shot in the rain and cost Rs. 50,000 and I think it is not affordable by a Bengali filmmaker. The song was sung by Sandhya Mukherjee and Manna Dey. Today the actors cannot express the feeling of a song. Thus they look very flat when picturised.

I assisted Panchi Chaudhuri, Santosh Guha Ray, Suresh Das, Prabadh Das, Jatin Das, Dhiren Dey, Sudhir Bose and Ramananda Sengupta. I was also attached with the team of *Pather Panchali* with Subrata Mitra. He was a very talented man and I helped him in

many ways; like for a day scene shot with the help of bounce lighting. Then we did *Aparajita*, *Paras Pather* and *Jalsaghar*. I was the camera assistant for all these films. I had already become a cameraman by then and shot films like *Ajantrik*, *Ektara* and *Bhai Bhai* (Oriya). But I could not leave the Satyajit Ray's team. However due to date problems I had to quit. I assisted Ramananda Sengupta in his film *Madhur Athi*. I also worked independently in *Antariksha* and *Ganga*. When I started working independently, I had to shoot three films simultaneously: *Ajantrik*, *Ektara* and *Antariksha*. I worked with Ritwik Ghatak in *Ajantrik*, *Bari Theke Paliye*, *Meghe Dhaka Tara* and *Nagarik*. I shot almost 70 films as a cameraman. Then after I became a director, I still handled camera for films like *Chowringhee*, *Sankha Bela* and few others.

There was a film called *Ashite Ashio Na*. The story goes like: there was pond in which whoever dipped would have half his present age. When this film was released, our Prime Minister was Lal Bahadur Shastri. He came to visit this pond with his secretary. Shashtri's character was depicted by Rabi Ghosh and his secretary was Kamal Mitra. One day Rabi Ghosh came out from the tent and dipped in the pond to become small and then took another dip. After dipping twice he became very small. This was the story of the small Prime Minister who had to be photographed. I did not do such work before and so I suggested a cameraman from Bombay. A cameraman called Satya Narayan came and shot the scene, but before the projection he left. Then I took over the job and shot in one strip. This shot was taken by trick process. All the shots were taken in 75 mm lens and the shot of Rabi Ghosh was taken in the same strip at 25 mm lens. Both the sides were masked. The Mitchell camera has its own mask inside, which is close to the film. I made a full dummy of the real shot and satisfied the producers and directors first. Then I shot with actual artists.

From my childhood I had a very good relation with Ritwik Ghatak and from the film *Nagarik*, the relationship grew stronger. His next film was *Ajantrik*, then *Bari Theke Paliye* and *Meghe Dhaka Tara*. I had a very good understanding with him and I always tried

to photograph his thinking, which I could do in many films. In the scene inside the car in the film *Ajantrik*, the composition of lighting was matched correctly with the exterior in a balanced way. In those days there were no generators or battery lights. There were morning scenes, scenes of afternoon, evening and also of a rainy day. I always tried to give what the director wanted. Then I never used meter and did all these jobs through my eye. Even today in spite of having meters, I sometimes feel that your eye can be a better judge of lights. If the lighting is not correct then you cannot have that life in your photography.

In *Bari Theke Paliye*, when the boy runs away from his house and reaches Calcutta, he sees everything enlarged. This was shot consciously in 18 mm lens. These decisions were all discussed earlier. Sometimes we also worked without filters. When I used to do still photography, I never used filters but the black and white effect came quite well. So I thought why will it not work here? So I did it. In *Ganga* also there are works without using filters and are looking good. In *Ajantrik*, Ritwik babu wanted that when Kalwar was going away after buying the car, and Bimal is watching, the head light of the car and the reflection of the glowing sun should fall on Bimal's eyes filled with tears. The reflected light from the head light falling on the lens and also on Bimal's face was really very painful to do. The director wanted this. It looked very good on the screen.

In *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, *Chhacher Bera* the night scene in which the song *Je Rate Mor Duar Guli Bhanglo Jhare*, was shot in three shots. The background was looking very dull but I thought that if I give some light then the picture would look flat. So I pasted a white cloth at the back and reflected the light on the cloth. When I shot in 75 mm lens, it gave a very soft glow in the background and light on the face was less. There were backlights, high lights and cheek light so that the separation of the face comes out well. This was actually the portrait light which we do not find now. In *Meghe Daka Tara* there is a scene where he visits his friends house and finds his sister there. Shadows have been used to show that she was very tired and was broken down from inside. There was a sound of a

whip in her tiredness. I used some dark patch at her back to show that she was coming out from the dark, which signified her pain that she carried throughout her life but did not get anything in return. Any decorative light would not have brought this effect. So I used only one light from which the shadow fell. The face light fell on the staircase. This was a separate light and as she came down the staircase her face grew darker. These were all planned in advance and hence the cameraman's contribution was registered. I used reflected light while shooting inside the room. I generally try to maintain the source of light which I did in *Antariksh*, *Ganga*, *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, *Bari Theke Paliye* and *Akash Chhoya*. But always the source of light could not be maintained properly and the pictures were somewhat hazy.

Nowadays, same lighting goes with almost 10 scenes. But I used to change light in every scene because I thought every scene differed and hence lighting should also differ, whether it is a day or a night scene. The directors of today cannot differentiate between the lighting used for different times. If he is asked to show an afternoon scene, first it has to be decided whether the sun has already set or is still there. If the director wants a sunlit afternoon then I pass a strong side light from the window side to give the effect of the setting sun. The shadow that falls and the source of light are given a slight wash and backlight is provided to avoid shadow from falling on the wall. I never faced any problem with the directors regarding time because I always set my lighting before the director entered. Before my final lighting, I always visit the set four to six times and discuss with the art director about the settings outside the framed shot. I did this even for black and white films. This is very important to set the lighting for a particular scene. The relationship between the cameraman and the director should be congenial. The cameraman should always listen to what the director wants in his film and if the director is less competent to handle situations then the cameraman should do the needful without taking the credibility into his own account. This relationship can only make a good film. A cameraman is not a director, he is a cameraman.

Sometimes it also happened that directors came to me and surrendered that he cannot handle a particular picturisation, say that of a song sequence. For that a cameraman should have the sense of editing to handle such jobs. I have also done such jobs. There was an early morning shot when someone was running away from a house. The person came through different rooms and finally reached the main entrance. When he came out of the house the sun was just coming out and the sky would look exactly like that. When he looks back the house is seen like a dark structure and his face is lit by a patch of light coming from the rising sun. That patch had to be shown as a correct sunlight. But the picture is black and white and there was no scope of creating the scene with any colour. Then as he looks, the sun is seen coming out through the leaves of a tree. For this scene, I went and shot a real sunrise and while editing, this was added which looked very good. In *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, the scene when the sister snatches the letter from the brother was shot inside a room. The set was done on the banks of a pond in Technician Studio. The light was reflected from the water on to the walls all through. All these ideas were of the director and I only followed his orders. What the director thinks is very difficult to visualise and picturise and this can only be done through proper coordination among director, cameraman and the editor.

In *Pather Panchali* when Harihar returns after the death of Durga, and asks about her whereabouts, the mother cries holding Durga's saree. Karunadi, the mother, said that she could not cry like that. After a while, Manikda (Satyajit Ray) said, "Well, you need not have to cry. Just take the cloth slowly near your face and Subrata will take the camera slowly on your face." This sequence had a sad music which played the crying role very well. In *Meghe Dhaka Tara's* last scene, when the sister says her brother that she wants to live, the camera moves 360°. This pan was marvellous and there were four twists of camera. Similarly it was in *Pather Panchali* when Durga was getting wet in rain. First we thought we would use a trolley but that was not possible on the muddy soil. At that time zoom was not there. We had to change lenses to 35, 40, 50 and 70 at the same place to register the rain.

Then there were long and mid shots. I made a film called *Benarasi* in which a man kidnaps a girl from the bank of Ganga. I set the trolley on the banks of the Ganges to shoot the scene from in-between the crowd. The camera came out from the water of the Ganges and 10 people were pulling with a rope and I moved up operating the camera. That was an excellent shot.

Natun Pata was my first film as a director, and it also won the National Award. Photography was quite well done and it was good also in *Marjina Abdullah* and *Devi Chaudhurani*. Previously we had efficient electricians who understood what I wanted. They had an idea as to which light I wanted and also which would suit in that location. Now we do not have electricians. Now people who work on the floor use only flat lights like Multi 20, Hard/soft and Halogen. With all those lights the scene becomes so hazy that camera work is no more seen. Earlier, the electricians worked totally in a different pattern. I remember a film in which Ashit Burman was wearing a white tie. We measured the length of the distance Ashit Burman walked and then dodged the tie. We tried to underexpose the tie so that it did not match with the face light. We also avoided the shadow to fall on the shirt. I also worked for catwalks. We had the initiative to learn and we worked for it but the present generation does not want to learn but are very particular about counting notes. I lacked two things. I never counted money and I had no sense of time that was consumed in my work because I did not have a watch. Today *time* and *money* is the main factor. Work satisfaction is no more there and work efficiency is no longer seen.

My first colour film was Utpal Dutta's *Jhar*. It was shot in Raj Bhawan for 15 days and the photography was excellent. I always tried to photograph like a painting. Today in Hindi films, the photography is somewhat flat. Though 500 ASA is available but is not utilised to its extent. Probably they are thinking that it can be used only for depth of focus. I did not have any favourite aperture and have worked according to the available lighting. But

I always tried to maintain certain specific apertures. While working indoors, I tried to maintain the aperture at f4. Till now I work with indoor and outdoor set together. In my last film too, I blended the two sets but I try to maintain the uniformity of the negative.

The laboratories of Calcutta are in the same condition as the Calcutta State Transport buses. There is no quality consciousness, or the will to improve the standard and quality. Whatever is there, is all. These laboratories process in 'Gamma' and then print in flat light hence, the output is not very good. But laboratories like Prasad and other private labs try to do some good work provided the negative has something substantial. I first started my colour photography with lillies. Then I shifted to 'Band' where corrections had to be made at every print. Now in labs, when they find the chemicals slightly weak, they use a fresh bath. The particles of the film remain in the water while processing and when fresh bath is poured, the particles start moving and get attached to the film. Thus, some 'stars' are formed. In private laboratories, they drain out the chemical after certain thousand feet. This is not there in government studios. As bath is very expensive, the government cannot afford a fresh bath every time and wait for the negatives to come. May be they are economically correct....

I have also worked in video for many serials and am still doing so. I will be starting *Chowringhee* and *Nishi Kutumbo*. For video photography, composition should be good and camera operation should be excellent because there are no long shots, but mid shots and close shots. The lights which are available here are simply poisonous for cameramen. The colour temperature is not uniform. The use of 3200 Kelvin is not there at all and about 90 per cent of the cameramen do not even feel it. Photography is totally a different temperament, expression and image. If these things can be placed properly in mind then I think even video photography can be done very well. The serial *Mirza Ghalib* had very good photography done by K K Mahajan. To preserve classics, which is very important, can only be done in Super 16. If I am asked to repeat my older films I cannot do them. This is because, the atmosphere is not there, secondly the mentality of technicians and also actors

have changed. Now these people ignore the audience and pass their time. The actors do whatever they are told to do irrespective of their involvement. For *Marjina Abdullah*, I had made my own design elements and made the set and arranged the pops accordingly. There was a large idol inside which was made by a well known artisan in Calcutta. There was dynamic camera movement in the whole film.

In my career I faced many technical problems. Like sometimes I have to move from normal lens to zoom lens because the person moving the trolley cannot keep the timing. These types of problems come very often and are also solved by compensating with the artist. The camera moves a bit and the artist also moves along with it. When a crane moves at the right time, the output is good. These timely operations cannot be seen now.

The films which inspired me from my early childhood are Pramotesh Barua's *Mukti*, and Sushil Mazumdar's *Jogajog*. Ajit Sen was the cameraman of this film with excellent photography. Pramotesh Barua's another film *Sesh Uttar* was another film that I liked very much. In *Mukti* there was a track shot in the opening. I thought it was a zoom shot as there was no trolley. But later I came to know that the successive doors were made of same sizes so as to move the trolley. The camera then used was **Super Parbo**. I used this camera to shoot a film called *Bandhu*. It is very difficult to shoot with this camera. You have to see through the film and you need a white outline to see the characters moving. Once I was shooting a back projection in a studio where the scene is in the bunk of a train. An artist was on the upper bunk and Mala Sinha was on the lower bunk. I had to follow the artist coming down from the bunk and then compose the scene with Mala Sinha. But I could not see. It was a shot of a winter night with black blanket wrapped around the artist. The whole scene was black for me. The director asked me "What happened? He already came down and you are still standing up there." Then it was decided that after the artist gets up, he would sit for a moment. His sleeping suit was light coloured which allowed me to catch him in the frame. We came across many such situations. Now the directors sit in front of the

monitor and watch every move. The work is much easier. After shooting, I always used to go to the studio to watch the processing of the negatives. Then I used to see every negative on the table, put my signature and then come for shooting.

I liked Hollywood films like Gary Cooper's *Bridge on the River Coy*, Paul Muni's film, I do not remember the name, with a flock of birds, and many more films. While watching I always used to think if I could use the same techniques in my film and I tried a few of them too. I did a film called *Uttar Megh* where I tried to photograph in that way. I did indoor shooting of a vehicle standing at the level crossing where the train passes away focussing its light on the person's face and after it passed away the tail light of the vehicle lit up and the level crossing opened. I did this kind of photography in many films. I think the concentrating effect, which the black and white films had, cannot be seen in coloured films due to its different angles of focus. In my film *Natun Pata*, the girl receives a letter from her in-laws and reads it on her way to the house. The sun is setting and the mother is seen picking up dried clothes. The sister-in-law reads out the letter to the mother as she moves inside the house and her face turns dark. There was no reflection, only one shot in natural light and even the exposure was same. If you change the exposure within shots then it cannot be compensated with the light number.

Sometimes it so happens that the photography is marvellous but it does not go with the film. Few shots were like this in *Ganga*. But Nishida and Rajan Babu let those shots go. In *Ganga* the far view was quite distinctively used. This was done by conditioning the light. Light conditioning work is also there in *Ajantrik* where 75 mm lens was used before which there was a pile of paddy and the car standing back. I used to separate the light conditioned shots to maintain the depth of the scene. Nowadays nobody takes so much care. Even I have become like this. Because there are certain producers who feel that the film cannot run if certain actors or actresses are not there. But actors do not have any value if the film is not successful. But you cannot make them understand nor do they try to

understand. I worked with Tapan Sinha in *Hate Bajare* where the first entry of the villain was shot with a close-up of a dog with voice over and slowly the camera pans and catches the glimpse of the villain taking to Vaijayantimala. I found this operation most difficult because the movement of the dog, the trolley movement and shooting the villain's face while the camera was moving was very difficult to synchronise. There should always be coordination with the art director but it is mostly not found today because art directors have become *pandal* masters. Even the *puja pandal* makers are better art directors today with good sense of lighting. I worked with Banshi Chandragupta and Rabi Chatterjee who were like Kartik Bose, a renowned art director.

In *Pratham Pratishruti*, I made a one-storeyed house into a double storeyed house but it could not be understood that it was not originally a double storeyed building. I always discuss the set design with my art director but after the construction the design does not always remain the same as we discuss earlier. This is due to inefficiency of the art director. Banshi Babu always used to look through the camera till he was satisfied with the set, as he wanted it to be. He used to see every detail of the set before taking a shot. Set plays 60 per cent role in photography and then comes lighting. Today the directors cannot present the sense of feeling of a person who has just left a place. They show the place with some bright colours or use designer curtains and walls, but the feeling of a used place cannot be portrayed anymore. I have to do few things if I want to show it in my film like crushing the bedcover or keeping a glass of water which is half drunk. These things normally do not come in the heads of today's directors; they have to be pin pointed.

Cinema halls do not have good projectors to screen a film with night shots in total darkness. They cannot show the clarity of the scene. So now I have to use low lights to cut the figure from the dark for clarity, and in this we lose the charm of the film. The theatres do not maintain the reflectors in the projectors and even the projector operators are least bothered about the quality of the film. Good operators are no longer there, there is no

carbon adjustment and screens are not cleared. So even if we try to make a good film, our effort is lost while screening them. I do not want to write about these because there will be no protest in our country. I do not want to fight but always look forward to betterment. Today after Salil Choudhury has left the music world, there is no wave in the music industry. It is simply moving slowly in its course of direction without any life. I do not feel life should be like this. It should always have the darker and the lighter side.