

Interview

Premendra Mazumder

Let the Light Come in, and Don't Rely on Shortcuts: In Conversation with the Master Storyteller Atanu Ghosh



Atanu Ghosh

Atanu Ghosh is one of the most acclaimed filmmakers of contemporary Bengali cinema. Mainly an urban storyteller, Atanu so far has made six feature films: *Angshumaner Chhobi* (2009), *Takhan Teyish* (2010), *Rupkatha Noy* (2013), *Ek Phali Rod* (2014), *Abby Sen* (2015) and *Mayurakshi* (2017). Last one got the National Award for Best Bengali Film of the year. He just has completed his seventh feature film *Binisutoy*. Right now he is shooting his eighth film *Robibaar*. Within this very busy schedule he managed to create a comfortable space for this intimate conversation exclusively for E-CineIndia.

Premendra: You are now shooting a feature film 'Robibar' (Sunday) with two famous stars of contemporary Bengali cinema - Prosenjit Chatterjee and Jaya Ahsan. What is the subject you are dealing with in this film?

Atanu: Robibaar comes in league with my last two films, *Binisutoy* and



Prosenjit Chatterjee and Jaya Ahsan in Robibaar

Mayurakshi. For quite some time, I wanted to make a set of films on self-discovery pitted against the backdrop of Kolkata. The aim was to capture the light and shadows of urban middle class and their tryst with changing times and perspective. Self-discovery, as we all know, means many

things. It means finding your purpose in life. Or, digging deep into your own psyche and revisiting the experiences that shaped your life, both good and bad. The effects of self-discovery may include happiness, fulfillment, clarity, moral vision and maybe even illumination. But it is always a journey through fear, confusion, misunderstanding, anxiety, suspicion and many other challenges

P: You already have worked with both of these actors. Prosenjit Chatterjee was there in your National Award winning film 'Mayurakshi' (2017). But people say that Ritwik Chakraborty is your most favorite actor. Why have you opted for Prosenjit instead of Ritwik in this film?

A: I always believe in casting actors who are best suited for the role and Prosenjit Chatterjee is the best choice for portraying the complex persona of Asimabha in Robibaar. Besides, in this trilogy (Mayurakshi-Binisutoy-Robibaar), I have purposefully repeated two actors – Prosenjit Chatterjee and Jaya Ahsan. When people would watch all the three films together, they would easily discover the reason behind it. Actually, Aryanil of Mayurakshi serves



Ritwik Chakraborty and Jaya Ahasan in Binisutoy

as a distinctive alter ego of Asimabha of Robibaar. Regarding Prosenjit Chatterjee, I must say we go back a long way. Rituda (Rituparno Ghosh) introduced me to him and he produced one of my early tele-films. Thereafter, I was always attracted to his enviable discipline, dedication and profound passion for the medium. Working with him in the two films, I relied on his deep sensitivity and grasp on technicalities of filmmaking. The effort and perseverance he puts in to improve on his performance is quite exemplary. It's commonly said that a director should strive to bring out the best from an actor. I would rather say, Prosenjit Chatterjee's involvement encourages me to go all out for the character he plays in the film.

P: You have just finished one film 'Binisutoy' with Jaya Ahsan which has not yet been released. So you have no idea whether people would like her in your film or not, because you've your own signature in your films. Again you are doing another one, immediately after that, with the same heroine. Any special reason for that?

A: My answer to the previous question actually touches upon this. Repeating two actors is part of a design in lieu of the three films being clubbed together. Sraboni Barua of *Binsutoy*, which Jaya has played brilliantly, finds another curious outlet in Sayani, the Law Officer and writer in *Robibaar*.

P: What is your assessment about Jaya Ahsan as an actor and also as a person? Do you think that her talent has been properly used by the film industries of Kolkata and Dhaka, where she works simultaneously?

A: There is a concealed technique in the complex craft of film acting. Refined intricate acting always comes down to an invisible naturalism that makes the challenging components of characterisation far less obvious than in any other art form. Jaya brilliantly analyses the script, intricately plans both the inner life and actions of a character, and develops a truthful, complex plan for a deeply subtle and natural rendering. She is undoubtedly one of our finest talents right now.



Atanu Ghosh with Jaya Ahsan and Prosenjit Chatterjee

P: You made your first feature film 'Angshumaner Chhobi' (2009) ten years back. Then you made 'Takhan Teyish' (2010), 'Rupkatha Noy' (2013), 'Ek Phali Rod' (2014), 'Abby Sen' (2015) and then 'Mayurakshi' (2017). Though most of your films are critically acclaimed, but you got the National Award in 2017 for 'Mayurakshi'. Why it took so long to get this coveted award?

A: I never thought about this. In fact, when I make a film, I never bother about the prospect of box office success or winning awards. My only concern is whether the new film would lead to at least one small step ahead in my journey as a filmmaker. Besides, I have always made narrative films, which more or less cater to a discerning common audience. None of them are tailor made to suit the requirements of film festivals or fit the criteria for fetching awards.

P: You are making tele-films since 2003 and have made more than twenty titles. Some of those were very popular and still remembered by your niche audience. Why have you stopped making that type of films?

A: Even more! I think I have made 31 tele-films! There is no scope for making them now as all television channels have stopped producing them. When I made them between 2003 and 2008, the channel authorities gave us ample freedom to choose unconventional subjects, or go for experimentation. The genre became enormously popular only on account of its novelty of content and uniqueness of treatment.

P: How was your journey as a tele-film maker and from there shifting to feature films? Which one is you enjoying more and why?

A: Making tele-films was quite an inspiring phase. Tele-films not only gave a platform to us, but also provided much needed experience to try out and showcase whatever we were motivated to make. Besides, the tele-film boom helped in creating an enlightened audience for out-of-the-box content. That audience group is still existent, and curiously they inspire us to try out something new in large screen too. When I started making feature films, my priority was set on meaningful work, exploring original and unconventional themes, delving deep into human mind, its nature, variety and complexity in modern contemporary world, using a simple, minimalist narrative form. I think come what may, a filmmaker should stick to his belief, his conviction. He has to experiment and make mistakes rather than compromise. If he succeeds, it's fantastic. If he fails, he has to review his work and try again.

P: You write the narratives of your films by yourself, never depending upon the stories of others. It is already proved that you are a great storyteller. And interestingly, all of your stories are completely different from others and unique in nature and content. Where from you collect the ingredients?



Radhika Apte and Soumitra Chatterjee in Rupkatha Noy

A: Largely, they have been intuitive, mostly born out my own experiences, feelings and emotions. Besides, watching people is one of my favorite pastimes, especially when I'm at public places. I try to figure out the back stories of these strangers and this churning process often leads to the birth of a plot. But I take quite sometimes to reach a decision whether the plot is really suited for making a feature

film. Sometimes, I have discarded a script even after second or third draft, simply because I felt it was not worthy going ahead with it.

P: Most of your stories deal with the relationship enriched with complicated texture of the obscure patterns of human psychology. Why do you prefer this complex topic?

A: I am always drawn to the relationship between the mind, body and its social and psychological context. The interaction between the human mind and our everyday experience is actually the way we understand and experience our own self and that of others. I love reading about new insights on human mind, from philosophical, psychological and social angle from the perspective of modern cognitive science. With the ever increasing data on how the human mind works, the field that used to be social psychology has moved in the direction of a broader field of cognitive sociology. There is a focus on how we perceive ourselves and the role of memory, feelings and emotions and how all this affects human attitude and behaviour.



Atanu Ghosh directing Prosenjit Chatterjee and Soumitra Chatterjee in Mayurakshi

P: From the previous film to very next one, you are dealing with more obscurities and much complexities, getting more and more philosophical. Is it a conscious transformation or something spontaneous?

A: Yes. I have been trying to go more and more organic. And, in fact, I am enjoying this process. It is some sort of a journey of self-discovery not only for the filmmaker but also my soul. Right from the scriptwriting process down to editing, I try to stay away from anything that is designed and cooked up. Instead, I wait for my natural instincts to guide me towards a very spontaneous free-flowing pattern, which is natural, convincing and metaphysical.

P: I am closely observing your films for last ten years. I like your style of storytelling, dealing with the characters, structural pattern and overall mounting of the films. I am overwhelmed just watching the preview screener of your last film 'Binisutoy'. It's like a vintage wine which intoxicates slowly and sustains for a long time with a thoroughly gratifying indulgence. Brilliant narrative, awesome presentation and excellent performance by Jaya Ahsan and Ritwik Chakraborty. Where from you got this idea? Is it something your own story, a self-extension as a storyteller?

A: Actually, in our life, we often long to create an alternate world of subsistence for us. Primarily, our objective is to create a bond of empathy and trust within the make-believe world over which we have absolute control. That way, we are offered some solace from the wounds we suffer in our real life – all the cuts, burns and bruises. As I developed the concept for *Binisutoy*, I conceived it around two people, who are materially successful in real life. But in the worlds they create, they are always in crisis and seeking solace. My focus was to explore the belief that experiences of life serve as the ultimate source of sustenance, realisation and serenity.

P: You love to play with mystery! Most of your characters, especially the protagonists are mysterious. But as a person, as far as we all know, you are very open and transparent, free and frank. But why are you so obsessed with mystery?



Poster of Rupkatha Noy

A: In one or two of my films, there are some subplots involving crime and detection. But mostly, I have relied on complexities and intricacies of human psyche, the strange ways of destiny, the unpredictable crisis propping out of nowhere and our struggle in facing it. There is a “what is going to

happen next” factor. But I believe, it is so close to life that emotional turmoil gets precedence over thrill.

P: You are basically an urban storyteller. Your stories and the characters are all urban. Even if they cross the time-line (as in 'Abby Sen') they still remain urban. Have you ever thought to go beyond the urban periphery?

A: Going beyond the urban periphery means quite a big change of life for me. As I have been largely relying on my own instincts and organic responses, I

must leave my urban life and seek a new home outside the urban periphery. Declaring an identity between the film and its backdrop not only grounds the film but also shackles it to its location. Understanding the film, it is implied, requires intimate knowledge of the locales it describes, as well as people, living conditions, history, culture and everything.

P: What is your opinion about the present situation of the country? Do you think that the filmmakers are comfortable to express themselves freely?

A: Sometimes, it feels quite scary, when you hear about artists, writers, filmmakers attacked by fanatics for uttering a note of criticism against some political leader or party. Intolerance, hatred, moral policing born out of political agenda is gaining so much of prominence that it is really alarming. Society can flourish only when it has space for difference of opinion and free thinking. And lack of that space certainly threatens democracy.

P: India is the highest film producing country of the world, but in all leading film festivals of the world, Indian films are failing miserably. What could be the reason? What do you suggest to change the situation?



Atanu Ghosh directing Riwik Chakraborty and Chandreyee Ghosh in Binisutoy

A: In terms of form and treatment, we are choosing not to make radical experiments in Bengali cinema. We are still dependent on the audience to come to the theatres or the sale of satellite and digital rights to cover the cost of production. We are also continuing the tradition of narrative form primarily to cater to a wider

audience. But all over the world, cinema is going for deconstruction of narrative. That's true particularly in

competitive sections of the top-ranking festivals. Further, in order to make our presence felt, we need to collaborate with foreign producers/co-producers/agents, who will ensure that our films are at least watched by the jury. Just to get the foreign production agency collaboration, we need at least ₹15 lakh to ₹20 lakh. In the absence of such tie-ups, I often find that our screeners are not even watched by the jury of the selection committees. This is clearly evident as we get the entire viewing statistics on screener platforms. In the last 10 years, there has been a radical change in the scenario at festivals. Nearly every Indian film that gets a berth at any of the top-notch festivals has a foreign collaboration or connection. In order to create something worthy for

these festivals, we must make our films exclusively targeted towards them and forego our ambitions to get good returns from local theatrical and satellite sales. The constant pressure on a director to make a film that will recover and even make money through multiple sources for the producers is too taxing. Now, if I choose to make a film that will exclusively cater to the requirements of these A-list festivals, I will have to forgo all these pressures. Earlier, our icons didn't have to go through all this. If I make a film taking into consideration all these factors but without any of the above attributes, what will happen to the fate of my film and my local producer if it is not taken by the A-list festivals? There is no guarantee of success in any form of art. The producer will be in a soup and won't be able to recover the basic cost since all other avenues have been deliberately ignored. I can't afford to take this risk now.

P: Bollywood is getting much more popular in the commercial circuit worldwide. In many countries Bollywood is the main contender of Hollywood in box office. What is the reason behind it?

A: First, the language is Hindi, which serves as a wider connect worldwide than any of the other regional Indian language. Secondly, the biggest Bollywood stars have huge global popularity. Also, Bollywood productions are backed by huge financial resource, which invariably attracts international distributors. Lastly, most of these chartbusters are mainstream populist cinema which caters to a wide audience group.

P: Many filmmakers are highly critical about the overall ambience of the Tollygaunje (Kolkata) film industry. Do you agree with them? Could you please explain the real situation from your long experience with this industry?

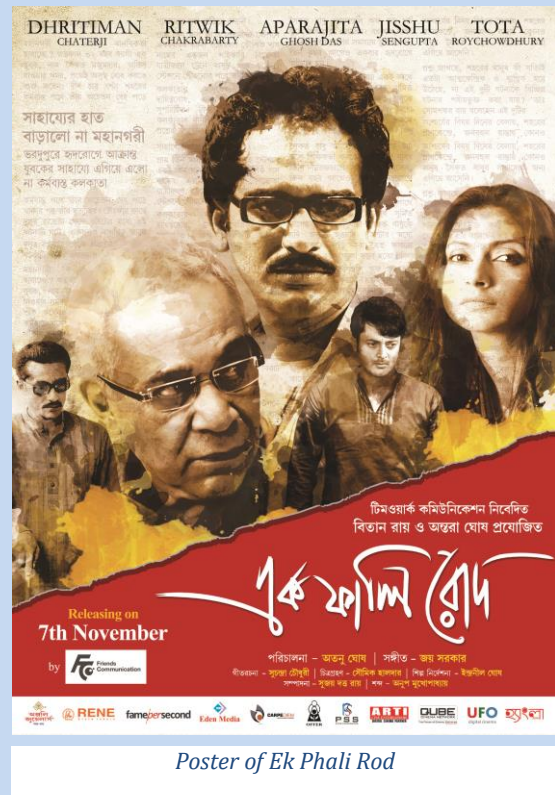
A: I think, there are positive and negative influences in any industry. Filmmaking is never a bed of roses. Hurdles, challenges and obstacles are always part of the journey. But if the filmmaker is focused and grounded, he can carry on doing his work. I'm certain about that.

P: Some of your films have traveled to many festivals. Got several awards. Are you satisfied with this appraisal? Or you think, your films are underrated by the festival circuit and you deserve much more applause?

A: I think being underrated is always a blessing. When one is underrated, he can strive to become better, to prove others wrong and reveal his full potential, and should it fail, there is nothing to lose!

P: Do your films recover money and your producers are happy with the return? Or you are still not a favorite director of the producers? Do you get the producers easily now?

A: I work within a very restricted budget with specific plans for recovery of investment. With one producer (Friends Communication), I have done three films so far and with another (Echo Entertainment), two till date. They have utmost faith and trust on me and I believe I have never let them down. Now, they have also gathered experience to work out solutions towards distribution and exhibition issues. Nowadays, we have almost simultaneous release of Bangla films in major cities of India and also in select cities of USA and UK. I find this very encouraging, as more people get to watch our films now. Besides, there is the online streaming platform like Netflix and Amazon, which literally opens up the entire world for the film. So, local release is not the one and only option for exploitation anymore. Two of my films are presently on Netflix and almost all the rest in other digital platforms. Besides, satellite rights of all my films have been sold out. So I believe, I am a quite safe director to bank on!



Poster of Ek Phali Rod

P. You are a close acquaintance of the legendary actor Soumitra Chattopadhyay (Chatterjee) who also acted in many of your films. How do you evaluate his talent and expertise, temperament and experience?

A. I am not at all equipped to judge his talent or expertise. But he is certainly one of my greatest inspirations to explore life or the art of acting on screen. He is always there to fuel my imagination and I love interacting with him and we do share a brilliant chemistry. On quite a few occasions, he has remarked in some interview that “Over the years, I have worked with Atanu so many time and now I can read him or his writing so easily that I can take a plunge into it almost blindfolded!” Actually, he is always eager to break out of what he has done. He wants to explore and stretch his limits as an actor. And this remarkable quality encourages me to go back to him time and again.

P. Who are your most favorite actors in Bengali cinema, both male and female? Have you discovered any new talent(s) whom you would like give break(s) in your upcoming film(s)?

A. I always enjoy working with powerhouse performers because I am really fussy about three things – script, acting and editing! And my scripts rely on a very natural spontaneous acting form, which does not conform to any filmy format. There are many actors who are absolutely brilliant to work with - Soumitra Chatterjee, Ritwik Chakraborty, Rudranil Ghosh, Indrani Halder, Jaya Ahsan, Sudipta Chakraborty, Kharaj Mukherjee and many others. In each of my films, I try to give some space to newcomers and many of them have been recognised as truly gifted.

P. You often promote young filmmakers by posting your comments in favour of them in social media or referring them to the veteran critics/curators. Have anyone else did the same thing earlier when you started your journey as a new film maker?

A. No one did when we started. But I desperately feel the urge to promote serious Bengali cinema. And some of the emerging filmmakers are absolutely marvelous. I am deeply impressed by their work.

P: What's your academic background? Where you studied and what were the main subjects? Have you got any formal training of film making?

A: After completing Masters in Journalism, I started my career as a Trainee Journalist. Next year, I went to FTII, Pune to do a short term course in Film Appreciation. That was the turning point. I went back again to do another certificate course in Film Editing. Thereafter, I started my career as an editor.

P: Why was your 'aim in life' when you were a school student? What prompted you to make films? Is it your full time profession or you have other professional assignments as well for survival? Are you satisfied with your profession(s)?

A. In school, I wanted to be an artist. A grandfather inculcated in me the passion for fine arts and photography. Thereafter, I got passionate about music. I learnt Classical Hawaiian Guitar for many years, and also completed Sangeet Prabhakar Diploma. During that phase, I also toyed with the idea of becoming a Music Director! However, since early childhood, I had some flair for writing. So, my next ambition during the college phase was to become a Journalist. My connect with the film industry, however, goes back more than two decades, directing weekly soaps, tele-films, documentaries and corporate films since 1997. I believe no filmmaker is ever satisfied in true sense of the term. Creative

projects do not truly match the original moment of ecstasy that inspired them. Ideas always appear much more perfect in our minds than they do once they are finished, where some form of compromise and disappointment are inevitable.

P: Are you a very rich filmmaker earning lots of money by making films, maintaining a big car, dwelling in a posh area of the city or you maintain a quiet lifestyle like a middle class Bengali intellectual still traveling in public transport and not hanging around regularly in late night parties in five stars? Or maybe, you stay somewhere in between?

A: I strongly believe in minimalism, both in my work and personal life. For me, less is more. That way, I can easily discard whatever is superfluous for me and focus on what I really need.



Dhritiman Chatterjee in Ek Phali Rod

P: Who are the other members of your family? How they motivated you to become a filmmaker?

A: Presently, I live with my mother. My father was a renowned scientist. But he was quite a Renaissance personality having wide ranging interests and believed in absolute freedom of his son. He always encouraged me to do whatever I like. So I kept drifting from one passion to another throughout my school and college days. Even after passing out with a Masters in Journalism, I shifted to

filmmaking. Ultimately, when I look back now, I find all these divergences enriched and supplemented me in some way or other.

P: You have made all of your films in Bengali. Have you got any plan to make films in other languages too? If yes, which language do you prefer most and why?

A: Certainly, I would like to make films in other languages, provided the content demands that.

P: What is your target audience - mass or class?

A: I believe my films can be enjoyed by anyone who is sensitive and enlightened and believes that cinema is a form of art and not just a medium of entertainment.

P: If you are offered to make a big-budget 'masala film', will you accept the proposal? What could be the reason behind your decision?

A: No. Am not keen to make anything driven by formula and only populist in nature.

P: Who, according to you, are the great masters of the Indian cinema? Are you influenced by any of them?

A: Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen, Ritwik Ghatak, G. Aravindan, Shyam Benegal, Adoor Gopalakrishnan, Grish Kasaravalli. To some extent, I am influenced by Mrinal Sen.

P: Which are the all time top five Indian films according to you?

A: It's really difficult to select only five! Anyways, let's make an honest attempt to figure out the first five films which can really be termed as path breakers. I would say they are - *Charulata* (Satyajit Ray), *Bhuban Shome* (Mrinal Sen), *Ajantrik* (Ritwik Ghatak), *Ankur* (Shyam Benegal) and *Swayambaram* (Adoor Gopalakrishnan).

P: What is your opinion about the film criticism in India? Do you give any importance to the criticisms of your films? Does it help you or you feel disturbed?

A: The most important aspect of film criticism is to analyse and evaluate a film from the filmmaker's point of view. The critic should try to discover and

understand how the filmmaker's objective works, and judge the nature and extent of its consequence. Unfortunately, film criticism is no longer profound in India. Further, it is often tainted and biased. But there are exceptions as well, however small the number might be. But I never feel disturbed from negative criticism. Whoever watches a film, can obviously derive his or her own impression and that varies drastically. Films mean different things to different people. That's what is so incredible about them.

P: What is your opinion about the film society movement in India? Are you influenced by this movement in any way?

A: In India, the film society movement served as a catalyst to a new film culture, impacting quality of Indian films, both in terms of technology and content. I became a film society member when I was eighteen. Much of my conception and sensibility about cinema was shaped up through film society screenings of classics, works of masters, and not to mention the wide spectrum of world cinema.

P: If you decide to quit film making then what are the alternatives you may like to opt for?

A: I would like to write full time. Or try my skills in digital art, may be.

P. Film viewing is getting transformed from a community culture to an individual culture. Is it good for Cinema? Please explain your observation.

A. I feel the crisis lies somewhere else. Few years back, when we went frenzy celebrating centenary of cinema, noted Czech novelist Milan -Kundera voiced his strong denial against such observance stating that "we have come to the era of post-art in a world where art is dying because the need for art, the sensitivity and the love for it, is dying." Kundera charted the decline of film from an 'agent of art' to 'the principal agent of stupidity'. Very recently, one of the greatest living filmmakers of our times, Martin Scorsese, shared similar despair when he said, "cinema is gone; the cinema I grew up with and that I'm making, it's gone." One principal cause lurking behind such lament and hopelessness perhaps lies in the shift of focus, which the making and purpose of cinema has undergone over the past few decades.

Actually everything changed so drastically, in the last 20 odd years! When we were in school, we needed a full-fledged camera with a roll of film in it. Usually each roll had 35 films. So each shot was so precious, so invaluable. We thought deeply as to what we are capturing before we pressed the shutter. Now, all you need is to aim the mobile and press the button. It's so easy. And probably that is why, there are images all around, hundreds and thousands of them, popping out

from everywhere. The world is literally getting drowned in images. Whenever we see something interesting, we don't care watching it with rapt attention. We are too eager to record it on our mobile. Very recently, a chef in a hotel told me – "People are more interested in taking photographs of the food instead of enjoying it". So, there you are!

P. Digitization has made film making very easy. Important film makers are also using mobile-phone-cameras for their films. Virtual Reality is not too far. What is your prediction about the future of cinema?

A: The result of digitisation is certainly open to a lot of debate. Perhaps it is too early to jump to the conclusion that it would have been better if filmmaking did not become so easy! On the other hand, Virtual Reality has an absolute future in the film industry. But will VR follow the path of 3D cinema – a meteoric rise followed by a gradual loss of relevance? Or will it become a stable film format in the years to come? Time would provide answer to that.

P. You are also a very good teacher. Especially your workshops on acting and direction are quite popular. What is your advice for the upcoming filmmakers?

A: I think new filmmakers should work on developing their mindset. That should be the first step. Let the objectives and priorities be clear first. Then they must stick to some time-tested fundamentals, like the three essential elements of enlightenment – think, read and write. Through films, we can create deeper connections with the world around us and seek to explore the levels of understanding that can lead to stronger bonds of trust and humanism. So it is always wise for budding filmmakers to keep doors and windows of your mind open. Let the light come in, and don't rely on shortcuts.

**Atanu Ghosh is a famous filmmaker based in Kolkata.
Premendra Mazumder is the Secretary of Fipresci-India, based in Kolkata.**