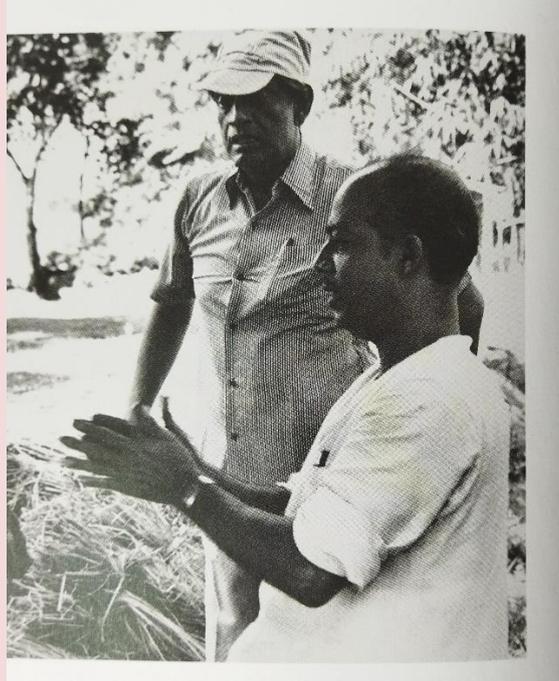


Article

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Ashoke Bose: The Iconic Art Director of BengalThe Dacoits**2. 30 am.**

Four gunmen stopped our white Ambassador.

August, 1987.

The forested strip of the highway was desolate and the sky overcast.

The barrels of four guns entered through four windows of our car. Limbs frozen, I felt that my asthma attack would relapse in three seconds.

“Give us everything” – commands us a voice, hoarse and tired – “We are giving you only 5 minutes. If you don’t obey, your skulls will be scattered on mud.”

Our heartbeats were running like horses in the Calcutta race course. We felt that death might smack our skulls any moment.

Only one man among us could keep his cool.
Ashoke Bose.

He was a senior artist working in the Calcutta Office of The Geological Survey of India. Bose appeared to be the meekest one among the four passengers that night. But it was due to his cool

bravado that I’m still alive to narrate you the incident.

What exactly did Bose do?

Bose simply said in his characteristic low voice:

“We work in Bengali films.”

“But why are you here?” asked the masked man.

“Going to the village where we’ve started our shooting” – replied Bose.

“Name of the film?”

“‘Sati’.”

The dacoit paused for a moment.

“The one being directed by Aparna Sen?”

“Yes.”

The man slowly started removing his gun from the bald head of Bose.

The other goons, however, were still aiming at our heads.

Now Bose took a sensible measure.

He handed over a big and soiled envelop which he was coincidentally carrying in his trademark cloth bag.

*Patang*

Opening the envelop, the chief dacoit found (approx) 20 black and white photographs – by Nemai Ghose – taken during the shooting of ‘Sati’, the Bengali film for which all of us were working and which was then being shot in a remote and an unknown village on the bank of Ganga flowing through the Murshidabad district of West Bengal.

One of the dacoit’s assistants held a torch over the photos while the chief shuffled through the enlarged stills showing Aparna Sen directing Shabana Azmi, Aparna Sen is looking through an Arriflex Blimp – her favorite camera, Aparna discussing the sets with Ashoke Bose – her Art Director ... and so forth.

The chieftain compared two faces of Bose – the one in the photos and the one sitting in front of them. Fortunately, they didn’t have to spend more than 45 seconds to observe the obvious similarities.

“But why are you carrying the envelop with you?” was an obvious question asked by one of the dacoits.

“Are the huts still in a photographable condition after the heavy rains last week-end?” – replied Bose – “We made the huts in May.”

The chieftain kept with him one of the photos and gifted us a bamboo-basket of ripe mangos in return.

“The mangos of Murshidabad are the best in the world”, said Bose thanking them.

That, in short, was Ashoke Bose’s nature. He never had to raise his voice to convince people.

The Expert

par excellence

While chatting with him, it was almost impossible to recognize an Art Director with an international reputation behind his shy and ever-smiling face which was often unshaved. Few could realize that he was the chief Art Director of Satyajit Ray’s unit since 1971. Few of his close relatives knew that Bose’s association with Ray lasted for 21 long years. Bose was so reticent about his astounding accomplishments.

The Trustworthy

An extraordinary mixture of modesty and confidence made him a trustworthy colleague. Best directors of Bengal knew that Bose would never boast shouting in the sets. Therefore, the Art Department headed by Bose would not bother during shooting. Bose knew the crafts of remaining ‘invisible’ in the crowd of celebrities.

*Antarjali Yatra*

Nevertheless, the sets created by Bose would be exceptionally beautiful, magnificent and realistic.

Ashoke Bose was a master builder with wood and plaster. Therefore, the huge columns erected by him were perfectly perpendicular and beams perfectly horizontal. So big buildings made by Bose for film shootings always appeared to be 100% authentic.

His experience of making surprisingly realistic plaster models of rivers and mountains and soils and rivers for his office – Geological Survey – gave him the confidence of making perfect film

sets. Migrating from Faridpur – situated in the then East Pakistan – to Kolkata, Ashoke Bose learnt the arts and crafts at the Academy of Fine Arts. His specialization was plaster modeling which helped him get the coveted job in the central government in Central Calcutta. Economic stability enhanced his skills.

Achievements

Here is a list of the huge – and unforgettable – sets built by Ashok Bose –

1. The court in the palace of the Nawabs of Lucknow (*Shatranj ke Khilari*, in collaboration with Bansi Chandragupta).
2. The entire interior of the huge palace of the Ghosal family (*Joi Baba Felunath*)
3. The courtroom of the Kingdom of Diamonds (*Hirok Rajar Deshe*)
4. The laboratory of the Scientist/Alchemist employed by the Diamond King (*Hirok Rajar Deshe*)
5. The total interior of the Chowdhury palace (*Ghare Baire*)
6. Total interior of the Palace of the Majumdar family (*Shakha Proshakha*)
7. The huge slum of West Kolkata (*City of Joy*)
8. Rippon Street, Central Calcutta, of the 1930s (*La Nuit Bengali*)
9. An entire village in an arid land of Bihar, central India (*Patang*)
10. The burning ghat of 1820s and an adjacent temple on the bank of Ganga (*Antarjali Jatra*)



Antarjali Yatra

Why was Ashoke Bose remarkable?

The Philosophy

Bose made all those globally acclaimed sets with simple materials available in the local markets run by the municipalities. He never had to bring anything from Mumbai or Chennai. Bringing anything from Europe was beyond question. It was for this reason – among many others – that his sets looked so ‘rooted’. Why and how?

Bose could derive an *unimaginable* power and beauty from small things available either in low or no price at all.

Now I must explain why I’ve used as strong a word as unimaginable in this context.

The king in Satyajit Ray’s ‘*Hirok Rajar Deshe*’ used to hold his cabinet meetings in a dark room lit only by flaming torches hung from the walls.

But making small torches was not an easy job. Torches were made mainly of wood according to the lithographs done by the artists coming to Bengal with the East India Company. But, in reality, wooden torches would be burnt in half a minute. Ashok Bose solved it in a manner typical to him.

He just locally purchased 10 brass pots used for burning resins during the Hindu worships. [*These are called ‘Dhunuchi’ in Bengal.*]

But why ‘Resin Pot’?

It’s a brass pot with a metallic leg – only one leg – so that it can be held by hand. Grinded resin is thrown in the fire burning in the pot, emanating white smoke with a hypnotic aroma. This inexpensive artifact is available everywhere in India. The ‘Resin Pot’ is built to withstand the high temperature of burning coconut coir on which the resin is melt.

Therefore, one can very well use it as the base of a flaming torch. The pot will not melt or burnt. And since the pot traditionally has a firmly attached metallic stand, it’s very easy to attach it to a rod – wooden or metallic – to be hung from the wall.

Bose just used the Resin Pot as the base of a flaming torch. Pieces of torn cloth soaked in ‘kerosene’ were kept in the pot.

Therefore, the torches were burnt for 10 hours every day. It was a testimony to Bose's inventive style of solving a problem by using a simple method.

One of Ashoke Bose's methods was to gather/collect small things from open fields and villages. During the preparation of Aparna Sen's film – SATI – Bose used to roam alone on the open fields for gathering small things. He often affectionately called me to accompany him on the field tours.

It was May in the district of Murshidabad. The temperature was often above 42 C at 11 am. Notwithstanding the heat, Bose used to cross the long and wide fields alone with only a bamboo umbrella guarding his bald head. (He possibly didn't care about the deadly Sun Strokes.)

What did he gather during the morning tours?

Dry nests of the Weaver ('Babui') birds lying on the grass.

Snails with cracks lying almost invisible on the whitish dry mud.

Dry and broken woods.

But, what Bose finally discovered was stunning.

It was a big palanquin, genuinely old, pale and worn out. It was an 'Open Palanquin' that was really required for the first sequence of the film. The passenger sitting on an 'Open Palanquin' could be seen from every possible angle. Before the 1830s, widows were often carried on open palanquins – so that villagers could see and, even, touch her – to the burning ghat.

But, open palanquins were not at all available in 1987 in which year SATI was being made.

Ashok Bose 'discovered' one such artifact in the courtyard of a villager. And thus, Aparna Sen, the director, could properly create the first scene according to what she had written in the screenplay.

But why did he do it?

Bose was a follower of Abanindranath Tagore who had headed the movement called 'Bengal School of Art' that entirely shunned the

colonial influences from their drawings and paintings.



Ghare-Baire

Being an admirer of Abanindranath Tagore, Bose was always in search of locally available objects that would make the film genuinely ethnic. Bose believed that authentic objects couldn't be manufactured on an impulsive demand. One has to patiently collect the objects from genuine sources.

"You cannot make a torn and old hand-fan made with a palm leaf." Bose once told me – in May 1987 – in a very low voice while tasting the sour curd after lunch on a boat floating on the Ganga.

"Why? Can't you make it look old?" I was curious.

"It's impossible." Bose replied with his trademark hesitation – "because when a hand-fan is left unnoticed in the corner of the flower garden, it acquires an inimitable whiteness caused by heat and rain and cold. It gathers fine dust mixed with sand in its folds for a couple of years. Can an artist 'manufacture' the same paleness in a couple of hours?"

This, in short, was Bose's maxim.

"Therefore, use available objects as much as possible." Bose advised me – "Even for making an abstract/absurd artifact for a fantasy film, always hide a time-tested 'object' to make its 'skeleton'. If you can consistently do so, the 'time-tested object' will function properly during the shooting to cancel out the slightest chance of an accident."

"Kindly give me an example Ashoke da."

I requested him.

“Remember the magic slippers used by the main characters of ‘Hirok Rajar Deshe’. The king of ghosts gave them the slippers with designs of smiling ghosts. But I didn’t even try to manufacture the entire shoe. I just purchased normal slippers from the Rajasthan Emporium and created the smiling ghosts according to Manik da’s (Satyajit Ray) own drawing.”

“But why didn’t you make totally new slippers?” I asked.

Ashoke Bose gently smiled – “New shoes made by artists would have been slippery causing accident. Traditional shoe makers have acquired the skill through generations.”



Ganashatru

I understood why all of the major directors in Bengal invited Ashoke Bose to make their sets for nearly 34 long years – between 1971 and 2004.

HALLMARKS OF ASHOKE BOSE

Snehasish Mistri, B Tech. CSE

Ashoke Bose, an accomplished artist, was famous for creating the old look of the houses built in the studios. A number of his sets are shown here.

- DOTS

Look at the sets of ‘Ganashatru’. The huge courtyard was entirely built with plaster by Ashok Bose. The marks of moisture seen on the columns were created by spraying innumerable dots made of two colors – Olive Green and Grayish Brown. The application of fine dots was Bose’s hallmark.

- VERTICALS

“Increase the number of vertical lines in the frame. It will certainly make your sets more attractive” was his advice to the youngsters.

We have divided a film-set into a number of vertical segments. It was a replica of a Bihar village made by Bose for ‘PATANG’, a Goutam Ghose film. Look at the vertical lines created by the natural segments of the mud-houses. The covert verticals made the sets more attractive.

Ashoke Bose was a magician of accentuating verticals.

Mr. Ujjal Chakraborty, artist and teacher, is an internationally recognized Ray Scholar and National Film Award Winner in 2010 for writing The Director’s Mind, a book on film making.