

The ambience is central to a film's appeal

Subhrajit Chandra

He is just not the most well-known art turned production designer in Bollywood but is on the wishlist of Bollywood's biggest makers. He is on first name basis with Shyam Benegal, Mani Rathnam and most in between. There is hardly a film-maker he has not worked with and not one Indian award that he has not won. He is a Calcutta boy, who having passed from art school, landed more by accident than by design in Mumbai and found himself in the film industry. He has also designed a special Production & Art Design Course at Film & Television Institute of India at Pune. Yet SAMIR CHANDA's heart lies in doing as much Bengali cinema as he can. His first film *Ekti Nadir Golpo* (Story of a River) awaits release and he has just finished the fictional Lalan biopic, Gautam Ghose's *Moner Manush*. Chanda talks to SAYANDEB CHOWDHURY about his films, graduating from art to production designing and why he keeps coming back to Bengali cinema.

How would you define your career as an art director and production designer?

I studied art in Calcutta and was very much into theatre and fine arts. Actually I found myself in the Mumbai film industry quite by accident. In my initial years I worked under Mr Nitish Roy, the noted art designer. You can say that I have come into my own in the last ten years.

You have worked with whom we call the masters of Hindi cinema as well as the exciting new brigade which is making its mark in Bollywood.

I am fortunate to work with Shyam Benegal, Govind Nihalani, Subhash Ghai, Mani Rathnam, Ketan Mehta as well as Buddhadeb Dasgupta, Mrinal Sen, Gautam Ghose. As for the younger ones, I have almost grown up and am friends with most of them. So when they took to filmmaking as a profession after hovering around for few years here and there, I was almost condescending. But you bet, they have, in front of my eyes, turned into such exciting new talent.

You are very close to Shyam Benegal.

I sincerely would like to believe that he is blind without me. He depends on me so much during making his films; he makes me feel almost pampered. I have been with his unit for many years now



and there I virtually look after everything, even things like transfer of tapes and dates etc.

You have turned into a production designer from an art director, apparently at the behest of Mr Benegal.

Yes. It was during the shooting of his train docu-feature *Yatra* that I had to take up additional roles of a costume designer and assistant editor apart from being the art director. It was a feature based entirely on the train and each day a new set of characters would embark and disembark bringing in and clinging to their mannerisms, characters, customs and clothing. I worked on each and every aspect of the set and costumes and what you call the ambience. I stayed on the train for two full months. I was just married. So Mr Benegal said, why don't you hop on to the bandwagon, literally, and enjoy your honeymoon too? I don't know what sort of honeymoon it was but *Yatra* gave me a huge perspective.

Then you took it up seriously?

I think I did my job well enough to

have Mr Benegal suggest that I do this on a regular basis. So I started calling myself a production designer who looks after a significant share of the film — costumes, dresses, décor, interior, furniture. And believe me, if it's a niche film in which the director gives whole lot of attention to the ambience, having one person do the production design helps. Among the major films I have done this way are *Guru*, *Delhi 6*, *Rang De Basanti*, *Raavan*, *Omkara* etc.

Does it give you a better grip on your art?

Of course. I can keep a keen eye on various parts of the film. For example, for *Delhi 6*, I worked on the film from the day the script was finished and we spent hours deliberating on where to build the set. We did miniatures, models of entire city areas and tried to fit in the setting of the film. But it did not work. Then I called one of Rakesh's key unit members and asked her to send me photos of places which have some resemblance to Delhi's Chandni Chowk where the film was set. Finally we zeroed in on a village

near Jaipur and there we created the entire set there, complete with coolers, hangers, open balconies, wire meshes and the typically half burnt brick finished, open roofed houses and those jalebiwalas, milkwallahs, sweetwallahs etc who made make up Old Delhi. We pasted the Jama Masjid and Red Fort to the scenery and bingo, we had Chandni Chowk! Could you make out if it was a set? The film gave me a host of awards (chuckles).

Among the greats you have worked with who would you want to make special mention of?

It is difficult to name. That they work with me, that they have found me suitable time and again make me feel humble and proud at the same time. But I must mention Mani Rathnam. I was in Vizag on a holiday when *Bombay* had released. It was one-and-half decade ago. I lied to a hall manager that I was an assistant in his team to get an entry into a houseful theatre to watch the film. It was in Tamil. We were seven of us, all Bengalis. And we watched rapt. At the

end of the film I rued to my wife that, here is man and here is a movie, had I ever been part of it, would have really been a prized experience. Cut to the sets of Mr Benegal's *Sardari Begum*. I was as usual busy with two hundred aspects of the film when my phone rings and the other side it was Suhasini Mani Rathnam. She said that Mani wants to meet me. I went to Chennai and we hit it off. He wanted me to do *Iruvar*. Think of it! I am a Bengali who grew up in Calcutta and was now working in Mumbai and now I have to do a film that is Tamil (as well as Malayali) to the core. I could not make a mistake. I would have been lynched. But *Iruvar* happened and since I have been an integral part of Mani Rathnam's films. But Mani is a very hard taskmaster. He pushes you and pushes you till the end.

What about Vishal Bharadwaj?

Yes, I must mention Vishal. You know Vishal is that rare talent who never makes you feel that he is working. I have not seen anyone working out a scene from just another session of gossip and *adda*. Mani and others need a lot of time, atmosphere and concentration and they bar people from their territory when they work on the scenes. Vishal just goes about it like he goes about chatting. He is quite a character and indeed a very talented maker of cinema.

How was your experience working for the Rose Valley productions' Moner Manush by Gautam Ghose?

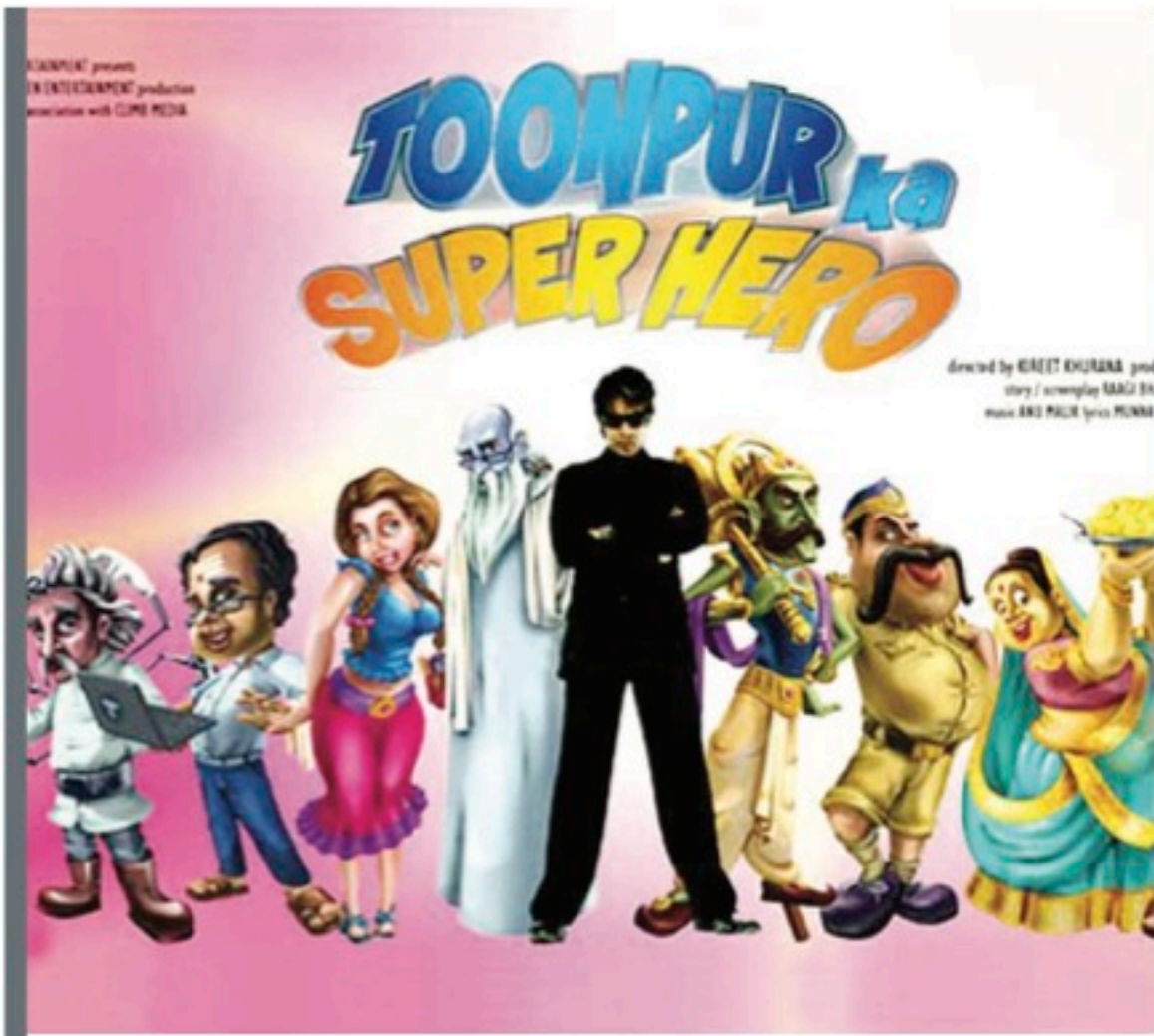
Gautam is a fine filmmaker and I have worked with him in all of his recent films. *Moner Manush* was different from his recent films to the extent that *Moner Manush* is in some ways a period film and the period, given Gautam's eye for detail, had to be flawless. We created the entire ambience of 19th century Kushtia in the forest of Tilpata. We planned to shoot in Tangail but the shoot got cancelled because the crowd became unmanageable. We had to move further into the forest and shoot at an old bungalow. It was hard but very rewarding. And the way the film has shaped up, it should do very well.

You seem to be coming back to Bengali cinema?

Bengal has produced some of the best art directors. Is there a better school to learn art designing than from the masters like Ray or Ghatak? For me, coming back means a great opportunity to put to use in my own language what I have learnt all these years in Mumbai.

interview

newsmakers



Our own superhero

One need not look West anymore, to find the flight of fantasy on celluloid where living, real characters meet animated one. Kireet Khurana's *Toonpur Ka Superhero* is the first Indian film to achieve this feat, and is all set to enthrall the audience. The film stars Ajay Devgn and Kajol are in the lead roles. Toonpur is a land of cartoons, where the good and the evil are represented by Devtoons and Toonasurs respectively. And in this fancy-land accidentally drops in a reel life superstar. Produced by Krishika Lulla and Kumar Mangat, *Toonpur Ka Superrhero*, showcases Toonpur as a microcosm of India where Sardar, Bengali, Gujarati, Marwadi, Maharashtrian, Bihari, Tamil, Christian characters dwell. Truly it seems to be an animated tribute to our cultural diversity. The makers of *Toonpur* have really gone the distance to attain the perfection that such an ambitious venture demands. For the voice dubbing of these various cartoon characters, artists from across the nation were auditioned. Over 2000 voice artists were tried to get the right accent

for the characters. The film is slated to release in the last week of the year.

Unwanted mediations

Newspersons were the new newsmakers this week as Radia-tion from recorded tapes hit them. Claiming they were

not lobbying for corporate entities, they came on air in different programs with their own explanations which would do credit to the proverbial babe-in-the-woods: "we were only chatting her (Niira Radia) up, looking for information". Radia's efforts were the information of the day, the news that ought to have been reported. If one believes them, the news bit them in the face and yet these great journalists did not recognise it. Now, one of them, Vir Sanghvi, has discontinued his weekly column in Hindustan Times; Barkha Dutt is going strong — she reportedly holds major share in NDTV — but it would be interesting watching her cover the cabinet reshuffle and allocation of portfolios.

I am, therefore I am

Speaking about Barkha Dutt and the vengeance with which she is trying to clear her name across social and public media, one can only smell the holier than thou attitude that has become her unfortunate trademark. Since the mainstream media has largely shown discomfort in critiquing its own fraternity, social networking sites, more specifically Facebook has sprung into action. People from every quarter are having a field day putting

their rants across online sites against the media, specially the two high profile journalists who have found muck on their name. Interestingly in more than one case Barkha Dutt emerged in the middle of chats trying to defend her act, name and person to a largely inveterate audience. And as in her TV show in which she pitched four editors against her to clear her name, she came out the hounded loser even in the Facebook chats.



As good as it gets

This is the year when Bengali cinema turns ninety and after a couple of decades of trying to peddle obscurantist melodrama Bengali cinema seems to finally arriving at a stage when it looks like an industry. It seems to have shaken its dependence on a handful of producers and new financiers and producers, many of them having corporate interests, are coming in. Similarly, the days of a handful of directors churning out stomach-churning and nauseating cinema seems to be over and new and exciting talent are finding it increasingly easy to get a foot in the door. In fact this week itself sees the big release, Gautam Ghose's *Moner Manush* and the next week sees the next in the super popular

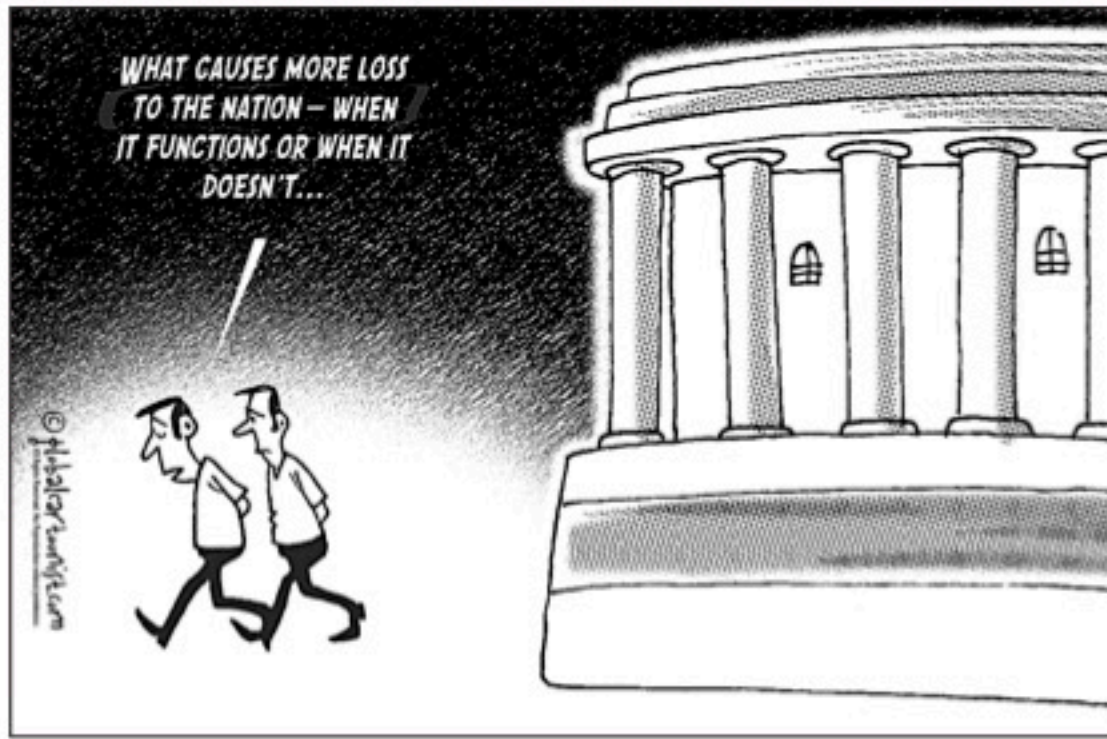


Feluda franchise: *Gorosthane Sabdhan*. Few can remember when was the last time that two big-ticket Bengali films, slated to cater to an audience across the board, had successive releases. Even the music of many of the films released lately have been

doing well and one song, *Amake Amar Moto Thakte Dao* from the recent smash hit *Autograph* is now almost an anthem.

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India today



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