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## **Interview of Movie actor Soumitra Chatterjee by Anasua Roy Choudhary**

**Anasua Roy Choudhary :** As we know you are not a Calcuttan by birth. So please tell us something about your childhood, your days in school, your family...

**Soumitra Chatterjee :** We started residing in Krishnanagar, that is, our hometown, from the days of my grandfather. Our ancestral home was also in the district of Noida, but during the partition, it got conceded. To East Pakistan. It was a village called Kaya, near Shilaidaha, about eight miles (four krosch ) from it, which my grandparents even my father used to refer to as our hometown. But of course, I do not have such special feelings, having been there only once a child. As you see, it's only Krishnanagar, which comes naturally to me as my hometown. In our family, my grandfather was there, but not my grandmother - she died long before. I had my father and uncle. Aunts... they were already married for quite a few years, but they used to come and visit us and vice versa. One of my aunts got married in Calcutta, to Sir Ashutosh Mukherjee's son. My father was a practicing lawyer at the Calcutta High Court. Ever since my senses grew, I would see him coming home every Friday and again leaving for Calcutta the Monday next. Maybe because of this inconvenience, we used to come down to Calcutta once in a while, take a house and reside for a few days. My studies got hampered due to this. Sometime in 1945, my father left his job and took up another government service, in the then Civil Supplies Department. After that we come to Barasat near Calcutta and I got admitted in the Barasat Government High School. Prior to that, My schooling was from C.M.S. St. John's School in Krishnanagar. After one year we came to the Howrah, where I got admission in the Howrah Jillah School. From there we moved

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to Darjeeling. After some time my father again changed his job .... this time in the Soil Department. We came back once again to Krishnanagar, where I used to study, this time in Krishnanagar Collegiate School. At that period my grandfather was Fatally ill. After his death, we came back to Howrah. Though My father got transferred after that, we finished our schooling here itself. Thereafter, I got admitted in City College in Calcutta and passed I.Sc., and then B.A. with Honours. Then studied for two years in the Post Graduate College of Arts, but did not ultimately sit for the M.A examination.

**Anasua :** If you could tell us the names of your parents and grandfather..

**Soumitra :** Yes, my grandfather was an advocate. He used to practice in the Krishnanagar Court. His name was Shri Lalit Kumar Chattopadhyaya. My father's name was shri. Mohit Kumar Chattopadhyaya and my mother was Smt. Ashalata Chattopadhyaya.

**Anasua :** About your interest in acting, was it from your Early Childhood itself?

**Soumitra :** Yes, the interest was there from a very early childhood. One reason behind that was the encouragement by my family. At that time performance of drama was a major subject of interest in Krishnanagar. That may have been because it was the hometown Dwijendralal (Roy)... but that is my personal view... I cannot substantiate. There were quite a few amateur groups and plays were performed all the time. I should say, for a sleepy town of 35,000 odd people, the number of plays per year was quite High.

**Anasua :** But in any case, Nadia district was the center for artistic fervour for quite a long time.

**Soumitra :** Yes, the cultural practice was their, especially drama. There might be another reason which I believe was that there was always a tradition of humour over here. Might be the legacy of Gopal the Jester... whatever.

**Anasua :** was that a part of the general lifestyle in Krishnanagar ?

**Soumitra :** Yes, of course. The people loved to add just a touch of humour in their General conversation, which I miss now a days when I go there because the town has almost totally transformed itself at this moment. I think it boast of a

population of three to four lakhs. The process of changing started right after the partition . Moreover due to its proximity to the Border. It imbibed certain peculiar characteristic which you know are pretty obvious.

**Anasua :** So, was acting a part of your family?

**Soumitra :** Yes, that is true. My grandfather was the president of an amateur theatre group in his time. We used to hear stories from about them since our childhood. My father also was a member and actor of such a group apart from that, he had a particular interest in recitation. At that time there was only one recitation competition which was held in the University Institute of Calcutta. It was quite famous and prestigious too. My father used to participate in that competition from Krishnanagar college and received prizes. As well! These things, you know, felt very nice from our childhood. We used to have random recitation sessions in our house, without always any particular reason. Mistakes used to be corrected by my father, or grandfather, sometimes by my mother.

**Anasua :** And .. Acting, I mean, in your family ...

**Soumitra :** well, we children used to practice drama on our own . we managed to get hold of the very few children's drama which were available at that time. After some time we graduated to Rabindranath's 'Mukut'.....

**Anasua :** Who used to lead in organizing those plays?

**Soumitra :** I do not remember specifically ... we siblings used to do them as a team. We used to make stages out of beds and wings and curtains out of bed sheets. At times my parents used to help out with the costumes. Sometimes my mother made crowns out of aluminum foils.... the audience was composed of family members, friends and domestic helps and we used to perform before them. We were never discouraged. In fact, we got a lot of encouragement.

**Anasua :** Did you perform in school?

**Soumitra :** I don't remember acting in school for the first one or two years, but might have done a bit of recitation. When I was in class V, I remember acting in a play. From then on I have been acting almost continuously. That particular play was inspired by the famous English story - "The Sleeping Princess". This plays

used to be staged during the Annual Prize Distribution Ceremony, or at the end of the year when the vacations started... I believe there were quite a few schools with the same routine.

**Anasua :** Yours was a missionary school, wasn't it?

**Soumitra :** Yes, it was.

**Anasua :** What was the medium of instruction - English or Bengali?

**Soumitra :** It was a school governed by the missionaries, but the medium of instruction was Bengali. I have never studied in an English medium school.

**Anasua :** A slightly different question in this context - was it a nationalistic fervour... I mean, a matter of principle for your father or someone else... which was common in those days, that you were taught in a Bengali medium school?

**Soumitra :** Not exactly. But it is true that the political consciousness was there in our household... both my father and my grandfather served in prison during the freedom movement... so the patriotic zeal was always there. But as far as selection of schools was concerned, I should say that there wasn't a particular reason for the choice. At that time there were three to four major schools in Krishnanagar. Somehow, it so happened that my elder brother used to study in the Collegiate School and myself in C.M.S. St. John's School.

**Anasua :** We have heard about a particular experience of yours during your school stage days, which has remained as striking as ever during your process of learning later on. Please elaborate.

**Soumitra :** At that time our Principal was a lady called Miss McArthur. As I already said, we staged a play in the lines of 'The Sleeping Princess' when I was in Class V. Incidentally, if I may add, the girl who was acting opposite to me in that play (we had coeducation till Class V) chanced to meet me after 40 years. She is Kumkum Roy, daughter of the famous dramatist, Shri Manmatha Roy.

Back to the topic, at the time when the rehearsals for that particular play were being done, Miss McArthur had a guest in her house, a gentleman whose name I cannot remember, who was somehow involved with the British theatre. Miss

McArthur used to bring him to our rehearsal sessions and not only that, she requested him to help us out with our acting too. He used to teach us a bit. The incident which I think you have heard is that, in that play, there was a sequence which involved a stretching out of the hand, which the particular character could not perform. This gentleman asked Miss McArthur what was the Bengali version of "give me some rice" in English. When he came to know the answer, he asked the boy to pretend as if he was asking for some rice during that particular sequence. Such was his method of teaching and that was the first time I came to see the art of using a known action to depict an action reciprocated by a feeling which is similar in nature to the former one.

**Anasua :** Did these bits of experience during your childhood act as reasons for you to come into mainstream acting later on?

**Soumitra :** Definitely! These were one of the cumulative reasons. Actually it was a tremendous attraction. I always loved to act.

**Anasua :** Could you identify this penchant from your childhood itself?

**Soumitra :** Yes, I could understand my liking for it. Another reason for that, could have been that first stage performance, which fetched me quite a few medals and accolades... and I had a greed for appreciation. I loved it when people said nice things about me. Actually, there might be another reason, which I explored when I grew up...I was not very confident of a number of things. Firstly, everyone in my family was beautiful, while they said I was the black sheep. Then, I did not have a particular interest in my studies...I used to run away from them.

**Anasua :** And you were very naughty too.

**Soumitra :** Absolutely! I did not want to study at all...I'm talking about formal studies. But I always had a liking for books since my early childhood. It was almost like an addiction. Whenever I became a bit too hot to handle, a book was enough to keep me sedated. This habit helped me a lot to pursue an acting career and has greatly enhanced my power of imagination.

**Anasua :** But imaginative power can be related with any artistic career whatsoever. Then why acting in particular?

**Soumitra :** I think I felt very much at home while acting. It gave me immense Pleasure that I could, for some time, hide behind another character. As I said earlier, I felt a bit low on confidence on various fronts. Actually, I have been noticing this presence of a contradiction in me for quite a long time, ever since I was young. So, as I was saying, I used to feel very confident while acting, whereas I used to really feel afraid before I went on stage...fearing what would happen if I forgot my lines...the audience will abuse me, or I might get scolded...things like that. But the thrill of forgetting myself, of being ecstatic, used to attract me the most. I used to get tremendously relieved and satisfied at the opportunity of being another person and releasing my emotions through him.

But this was the initial attraction. The primary and most important attraction was the idea that I shall get attention and be praised...that people shall say nice things about me. I do not know whether this happens to everybody, but I used to have a feeling of loneliness from my early childhood. We used to live in a house, in which my father was absent for 4 to 5 days in a week. My mother raised us almost single handedly...my grandfather was quite old at that time...in any case he was not very much involved with us. In fact, I used to feel him a little distant from us...he was involved in writing most of the time...it was the fag end of his career. I used to roam about all by myself. In a moufasil town like Krishnanagar, we used to grow up in the arms of nature. Life was... roaming here and there...going through bushes and crossing rivers to steal the coveted peanut from somebody's farm...being chased by the farmers...things like that. This life with its experiences came neatly packed with a sense of loneliness. To neutralise its effects, it was the natural desire of a human being to feel that he also is useful, that he is also affiliated with something. This sense of affiliation was something which came on my part, while acting. The same feeling came while playing, games in school, but the intensity was more in the former.

**Anasua :** Then when did you come to Calcutta permanently?

**Soumitra :** We came to Calcutta in 1945, in Barasat. There also I used to act in school. We began residing in Howrah from 1946. You may say it was here that I began to gather knowledge about theatre in Calcutta, mainly because Howrah is

Calcutta's twin city, and there is a lot of communication between the two. Not that I began seeing the theatres...it was more heard than seen. At that time, I was involved in a group in Howrah...not very consciously...it was more because everybody else was involved in one group or other. I used to take part in various sports activities too. You can say I was a Jack of all trades. I was the high jump champion at school, but was inexplicably attracted towards acting the most. That was the reason why I not only took part in the one or two plays that took place in school, but also formed a group of my own at that very age. At that time, I had not even heard terms like "Group Theatre"...so our group was just a group...an amateur group. We used to practice plays there only. It was like a club, which was parallel to the elders' one. It was named "Tarun Sangha". In the elders' group, I remember being, impressed by the acting skills of one of their members and used to copy his style. His name was Manmatha Mukhopadhyay. He does a few serials even today. At that time, he used to be a hero in a few films. He was a youth then...we were the boys. We used to copy the way he did a Siraj-ud-daulah, or the way he did a Clevering in Maharaja Nandakumar, in our own club. During this period, we went to Darjeeling. I think I acted in a play there too.

**Anasua :** Didn't this transfer mean leaving behind the cultural atmosphere altogether?

**Soumitra :** Absolutely. That atmosphere was almost totally absent in Darjeeling. There was an association called the Bengali Institute in which a few musical programmes and theatres were held, but there was no scope for us. But it would be wrong to say that I missed drama very much ...

**Anasua :** Maybe the age was a factor ?

**Soumitra :** Yes, definitely. I got engrossed in other things. Especially the natural beauty of the district of Darjeeling turned my attention almost totally towards a different direction. My father used to go touring most of the time in the hills, and almost throughout the year myself and my younger brother used to roam about with him...I used to go a little more often. Due to that reason I totally lost interest in the formal education of school. I no longer felt any urge to study. Instead, another trait revealed itself very strongly at that stage, though it was there from

my early childhood... if anybody asked me what I shall be when I grow up...the answer was...a globe-trotter. That was my foremost ambition - a contact with nature, to have a mind nourished by nature, 'which was manifested during that one year in Darjeeling. Though I did not consciously understand that effect at that age, it occurred to me later. I just cannot forget those days of witnessing the splendour of nature, and the image reflects itself even today in all My writings, I can realise the permanent influence it has had on me. Moreover, being brought up in a town which is only a notch up from a village, leaves a mark on the psyche of a human being. The place where you grow your senses, see the surrounding nature grow up with you...the trees, the streams and rivers...if you visit the place now, you tend to feel that this is just an ordinary little stream, and you spent so much time sitting on its banks, admiring it's clear water! Actually, the beautiful nostalgic moments in life are always beautiful.

So that was how I spent my childhood...seeing places with my father. My academic career was as good as over by then. My tutors spent some painful moments to get me through the hurdles of matriculation...especially that of Maths, which was not exactly my favourite. English, Bengali, History and Geography were my favourite subjects. I even got a letter in Geography. Maybe the ambition to be a globe trotter has something to do with it. The thirst to see new places, to visit new countries is still there, but the intensity has suffered. Now a days I do not like to travel too much. I tend to try living in one place...nearer to the center of my soul.

**Anasua :** The time you came back to Calcutta from Darjeeling, what was your age?

**Soumitra :** I came back to Howrah only after one year. In 1948, I used to study in Class VIII in Darjeeling, that means I was 13 years of age then. After Coming back, we spent a few days in Krishnanagar ... about five to six months. I studied in Collegiate School. At that time the play called "Naranarayan" was held. The Governor Shri Kailashnath Katju was the guest. In that play I did the role of Karna. The Governor awarded me a medal for the performance.

We came back to Howrah after that. From that period itself, there was a notion of Calcutta theatre in the atmosphere...I used to get news of that. Some of my friends even used to go and watch the greats like Sisir Bhaduri, Chhabi Biswas, Ahindra



Choudhury. I still remember, a number of my friends at school planned to go and watch the play “Maharaja Nandakumar” then showing in Calcutta. They went and saw it too. Once again, I did not go.

**Anasua :** For the fear of getting influenced ?

**Soumitra :** Yes. I had this instinct from my childhood days. It would have confused me if I had seen the play, so I decided not to go. Anyway, my characterization of Clevering was also liked by everybody. As usual, somebody awarded me a big medal. At that time, giving medals as an appreciation was the custom. Maybe today it seems a little funny, but perhaps these little gifts are necessary at times.

**Anasua :** As an encouragement?

**Soumitra :** Yes, very much so. It almost became a greed, an addiction for me, waiting eagerly for the next play, and perhaps, another medal. And the surprising thing was, I used to get them quite regularly! After this, we began to stay in Calcutta.

**Anasua :** What was the year ?

**Soumitra :** It was 1951. We moved to Calcutta from Howrah. I took admission in college, and the overall scene underwent quite a change. It was a peculiar transitional age, coupled with a mental growth in different directions...and then the awe of a big city like Calcutta was there. I took a plunge in the Group Theatre, the politics and the intellectual vigour of the city. It was also my luck to be in association with friends like Shri Gourmohan Mukhopadhyay, a senior to me in City College, who stood first in Bengali in the Matriculation Examination. He pursued a teaching profession all through his life. He was instrumental in almost totally changing my habit of random reading. He taught me the need to look upon literature as a serious tool to know the society and the important function arts and literature played, in projecting the life in it. Moreover, he was the person who took me to see my first theatre in Calcutta... that of the legendary Sisir Bhaduri. At that time, I was a student of 1<sup>st</sup> year. Now this acting by Sisir Bhaduri made me absolutely spellbound. For about a week, I could not think of anything else. It must be said that it was a matter of great luck and coincidence that my first experience

of Theatre involved none other than the great Sisirbabu. That in effect prevented the growth of the bad habits of acting since I was exposed to the very pinnacles of the art at the very beginning. There are many talented actors who spend a major part of their career, 'unlearning' the wrong or faulty ways in which their acting has been taught to them, often with little success. I know a story about Ustad Allauddin Khan, that when he went to take lessons from his second teacher, he was told that whatever he had learnt earlier was all wrong. To set matters right and from the scratch, he is said to have switched the position of his hands, in an effort to totally unlearn the faulty ways. This is the process of learning art. In our times, there was hardly any scope for a systematic study in this profession. We had to pick up scraps from here and there... the whole process had to be done all by ourselves... there was no one to teach. I mean, there was not enough scope. Those who could reach Sisir Bhaduri could well have considered themselves to have reached a university - like institution. But we did not have the right age for it... we were too young. I think there should be a scale of measuring one's performance within oneself. One cannot reach anywhere without setting a standard, in a haphazard manner. I always had a dream... to find myself acting like Sisir Bhaduri...not copying him, but reaching his levels of performance. Perhaps, it is because of setting myself such high standards that I never could really think that I have had enough of acting and have achieved everything. I think it will haunt me till the day I die, that I could not reach the levels of Sisir Bhaduri. This was because of that first day when I saw a theatre... any other play could well have grown the seeds of a polluted style of acting in me. That pollution was prevented by the superior acting abilities of a man of Sisir Bhaduri's stature.

**Anasua :** After your college life, you took up a job. Why this sudden urge to get into a profession?

**Soumitra :** These things came circumstantially. They were not planned. There was only one long term goal... after seeing Sisir Bhaduri's acting, I had already decided to take up acting and nothing else. At that time, I had been involved in a myriad of activities. I used to play Hockey for my college and also in a 2<sup>nd</sup> division club. With some effort, I could have gone up to 1<sup>st</sup> division and I would have remained a very

inconsequential mediocre Hockey player all through my life. It was Shri Gourmohan Mukhopadhyay who advised me to leave my various activities and concentrate on any one thing instead. Needless to say, I accepted that advice whole-heartedly. Slowly, I began to retract myself from games and concentrated more on acting and literature...I had grown the habit of writing by the age of fourteen and thereabouts...the transitional age when various romantic ideas flock to the mind and poems begin to flow. It was the same with me. My compositions were horrible. But there also Gounnohan's advice came handy. He used to tell me - "Not a day without a line". One must keep on writing, and should not wait for the right inspiration to come. One should always keep on practicing the craft of writing. So, I wrote regularly. The love for literature was always there in our family. Both of my parents had a large collection of books. Whenever new books of the then famous authors of Bengali literature...like Manik Bandopadhyay, Bibhutibhusan (Bandopadhyay), Tarashankar (Bandopadhyay), Bibhuti Mukhopadhyay etc. came out, we used to buy them immediately. Our household had quite a large collection of books. When we went to visit the aunt of mine who was married to the family of Sir Ashutosh, we used to play hide - and - seek in a huge library Sir Ashutosh had...which was later given away to the National Library... and suddenly would find ourselves reading books. The same story when we used to visit my mother's maternal aunt. Her husband was Shri Sourindramohan Mukhopadhyay, father of Suchitra Mitra. He also had a large collection of books. So that, love for literature was something which pushed me all along.

I took to the I. Sc. without much of a thought going into it actually. My family was also expecting the expected. I could not perceive the qualification for anything within myself. It was a very confusing time, I didn't understand what to do. At that time, a thought occurred to me... now I wonder how shallow it was... that since I loved nature, studying Botany might help me getting a job in the Forest Department. My father never used to interfere and so I took Botany for I. Sc. After testing the water, the combination of Physics, Chemistry and Mathematics managed to puzzle me quite a lot, ultimately ending in a failure in Chemistry. After that, I changed tracks totally, taking Bengali honours for graduation. I got pretty high marks in Bengali and English. But I think studying I. Sc. was a good

thing that happened to me... to have a correct outlook on life, one must have a scientific education.

**Anasua :** Otherwise the expansion of outlook is limited....

**Soumitra :** Yes, one is a liable candidate for superstitions. One may be the victim of many false notions. So, I'm thankful for being given the opportunity to study I. Sc.

**Anasua :** So, was Akashvani next?

**Soumitra :** No. There was more before that. As I said, I had already decided, after seeing a few of Sisirbabu's plays, in a career in acting while in the 3<sup>rd</sup> year but taking the decision wasn't all - there was a factor called scope in this profession - and then acting was very unpredictable as a career...my father used to remind me that. He never used to resist me from anything... only reminded me now and then about the need to stand on my own feet... his retirement was drawing nearer. But it was my elder brother who extended a whole-hearted support to my cause. He used to say - let him do what he wants...I am there for supporting you. My father used to remind me the harsh realities that most actors faced in their old age...having not earned anything substantial in the career. I lent a deaf ear to all these. Maybe the attitude was a touch headstrong, but somewhere there was a tremendous confidence that I shall act and will do well - what if there was not enough to eat - anything is well enough for a single person like me! You know, at that period, life had no particular....

**Anasua :** ...plans?

**Soumitra :** Right. There was no plan whatsoever. Only the decision during the 3<sup>rd</sup> - 4<sup>th</sup> year that I shall act. At the same time, it occurred to me that at least in this part of the world, actors need to have an alternative arrangement. So, like my other friends, I also decided to take up teaching as a profession. It was well enough for me, as I was already studying literature and particularly Bengali ...there was the need to learn more systematically about the language... but English was always more interesting, and hence more read by me. Taking Bengali was more a step towards learning more about it. But it was hard to keep up the tempo while studying the language under M.A. I took up a job just after passing the

Intermediate exam, but left after 3-4 months and took admission in B.A. After passing B.A., I tried another job. Once I got a job in a private company...as a probationary officer at Rs 200 a month. It involved extensive travelling in the Dalhousie area... now it seems these are necessary for gaining experience in one's life. Anyway, after a few days they appointed me as a manager in a stone crushing factory they had...I had to sit in the midst of dust all day...I left that job too to study M.A. Actually, these were an effort to show my parents that I was doing something and not just sitting around. So, you see, there were a few more jobs before Akashvani. few months prior to the M.A. examination, the offer as an announcer for the All India Radio came to me and I took it. The job included the news section too. But throughout the period I worked for All India Radio, I very consciously avoided one thing... drama. At that time Radio drama did not interest me.

**Anasua :** Why so?

**Soumitra :** Because by then drama to me was manifestable only as a whole, with all its physicality. Such was the impact that I declined an offer from All India Radio in Delhi, let my theatrical career should be over.

**Anasua :** By then your will to act took a concrete shape.

**Soumitra :** Very much so. By then I was looking for a chance to go to Sisirbabu. They used to show me off saying there was no vacancy and I used to come back from the doors of the theatres. At that time, there was a friend of mine- Ardhendu, whose mother was an actress called Shefalika devi..."Putul mashima" to us. I requested her to take me to Sisirbabu...by the time the arrangements were done, it was the last day of his stint at 'Srirangam'. The hall was to be closed after that day. That was 1956. I met Sisir Bhaduri and asked his permission to keep contact in the future. The permission was granted.

**Anasua :** Did you see 'Alamgir' that day at Srirangam?

**Soumitra :** That day? No, it was 'Prafulla'. It was the famous dialogue with which the curtains downed on Srirangam... "Aamar shajano began shukiey gelo..." About 20-25 of us went to see that play. We were a big group of his fans. Amid the ruins

of Srirangam...the seats were so dilapidated...with his team in turmoil...the sets giving in...amid his withering production...it was the sheer power of his acting which astonished all and sundry - Cherkashov from Russia was bewitched...so was Thorndyke and me? It made me the actor I am! Maybe I learnt more after that, but the fundamentals came to me from these. I regard Sisirbabu as my Guru. There was only one play which had both of us on one stage...it was the same 'Prafulla' ...in Marcus Square for the occasion of 'Banga Sanskriti Sammelan' ...I did the role of Suresh.

When I used to go to his house - at least 2-3 times a week - I used to express my desire to learn acting. He used to say-'how can I teach you. I don't have a theatre any more. But those days of seeing him on stage, talking and discussing with him, being on stage for one play...that was some useful experience. These were the things which taught me acting. Prior to that, acting came to me spontaneously - because it would give me immense pleasure, because it was an addiction, an attraction. Actually, there were a number of things which coincided for me. The shift to Calcutta...an expansion of the outlook towards life... the big city temperament...a consciousness for its political life...a chance to see quality theatre... getting a systematic glimpse of literature, especially drama - literature due to my studies in B.A. and M.A. and largely because my decision to take up acting prompted me to study more about it...these were the factors which worked in co-ordination.

**Anasua :** Please tell us something about Sisirkumar, his radical thoughts of total theatre, the theatrical backdrop... the things which influenced you later on.

**Soumitra :** My knowledge about the early Sisirkumar is restricted to academic consultation only. After doing a bit of reading, and talking to him, I think the biggest contribution he made towards Indian theatre was that he was the first ever 'Applier' (Director) in the true sense. Prior to that, Bengali theatre took off on the wings of the vastly talented Girish Ghosh. Apart from being an able playwright, he was a very good actor. But he did not as a whole regulate or determine the theatre with all its aspects. He was fortunate to be in association of a very talented group from Bagbazar...there were famous scene drawers (those who drew the

backdrops) like Dharmadas Sur in that group. Girishbabu was somewhat instrumental in a bit of teaching, but apart from that, things like lights, music, sets etc. were largely handled by others separately. The process of evolution of theatre had not yet come to the fore. At time, Europe was witnessing the emergence of the first director, though not very pronounced. Those days, there was more a 'manager' than a director, who used to look after the various aspects, while the actors did their job. That was theatre. Till that time the shadow of the foreign theatres did not fall on the Indian scene - that came here through Sisirkumar.

**Anasua :** But what about Rabindranath ?

**Soumitra :** Tagore did it somewhat, but I shall say that was again possible due to the presence of so many talents around him. He had Abanibabu (Abanindranath Tagore) to handle the sets, who was very capable and was a man with artistic visions. So Tagore must have been pretty satisfied with his work. We do not know for sure how much interested he was about the sets himself. But we know that the theatres which were staged in their family used to get attention in every quarter - costumes, sets, lights etc. Surely Sisirbabu was influenced by that. He was a certified follower of Rabindranath. The rest was due to his exposure to European theatre and his vast learning. The concept of 'Total theatre' came from him only. He came to be the first director and not only that... he took the art of direction to such excellence that it is hard to match even today. This is certified by the all-time greats like Rabindranath, Abanindranath, Chittaranjan Das and more recently by Sambhu Mitra, Bijan Bhattacharya and the likes and therefore it can be said even today with the same conviction.

**Anasua :** And from the viewpoint of his acting abilities ...

**Soumitra :** It can be said that he tried to bring a certain modernisation in theatre. He used to contend about one thing, which was 'acting sans tune'... this term has given rise to much controversy and misunderstanding.

**Anasua :** Rabindranath himself was not a follower of this style.

**Soumitra :** No, he was not. His acting was coupled with melody. The same with Girishbabu. What Sisirbabu actually said was - 'I do not champion the cause of

acting without melody. Even I act with melody...acting is not done without it. What I meant was that you have to get rid of the discordant part'. This was misinterpreted in some corners. He contended that from the '*Jatras*', this tradition of melodious dialogues came into being. Of course, this was an intrinsic part of the quality of the play and it was no doubt very relevant. The melodious accompaniments of the dialogues had a very forceful impact on the ambience of those settings. This larger-than-life effect was necessary to effectively fill the void which rose out of the lack of the correct properties. It was a prerequisite to convey the correct ambience to the audience. There had to be a ...what can I say...a...

**Anasua :** stylisation ?

**Soumitra :** ...something like that...an impact.

**Anasua :** You mean to say, a rhythm ?

**Soumitra :** I don't think 'rhythm'. is the right expression to use. No. It requires a meaningful transition. That kind of acting cannot be done from within the limits of so called reality. Take, for example, Eisenstein's "Ivan the Terrible" and the acting of Cherkashov in that. His acting in that play was stylized. That was surrealistic.

**Anasua :** So you mean to say- that Kind of acting was not suited to the theatres?

**Soumitra :** Especially in the case of social plays. Where the scenes, the sets were there, so the reality needed more to be recreated. In that case there was a need to shift the melody to another level, which was successfully done by Sisirbabu. In the plays of his that I have seen in the later stages, he used to revise them from time to time. It was very evident in '*Shoroshi*'.

**Anasua :** He used to do '*Jibananda*'.

**Soumitra :** Yes. Sisirkumar was very transparent when he did the character of Jibananda. His mode of acting was very evident. When he is seen holding a meeting in the village square, or the scene where he seen suffering from acute liver pain...in those scenes the reality was never more real. It felt as if I was a part of the meeting...I'm one of the villagers...the naturalization went that far. Again in the same play, when there are romantic scenes with Shoroshi...the scene where he says - 'Won't you come back, Alaka ?'... the so-called reality was absent there. It flowed



into the realm where there was adequate theatricality, which was so necessary for that romantic acting. This amalgamation of so many styles in one was a quality of his. At that time there were mainly two to three... Sisirbabu didn't like the term 'school of acting'... maybe that is why I too do not like it... styles of acting. One was the style which was nourished by the age old Jatras of Bengal... in which dialogues were intentionally laced with melody. One major exponent of this style was Amritlal Mitra. Though he was a member of Girishchandra's groups he used to render dialogues very melodiously. He was the one who taught the style to Girishchandra's son Danibabu, which was evident in Danibabu's acting in the later days. Danibabu was in turn vehemently followed and copied by Nirmalendu Lahiri... he was lucky that his voice came as a gramophone record in the market. The tune is very apparent in his dialogues in the play 'Siraj-ud-daula'. The other style was there from the very beginning... an absolutely super-naturalistic style, which Ardhendu Mustafi had mastered. He was inclined to that naturalism, which was again found in the likes of Jogesh Choudhuri. There was another style, an intermediate one. Girishchandra was a bit inclined to that. He had a nice balance of theatricality and naturalism, which is a must for theatre. Sisirbabu was the follower of this particular style.

This style has been seen even outside the boundaries of professional theatre in Calcutta. That was in the house of Tagore. Abanindranath was like Ardhendu Mustafi. He had a very naturalistic style of acting and was capable of acting in a variety of roles. Rabindranath was not like that. Though he was a little inclined towards the melodious style of acting, his acting prowess was praised by Sisirbabu himself when he told me - "I have seen the acting of both Girishchandra and Rabindranath... when you see them acting, it does not really remain acting any more at some level...it was more a tremendous experience". They had the ability to create another level of art.

**Anasua :** This direct contact between you and Sisirkumar - how did it develop with time ?

**Soumitra :** The direct contact was there since I went to his residence and had discussions on various topics with him regularly. Even prior to that, we had a

system of exchanging books. I used to take from his collection and he used to ask me for certain books at times. I still remember the last book I gave him to read... 'The Medieval Stage' by Chambers, two volumes. I took them back from his home after his death. We used to have discussions regarding these books we exchanged during the initial stages - at the time of returning them. The discussions thereafter rolled on to theatre, acting and his concept of theatre academy, things like that. Needless to say, I used to ask him myriad questions to know the condition of Bengali theatre in the former years. These three years that we spent some time together, he used to tolerate me, talk with me all through, in spite of the fact that there was a big gap between our respective ages... he was 70 then, I was in the early 20s. To tell the truth, the influence he had on me perhaps did not remain limited to my acting only. He had influenced my character too and it still remains that way. His influence must have acted in the way I look upon life, humanity, the society and its history.

**Anasua :** He was the one who first gave you the works of Brecht to read...

**Soumitra :** Yes.

**Anasua :** What was the connection?

**Soumitra :** It so happened that in our discussions about drama, he mentioned an author from Germany who could well be called the Shakespeare of modern times. He was a great fan of his. He gave me Brecht to read out of his collection. Not only that, he encouraged me to work on a play which would be an adaptation of his work. It was then that I made a translation and adaptation of Brecht. It was named by him 'Bidhi o byaticrom' - from 'Exception and rule'. You may say, the adaptations I did afterwards due to lack of good plays, were also due to his influence.

**Anasua :** From direct communication with Sisirbabu, to the role in 'Prafulla'... why did he offer you the role?

**Soumitra :** No, he did not offer. It was me who asked for it. By that time we had been very well acquainted. When I heard that 'Prafulla' was going to be staged at Banga Sanskriti Sammelan, I told him, I also want to do a part. He was absolutely

clear-cut... "You could do well in Suresh's role... all right." He agreed straight away. There were one or two occasions earlier when he used to tell me "Your preparation on this side is going on quite well, but now you need a bit of practice too. These things do not happen only with intellectual practices." So that is why he immediately gave me that chance. It was nothing else than his greatness. I asked what was my next job. He said, "Read the book". When I pointed out that the book was a part my syllabus and that I had already read it, he said, "Bring the book to me. I will edit it." He asked me to read the book carefully. I took it to him the next day. After editing the book, he told me something which I have remembered like a sacred recital in my approach and my craft of acting ever since. He said, "This time, read the book with your mind, not with your eyes. And read it like a detective ...read between the lines..." I was just listening... "to read like a detective means, you shall have to enter the story as if you are going to solve a crime. Try to know the full history of the characters... there is a larger story out of this one, waiting to be unfolded." This saintly concentration in one's work...I have heard about it many times, but it was my chance to see it in front of my eyes in Sisirkumar.

**Anasua :** Would you rank your role in 'Prafulla' as the start of your career in acting, if we set aside the amateur roles in your childhood ?

**Soumitra :** You cannot just ignore the amateur experiences too. They were, I feel, necessary in the process of my intellectual development and in later stages, my efforts to systematically study the matter. The love, the passion for acting was primarily instrumental too. But you can say, 'Prafulla' was my first step towards professional acting.

**Anasua :** Which year was it ?

**Soumitra :** ...Perhaps 1957, because it was '58 when I came into cinema. Must be '57 only.

**Anasua :** Please tell us something about your experience in 'Prafulla'.

**Soumitra :** The first day of the rehearsals started in a club room, which was left for him to use by a group of his admirers. I went there with a lot of apprehension... I had heard a lot about Sisirbabu's rehearsal sessions. What I saw

in reality was a small room, with a feeble light, crammed with the people who were in the play sitting and he was correcting the mistakes a few of them made, only vocally. There was not enough space even to stand and render the dialogues with ease. When my turn came, he corrected my dialogues by repeatedly asking me to let go of my full voice. I hardly knew how to do it ! There was a sequence where I was supposed to scold somebody. He said "Give it your full voice. Give a little more authority to it." Finally, I succeeded ill shouting very loudly. At that age my voice was very soft. He stared at me for some time and then said... "You have a very powerful voice, but unfortunately you do not know that you have one. You must know where lies the strength of your voice." There was another thing in his teaching. Suppose I have tried a line 2 to 3 times, but not very effectively and suppose I requested him to show me the correct way. One thing I have learnt from this experience is that, he always wanted the particular person to understand the concept of the whole thing, including the dialogue. After he showed me the correct way, I would try to do it exactly as he did it, but he used to shake his head and say... "Don't copy like a parrot. You do not have to say it exactly in the way I said it. It is up to you to decide if you will say exactly in the same way or not, but try to understand the reasons behind my rendering the dialogue in that particular way." He tried to convey the inner logic behind it to the actors. He taught us to think and here lies the greatness of Sisirkumar. He wanted the actor to think and encouraged it. So wonderfully did he create a subtext for every line he helped in, that a vivid emotional graph unfolded before the mind. One's imaginations took wings and one began to think in the way he thought.

This was his most important lesson. It was already expected that he was a champion of correct speech, a wizard with variety of dialogues. These things were fully expected of him, whom I rank as one of the greatest actors in the world ever. I was sure to get a part of his vastness of knowledge whenever I went to him for lessons. But that was not the most important lesson. To make an actor capable of acting in his own way...that was the most important one.

When the big day came on stage, I very clearly remember one particular incident. There was a scene in which the character Jogesh was seen drinking, while Suresh is

trying to persuade him not to drink and in return he gets a scolding. Needless to say, to be acting along with him, on the same stage...I was no doubt awe-struck and indeed very afraid. When he shouted at me, I felt my limbs giving away, as if he was scolding me and not the character. I was wishing the scene would be over soon. When it finally ended, I met Nivanani devi, the lady who did Jogesh's mother 'Umashashi' in the play. She called me and said that I seemed a bit too eager to come out of the stage in that scene. When I admitted to be a little in awe of the great man, she said she could understand my feelings, but she also said - But why should these things happen, my son? After all we are students of 'Barababu'.." ...everybody used to call him Barababu... "we should not commit these mistakes !" I must say that the ability to take good advice quickly and work on it has always been my character. I do not remember anyone finding the same fault with me ever again. I could overcome that awe on stage after Nivanani devi's piece of advice. But it came to me as a very pleasant experience, because she was a very senior, very experienced actress. She could well have scolded a greenhorn like me, or even could have rebuked me... this could be done those days...not like now... but look at the way she pointed out my mistake. It was a wonderful experience. Later I asked Sisirbabu whether there was any mistake done by me. He said -"No. you made no mistake, but your voice is still to mature. Your pronunciation is good, but you need to work on your voice a little more."

**Anasua :** Theoretically, what was his outlook on Brecht or Stanislasky ?

**Soumitra :** I wouldn't say he was influenced by either of them. He used to appreciate them. He had read all of their works, but he was at times a bit critical of Stanislavsky. That was obviously nothing very important. Actually he already had a vast legacy of acting in front of him... he did not have to go very far in search of it. He saw the likes of Girishbabu, Ardhendubabu, Rabindranath, Abanindranath in front of him, so the ideals were right there. Apart from that, he had a vast amount of study and the experience of acting from a very young age. There was a 'workshop period' at a point of his career, in the University Institute... which was at that time almost synonymous with him . . . where he involved himself in various experiments before his public theatres. So from that point of view, the shape of his

mindset regarding acting was already done long ago. Reading Brecht and Stanislavsky, he understood their efficacy for a beginner, a learner, a novice. But he himself did not appreciate the idea of writing. He believed that these were tools for self-propaganda. But at the same time, he understood that a student would no doubt be enlightened by reading these books. He was an ardent admirer of Brecht. Being a student and a teacher of literature he had a strong literary mind. He was able to pick out the good literature from the also-rans. But in spite of that, his views on certain things were a bit adamant...for example - cinema. He could not conceive the idea that cinema had already become an art.

**Anasua :** But was it not somewhat correct in the context of the contemporary Indian scene ?

**Soumitra :** His ideas were correct in terms of India, but it is also true that he had seen foreign movies. The surprising thing was that he believed Chaplin was art enough. The fact that he considered Chaplin's work as an artistic creation was itself not very ordinary, but...I used to argue in favor of the works of Eisenstein, Pudovkin etc., but then he would say-"I haven't seen those". Headstrongness like these were there in him.

**Anasua :** But then you yourself had a sort of snobbish attitude towards cinema at that time, at least in comparison with theatre.

**Soumitra :** Yes, but that was long ago.

**Anasua :** Was it even before coming to Calcutta ?

**Soumitra :** No - no ! I had this attitude even after coming to Calcutta. You might say I had it till I saw "Pather Panchali".

**Anasua :** That means prior to 1955 ?

**Soumitra :** Yes. My idea took a transformation after seeing the film.

**Anasua :** But even before that, there were a couple of very good... not of the same stature as "Pather Panchali"... but reasonably good films made here. Like Nimai Ghosh's 'Chhinnamul', Bimal Roy's 'Udayar Pathey' etc.

**Soumitra :** I must say that in this matter there was a dichotomy that played in me. I had a tremendous addiction for cinema from my early childhood. I used to bunk school to see a movie, right from Class IV-V to Class IX-X in a random manner. Especially when we came to Howrah, the scope increased due to an increased number of cinema halls, and a decreased chance of getting caught in the act, which was always there in Krishnanagar... that somebody or other will see me and report to my parents. But not that it was a deterrent. The ticket cost one paisa each...I spent my tiffin allowance on that, such was the addiction.

**Anasua :** Did you watch Hollywood films?

**Soumitra :** Of course. At that time most of the movies were from Hollywood. There were Bengali movies too.

**Anasua :** Bengali films...you mean Pramathesh Barua's ones ?

**Soumitra :** I saw a few of Barua saheb's films. In those days, we used to devour whatever came as a film, from `Nandaranir Sansar' to what not. The unconscious love for cinema was there from that age itself. I saw a few Hindi films too... 'Kismet' ...when I was in college, then due to involvement in serious literature in many ways, I grew a false sense of snobbery like many others.

**Anasua :** What was the attitude exactly?

**Soumitra :** That cinema was nothing worthwhile, that it depends on the director and the actor has nothing to do.. things like that. Though these were my conscious ideas at that period, unconsciously I was an addict of cinema from the very beginning. After I saw `Pather Panchali', I began to whole - heartedly accept what Sisirbabu once used to tell me - "Have you ever seen art in Bengali cinema? Can you say Pramathesh Barua's films constitute art?... they are far from art!" But as a child, I really admired Barua's films. I remember Sisirbabu saying "I saw this film by U. Ray's grandson... it seems that Bengali cinema, after all, has a future." The same thing automatically happened to us...maybe it was his influence. But Pramathesh Barua no longer interested us. By then, our acting idols had changed.

**Anasua :** By then you had been exposed to parallel foreign cinema. You had seen 'Bicycle thieves', 'Miracle in Milan' etc.

**Soumitra :** Yes, I saw those films. Later on I saw 'Othello' by Bondarchuk. After these films, those average films did not excite me much. But the moment we saw 'Pather Panchali', we - the whole bunch of our friends - were simply shattered. Whatever snobbery we had about cinema, washed off. It occurred to us that if this is what Bengali films meant, then films were the future, the ideal medium for entertainment! And I have analysed this later, that my acting in 'Aparajito' was nothing new in perspective to my unconscious self...I had already seen and digested the acting part of each and every Ray film after that... and it was already working in me. So I do not see any measure of success in the role I did for him. It was already working inside for many days by then. I already knew what should be the mode of acting for the new era of Indian cinema.

**Anasua :** Your selection in 'Aparajito' has a background behind it, right from the days of 'Pather Panchali'. Kindly elaborate.

**Soumitra :** Yes, the story everybody knows. At the time when we were all under the spell of 'Pather Panchali', we came to know that he (Satyajit Ray) was going to do his second film. I did not know what would be the process of his selection of the cast. One day as I started for Coffee House, a friend of mine called Tapan met me. Somehow I felt that he was trying to engage me in conversation and between that, was making eye contacts with someone standing on the opposite footpath. I got wind of the matter and asked him who was that person he was looking at. Then he confided that he was Tapan's friend, who worked for Ray's production as an assistant. They are actually looking for an 'Apu' for 'Aparajito'. "Do you want to meet Ray?" I said that if Ray wanted me for his work, then I was ready. Then he called the gentleman from the other footpath and we met. We took a bus from there and reached the residence of Satyajit Ray. The moment we entered his room, he exclaimed - "Oh!... but you are just a touch too tall!" After that we got formally introduced and he asked me to sit down. He asked me in detail about myself... then again made me stand... this time by the side of Anil Choudhury, his Production Manager... talked a lot with me. But I was moved by the concentration he put in his work - he did not care for the social introduction - straight away he was concerned about my height... whether it will suit the character or not - he was that much



involved with his work all the time. Anyway, I was not selected. Then I took a couple of more persons to him later... my friends mostly, to see whether they suited the role or not. But they were also rejected. He had an assistant called Subir Hajra...we used to meet occasionally at Coffee House in College Street... he used to say - "He has taken note of you, he will call you later". I did not believe him and did not take his words seriously. The matter to me was over with my not getting selected in the first place. After some time he began telling me that Manikda (Satyajit Ray) had called me and wants to see me. By that time 'Aparajito' was released, and had already got the Golden Lion at Venice. He was then working on 'Parashpathar', and 'Jalsaghar'. At this juncture I had chicken pox. When I was recovering, Anil came and said Ray wanted to see me right away. Since he sounded that serious, I went to meet him one day. The same thing once again... the first words were - "Let me see... no, you don't seem to have any marks on your face. They said too many marks were there." He asked me - "Do you still have that willingness to act?" when I answered in the affirmative, he said, "All right. I am thinking of doing a third part too...I'll need you then." At that time, I did not realise that he needed me for the role of 'Apu'. One day Subir came to me with his message. When I went to see him, he said that he needed me, but first he wanted to take a few tests - camera test and voice test. He asked me to keep in touch. From that day I used to visit him once in a while. One day he shot a few still photographs of mine. Then he asked for the timings of my Radio announcements...he wanted to hear my voice. One day he asked me to recite in the studio, All the time I was thinking that he was going to take me in some role, but at that time I had no idea that he had chosen me for 'Apu' And it was long after that I realised that he did not have to take a camera test test me at all... the stills he took, and his experienced eyes were enough to know whether my face was photogenic or not. He did the test for me only.

**Anasua :** To reduce your camera-consciousness?

**Soumitra :** Yes. So that the consciousness about camera is no longer there and so that I may feel free before the camera, for my benefit. And then it was done long after he had already selected me.

**Anasua :** When did you first realize that you had been selected for the role of `Apu'?

**Soumitra :** In the sets of `Jalsaghar'. On his invitation, I used to go and see the shootings of `Jalsaghar ', `Parashpathar' etc. So one day on the sets of `Jalsaghar, when Chhabi da...Chhabi Biswas was acting, I started to leave in the evening, since it was time for my duty. When I asked to be excused, Manikda said, "Come, let me introduce you to Chhabi Biswas...Chhabi babu, this is Soumitra Chattopadhyay. He is the `Apu' of my next film "Apur sansar". Hearing this, my head started spinning. Everything else was secondary. The only thought that kept coming to my mind was - I am `Apu'! I felt like telling it to everybody at the top of my voice. So, I came to know about my role like this. And it was well afterwards that I heard that he decided on making a third part only after seeing me, because the then romantic heroes of his time did in no way appeal to him as the romantic hero of his kind of film. His image of romanticism was totally different. Maybe that is why he decided after seeing me that why not make someone who has a little potential, the hero for this film?..... I don't know.

**Anasua :** When the shooting schedule for `Apur sansar' started, was it then that you decided to leave your job?

**Soumitra :** Yes. When he gave me the offer, he asked me whether I would be able to take a few leaves. I answered I shall leave the job itself.

**Anasua :** Was that your instant decision?

**Soumitra :** Absolutely.

**Anasua :** What was the reason behind such a decision, I mean, in the context of that situation?

**Soumitra :** It was because it involved a lot of concentration and moreover, it would not be possible to get so much leave.

**Anasua :** Wasn't the decision a bit emotional?

**Soumitra :** Yes. . . more or less .. . but not very impractical in the sense that practically it was impossible to be involved in both. I had to leave any one.

**Anasua :** But wasn't the question of a livelihood there?

**Soumitra :** You could say the decision was a bit emotional in respect of our livelihood. I thought, this was what I wanted all my life... to be an actor. It did not happen in theatre. But what is wrong if it happened in cinema? Maybe it was even tougher in theatre as it was not very stable moreover, I would get a chance to work with Ray. He asked me -“you say you will leave the job to work with me. What will happen if you do not get one afterwards?” I replied “I will manage something”. That beat of Courage was there in me, I should say. Again you can take Sisir babu as an inspiration for me. When Sisir Babu choose acting as his profession, He left a highly prestigious teaching profession behind him. I have heard that at that time he used to earn three to four thousand, rupees a month, by way of teaching, writing notes and doing so many other things, as responsibility of a huge joint family was on him after his father's death. Anyway, he left his income and took loans to the Tune of Eighty thousand rupees to do his Theatre! how daring a man can be, how most How much must have been his love for theatre, how confidence he must have been of himself to take such a bold decision! I thought, if he could do so much, can't I do this little? So what if this is uncertain,... so is an actor's life! I shall manage to find the odd job.

**Anasua :** Any objection from the family?

**Soumitra :** No, nobody objected. But as I said earlier, my father warned me from very early time to be prepared for the eventualities and uncertainties for of an actor's life, which could not cease.... and they haven't.

**Anasuya :** Now please tell us about your experience while shooting.

**Soumitra :** The first day of shooting was on the Beliaghata C.I.T. Road. At that time the road was being prepared. The shooting was held in an open field... the scene where Apu goes to find a job in a labelling factory. It was the 9th of August, 1958...since this was the first day of shooting, I remember this date only...I have forgotten all the other dates. And I also remember that I had no N.G.s on that first day of shooting - I did everything right. Ray was happy with me. I remember another thing... at the time of preparations for the shoot, we used to meet

frequently and chat. He gave me a few books to read too ...some were already read by me... and sometimes he used to take me to see movies. I remember seeing Billy Wilder's 'Lost Weekend' ...one of those Sunday morning English movies. He told me - "Have you seen this movie? It's going on at Basushree. You should see it at once. It is the last word in cinema acting." So we used to see movies together. Obviously, it made a little difference from seeing it alone. I mean, he used to point out certain parts, which helped to groom myself.

And apart from that I followed a somewhat Stanislayskian method myself before the shooting. After he gave me the first draft of the script... he never used to give it to anyone, but perhaps he gave me because it was a romantic and young man's role, and because he was trying to groom me...I made a subtext in the form a diary about what could have been the things Apu was involved in when he was not in the scene, or when there was a gap between two days, in an effort to have the entire character ingrained in me. Maybe it was a little immature then - I do not require it now a days, now I can do it mentally - but Manikda never ever considered that immature... in fact he encouraged my effort . At times he would say-"See, here you have written that Apu was engaged in this particular thing . But it is also possible that he might have been doing something else . Like as you have written that he went to the book shop . He might well just have gone to see a cinema instead ." He .... Like ... what can I say...

**Anasua :** Instigated you?

**Soumitra :** Yes. he instigated me all the more. Moreover he wrote me a synopsis about the character of Apu. It is still there with me .The outlook which you should see Apu, the peculiar character in him... the reason why he agreed to a marriage... it's possible explanation, because since he was a college student in Calcutta, it was unlikely that he should have agreed. I still remember one of my possible reasons he gave...a sexual attraction...

**Anasua :** It was unthinkable! In those times...

**Soumitra :** Yes. He was a candid, down to earth human being, which I found very intriguing. He used to groom me up in that way. I myself was worried about one

thing - that was the dearth of confidence in myself...about my looks... I had the idea that I was very unattractive, particularly photogenically. And most of my photographs were shot at a period when I was in my adolescence, and you know, the look become so peculiar at that period.

**Anasua :** It happens particularly in the case of the boys ...

**Soumitra :** Yes , boys . Girl do not look that bad. Suddenly you start getting taller by the day...your neck gets stretched... it's a mess. And unfortunately for me, my elder brother chose that particular period to take up the hobby of photography. At that time he owned a box camera made by Kodak, and whenever he used to see me, he used to take a snap. I looked like a murderer in those photographs...yes. So whenever somebody wanted to take my photograph, I used to run away. So this was a worry that I'll look horrible on camera. Then I thought that since it was the Director and the cameraman who selected me in the first place, let this be their headache. I decided not to think of it anymore, and to fully concentrate on the job at hand, my acting. This helped me to reduce the camera-consciousness and avoid the pathological problem of self-projection, which happens with every actor. I decided that projecting myself was not the big factor... projecting the character correctly was. This gave me a whole lot of confidence. When I first saw the rushes of 'Apar Sansar'... incidentally I was also the first actor under Ray to get that opportunity...I felt like committing suicide. I was looking awful, not only physically, but my acting was also pathetic. It felt full of mistakes. It was disastrous. But I got rid of these feelings later on.

**Anasua :** Your earlier experiences were all on stage. What felt new in cinema?

**Soumitra :** At that period I was trying to pick up some experience in film acting. Of course, I used to discuss with Manikda. He gave me Pudovkin to read.

**Anasua :** He also gave you Stanislavsky.

**Soumitra :** Yes. "An Actor Prepares". I had already read the other books of the author.

Otherwise the realisation that came to me after reading a few books, and seeing Ray's former works, was the necessity of underacting. The degree of underacting

should not be so much that it becomes apparent to the audience itself. You have to somewhat decrease the magnitude of the way you act normally. The reason for that is, it is a machine that conveys the actions to the audience...and this machine can amplify a 6 inch face to 60 ft on screen. In that case if I laugh the way I do in normal life, it would look as if some demon is grinning viscerously. It will look terrible. In that case, therefore, I have to laugh in a subdued manner. I shall have to move my head a little slower than I do normally. I'll have to think in terms of the camera all the time.

**Anasua :** Were these your personal realisation, or were these a result of the discussions?

**Soumitra :** It was partly due to the discussions, and partly realisation. I could make that out from my own understanding. Another thing was there from my very childhood - the trend of naturalism. I had to learn more how to raise that naturalistic style to greater heights, than to learn the craft of acting itself.

**Anasua :** But there is another major difference between films and theatre -films are not shot continuously scene after scene. How did you manage to overcome the difference?

**Soumitra :** I was able to overcome this problem of continuity due to the director. He was the one who explained to me the process of shooting a film, why is it not possible for someone to sequentially take the shots...the sets cannot be rebuilt over and over again, and you have to shoot the scenes in the same set at one go. Due to my clear understanding of the matter, it was easy to clear the mental blocks. But then it did not come to me in a single day - it was a process.

**Anasua :** That means you had no trouble?

**Soumitra :** I had no trouble. Somehow, I knew that shots are usually taken in short duration. But since I was a stage actor, I felt pretty homely about long shots, whether it was Ray or any other director. Take for example, the shot on the Talla railyard in `Apur sansar'. It was a long shot, and had a lengthy dialogue in it. But unlike many other film actors, I used to feel very related to such scenes. Since I had a theatrical background, I was used to long dialogues and altering them at will

in the middle. I had a bad memory otherwise, but when it came to memorising dialogues, I had no problems. In 'Ghare Baire', in the first scene of the character 'Sandip', where he is seen giving a speech, Manikda told me in advance that the shot was going to be taken without a cut, and so I had to keep it memorised. Otherwise he used to tell me not to memorise... memorisation rendered the dialogue archaic, and the spontaneity would be lost. That is why I do not, till now, memorise my part. Not the same about theatre...I memorise the dialogues while I rehearse. So, as I was saying, Manikda asked me to memorise that speech. Afterwards, of course, he cut the scene once or twice to use intercuts of 'Bimala' watching him. But since I had it by heart, I could dub it in one go while dubbing. Manikda used to confer these kinds of responsibilities on me at times, due to this ability. Suppose just before taking a shot, he said, "Listen, I have written this scene a bit differently...I will take this shot now." Saying this, he used to hand me a mile long dialogue. If I protested, saying that how could I memorise such a long dialogue within such a short time, he just used to give it the minimum importance, saying, "Memorising ! A problem ! For you?" That is why he made me and Swapan rehearse the lengthy scenes in 'Apur sansar'...like the rail yard one... a number of times. He made us rehearse on the still incomplete floors of the India Scoring lab, once on the Talla yard, and then we finally went to the spot to shoot. So in this way, we got a chance to rehearse, where Ray felt it important, which is not always possible in case of films. We did the same thing while doing 'Charulata'. Now I realise that he gave us the scope especially for Sailen (Mukherjee) or for Swapan.

**Anasua :** This question is just because 'Apur sansar' was your first experience as an actor - didn't you feel any problem with the use of the hands with movement, especially in the long scenes ?

**Soumitra :** I did not feel it that much because I knew that the problem with one's hands comes when the relaxation necessary for acting is not complete. That is why I did a few relaxing exercises I knew or did before, and I was conscious. But nevertheless, it was a slow process in which I learnt so many things... there were quite a few mistakes in those days' acting.

**Anasua :** It is known that you had a very exciting experience which involved taking close shots of your face later in the studio.

**Soumitra :** Yes. In that same long shot which I mentioned before, Ray shot the scene from a railway push trolley. Since at that time zoom lenses were not there, it was seen that the trolley could not be made to go close enough for that shot..the mammoth that it is! That is why, he punched those scenes with a few close tracking shots taken inside the floor afterwards. I really liked those shots, and realised at the same time that it was a great scene to use my imagination. The original scene had a railway track, and actors too, but here, on the floor, there was no track, no actor, not even the night... it was recreated by the effect of artificial lights, yet I had to converse alone, imagining everything. That was an important lesson to me.

**Anasua :** Bibhutibhushan's `Apu' was immensely popular to the Bengalis, especially the educated ones, at that time. Do you feel that the character was somewhat changed by Ray in his film for the sake of the script ? Did you feel any difference ?

**Soumitra :** As an actor I did not feel anything, but I think a little difference was there.

**Anasua :** Especially in `Apu sansar'...

**Soumitra :** Yes. There was a little bit of difference in that film. That was because the times of the `Apu' created by Ray became a little more advanced. That was all. Otherwise, we all used to think in the lines of the Apu created by Bibhutibhushan at that time. And quite a few of us shared the same background with Apu. I mean, coming to Calcutta from outside, being thrust into the big life, with a romantic vision about life and love, which started to change from the Partition of Bengal. Though the change was not very rapid at that time, but after the '60s, the total generation started to change... those times of the Indo-China war... even cracks started to appear in the spontaneously leftist attitude, which was normally there in every Bengali youth. The disillusionment started to become more acute, now that they started to see that it was not possible to stick to their romanticism in the



midst of the poverty their country faced, the escalating unemployment... and they became much more practical.

**Anasua :** To the generation after yours...to our generation, to be precise, the image of Apu became almost similar to your own. Do you think that was because it were you who did the role ?

**Soumitra :** I don't think it was because of the similarity with me... it was more because it had an identity with my generation.

**Anasua :** Is it only that ? If any other good actor from your generation would have done the same role, would we be realising the same thing ?

**Soumitra :** I cannot possibly say that. It is a conjecture.

**Anasua :** Actually, after knowing about your background, somehow your romanticism, your imaginations identify themselves with Apu.

**Soumitra :** Maybe they did. But I am nowhere near to the detail knowledge the likes of Bibhutibabu, Jibanananda (Das) etc. had about nature. They knew by heart all the names of all the trees, the respective periods when they bloomed...I was no nature-lover that big. You can say I loved to stare at a tree longer than most people did.

**Anasua :** But then, Apu was also no astute nature lover.

**Soumitra :** Apu was not created like that. But he also made sure that Apu was not blind to nature, his mind was not blocked to nature. But the extent of knowledge about nature Bibhutibabu or Jibanananda had about nature, was simply astounding. I would become out of my senses while reading 'Aranyak'. It was one of my favorites... it was also a part of our syllabus. I still remember a number of lines from that book... and a number of characters still seem to be alive. The wonderful thing about Bibhutibhushan was that his love for nature was never in separation with humanity. He had entangled both in a powerful mesh. And the same feeling comes while reading Jibanananda. If you read his novels, you come to realise it. He was totally undiscovered to me as a novelist. When his novels started coming out in the beginning...like 'Malyaban', 'Sutirtha' and lot others...I did not, in any way, realise that a romantic poet like him, who was not only romantic, but

had a world-vision too, who could reproduce images of Egypt and Babylon in his poems, could so well imagine the sufferings of a girl in the stifling atmosphere of a village. This is a quality which I liked in him very much. The same thing was evident in the writings of Tagore... as is the trait of all good authors... an astonishing sense of equality of the sexes. But he did not ever, champion the cause of the women just for the sake of it...they were just human beings, and therefore worthy of an equal status. He could visualise a man suffering, and could also depict the circumstances of his suffering as well as in the case of a woman. I remember a line... where there is a single woman, who had not been married yet and a few men are attracted to her... she says "Women are like open wounds... it is only natural that a few flies will flock in." How well could he explain a common truth by an imagery so modern ! One just could not bring oneself to expect this vision of Jibanananda the poet. He was too good, and so genuine, not like any other author. Anyway, perhaps we have moved off track a bit.

**Anasua :** It's all right. Next question - What was your first impression of film as a medium...not particularly as a film by Ray, but the general impression ?

**Soumitra :** I have already said a few lines before...I was a film addict from my childhood. I was tremendously attracted. That was a feel - good period. After I came to Calcutta and gradually started to mature mentally... and the film festivals started taking place...I saw films like 'Bicycle Thieves', and from that first youth, I started to understand that cinema is a potent medium through which human condition can be ably expressed, and which can make a significant statement about the same. But the idea about what the medium was standing upon, was still not there. Of course, there wasn't a very conscious effort to have the idea, as my mind was totally preoccupied with theatre. When I started acting, then I started studying a bit more about cinema. I began to understand what makes cinema - cinema, and not everything else. It is actually imperative to know, why is a medium called a medium. It is not a medium just because it is shot with the help of a camera... what effect does the camera have in formulating a particular character...I began to understand all these. And to tell the truth, it was all the more possible due to my connections with Satyajit Ray. I used to discuss with him, he made it easy for me to

understand... among these, I'll particularly remember one discussion till I die. That was regarding the scene involving the throwing of manuscripts in the air, in 'Apar Sansar'. The shot was taken once in Chirimiri, but it did not come out good enough. That's why we went to shoot again in Netarhat. At that time Netarhat was not easily accessible. The tracks were broad-gauge till Ranchi, and then it was meter-gauge all the way. I was accommodated with him in a first class coupe. Others of the unit were elsewhere, and no outsider was there, so there was no disturbance. I remember - I myself did not sleep the whole night, and nor did I let him sleep. We talked the whole night. The discussions were predominantly revolving cinema...I kept on asking him questions to understand the inner characteristics of cinema, and he kept on telling me... about the arrangement of shots - the essence of cinema. He told me that the character of a cinema becomes separated from the rest due to the arrangement of shots. And since the shots are taken through the machine called camera, therefore it also determines the characteristics of the film. Later, during 1986 and thereabouts, when it was the birth centenary of Tagore, I was making a telefilm based on one of his stories - 'Stri ka patra'...the first and the last I made. When I actually started to shoot for it, I realised that I was leaving aside my experience over the last three decades, and was shooting with the help of the knowledge acquired in that single night...the necessity of taking a shot, a close up, a cut, a mid-long, a suggestion-preference, or the circumstances under which you do a two-shot... these were all the outcome of that one night. That night I asked him - "Why do you make films ? You could have done a lot of other things too, being so versatile." He replied that after he took admission in Santiniketan... he went there a bit late for his age... an excursion was held under Nandalal (Bose) from Kala Bhavan, to see the famous art sights of India. He mentioned that people like Dinkar Kaushik were also in that group. They went around Ajanta, Khajuraho and a lot of other places. He had an addiction towards cinema from a very young age, and he realised on that tour that India was already much ahead of others in terms of arts and architecture... and nothing more could be achieved in those fields. There was, however, a dearth of good work in the field of cinema, and that was when he decided that he would take up cinema as a profession.

**Anasua :** Did you get offers to act in other films while doing 'Apar Sansar' itself ?

**Soumitra :** No, nobody gave me an offer while doing that one, but as soon as it was completed, I started getting the offers. Even before the release of the film, they got air that they could take me, and right after its release, the offers started coming. I cannot remember the name of the first of those films I signed... it took a long while to complete.

**Anasua :** Was it "Shasti", under Dayabhai's direction?

**Soumitra :** Yes, yes. That was it. But the next film, which I could actually do, was "Kshudhita Pashan". When Tapan Sinha approached me, I asked Ray's opinion. That way too, he guided me a lot. He said - "Of course you'll do it. He is such a good director after all. And moreover, you'll have to do other films too, sooner or later. But remember to choose your films correctly."

**Anasua :** ...at least in the beginning...

**Soumitra :** ...yes.

**Anasua :** When you took up films, did you plan that you'll keep films just as a profession, and pick the stage as the arena to express yourself ?

**Soumitra :** No-no. Nothing like that. I'd do everything which a professional actor would do. But my notion about professionalism is very strong all through. I think of a professional as someone who delivers his goods ... otherwise he cannot fulfil the demands of the recipients of his services, which has to be of the supreme quality. Otherwise what is the point in being a professional? If you are a professional actor, and you cannot act, then it is better to say that acting is your livelihood, and not your profession. A professional actor has to be as qualified a professional as a blacksmith, or a doctor. Why can people leave their life and death in the hands of a good doctor ? is because they know, that he is a professional who knows his job.

**Anasua :** Satyajit Ray was instrumental to, in once sense, break the popular concept of the studio system. Maybe he shot in the studio....

**Soumitra :** No. the concept of studio system was not exactly like that. It was that the studio itself produced the film. But that practice was broken long before. Going to shoot on location, and not in the studio started long ago in Bengali films ...they

used to shoot quite regularly on location. Then from Barua saheb's era, the whole process came inside the studio. What Ray did was, finding a stage in balance between the two.

**Anasua :** This process had started from 'Pather panchali' itself. At the time when you went to shoot for 'Apur sansar', and for other films later on, did you feel any change... that Ray's concept of location was completely different ?

**Soumitra :** Yes... actually my experience of location-shooting with the great directors have always been nice, but the difference was in the studio - the sets. The set Banshi chandra Gupta used to make in the studio under Ray's direction, that real life touch was absent in the art directors under the other directors. The authenticity, the reality, the lifelikeness Ray films had, owes their contribution to Banshi Chandra Gupta and Subrata Mitra, which the other directors did not get. When the other directors used to shoot on location, their choice of location would be excellent, but whenever they had to go indoors, their art directors could not give them the same natural ambience. And they didn't know how to demand that of them, too. That was the difference between Satyajit Ray and the other directors.

**Anasua :** Did you feel the benefits or problems of the technical facilities that were available at that time ?

**Soumitra :** I did not understand much about the technical facilities or the difference between Indian and foreign technicality at that time. I had a vague idea that foreign cameras were a little more improved. At that period, there was the arrival of the Arriflex cameras in India as well as all over the world. But the latest models were too late to arrive. But then, ours is an under-developed country... no - no ....developing country !!

**Anasua :** But as an actor... suppose in the case of dubbing...?

**Soumitra :** The dubbing facility has improved gradually in our country. Ray used to do straight dubbing in his films. In some locations it was possible to take the recording instruments along with us. But in certain cases, take for example, the part of 'Apur sansar' shot in Chirimiri, the location was so difficult to access that it was impossible to do a sound recording, although the conditions were ideal. In

fact, the lorry which carried the generator set broke down... the roads were so bad. So a developed transport system by which it would be possible to take all those instruments, was absent in our country. That is why we had to resort to 'straight dubbing'. Then came 'loop dubbing', and then 'Rock 'n' Roll' ...now a days even more methods have arrived. In that sense there has been a lot of improvement in the facilities. Ray used to do straight dubbing, even after the arrival of loop dubbing. But he later adopted loop, and then towards the end - Rock 'n' Roll.

**Anasua :** Barring Ray, what were the working conditions like in that period ?

**Soumitra :** It was better in one sense, I mean, the working atmosphere was better. One could not survive as a professional if one did not have a certain amount of skill in what one was doing. Whether it was a sound recordist, or a camera man. Of course, the directors and their assistants knew their jobs, although they did not always work as Ray did. And to speak of acting - the new style of acting that was visible in Ray's films - in which way was it different from that in the other films ? It was the ability of presenting the performances of all the artists in a consolidated manner which was first seen in Satyajit Ray's films. He had the ability to bring out the acting in even a non-actor, who had never acted in his life, and was perhaps chosen for his face, or for any other reason. And again he did the same thing with Kanubabu (Kann Banerjee). But were Bengali films devoid of such levels of acting in those days ? No. But it was scattered about, and had never been seen in that consolidated form in the films. The good actors went and did their jobs, and that was that. There were some excellent actors even matching the standards of modern cinema. Jogesh Choudhury - whose acting skills cannot be matched even now. There were Tulsi Chakraborty, Manoranjan Bhattacharya, Tulsi Lahiri... and a little junior to them... Gangada...

**Anasua :** ...Gangapada Basu...

**Soumitra :** Yes. These were the greats. But you see, they were around even before 'Tatherpanchali'. Yet, their acting abilities were scattered. Take a few performances by Chhabi Biswas, for example. But combining these calibre into a single complete manifestation - this was first done by Ray. The measuring units came into being from that. Otherwise, they were excellent actors, and merely did their job well.

**Anasua :** One thing came to my mind while you were speaking...a bit out of the way... wasn't the same thing applicable to Sisirkumar ? I mean, the consolidation of the sets, the lights, everything..

**Soumitra :** Not only these things, but the whole subject, even the acting. The actors under his tutelage developed an uniformity in their styles of acting. It did not happen that one established actor was acting in a different way to another established one.

**Anasua :** And in the case of the sets - realistic sets were there before, but in a haphazard manner.

**Soumitra :** Yes. But it was not the actual reality. He used to think in terms of the theatre. Theatre cannot go into the realms of total realism...there are always certain limitations. The change was in the presentation of evocative sets. In the past, they used to draw a Mughal architectural backdrop even in the courts of Hiranyakashipu, which, being a tale from the Puranas, was far from linked with those sets. This authenticity came from his times. There was a reflection of authentic architecture and costumes for those ages, taken from old paintings of the Hindu period, when 'Sita' was staged. He tried to reflect that which was evocative of that period.

**Anasua :** In the two years post 'Apar Sansar', you did two films each for Asit Sen and Tapan Sinha. What was different in their work from that of Ray ?

**Soumitra :** The artistic insight which was there with Satyajit Ray, was not expected from any other director. There was a bit of immaturity in me about this at the beginning. To tell the truth, I never felt that I lost any of the lessons I learnt from Sirirbabu while working with Ray, since he was so immensely gifted and versatile. But this same feeling did not come to me while working with the others. But still I contend that to compare Asit Sen or Tapan Sinha with Ray would be doing an injustice to them. In comparison with the others of their times, they were quite competent directors. There were a number of good qualities in their films too. As an actor I can say that they both knew, in their own ways, how to make actors act. Tapan Sinha in particular, was very fond of the craft of acting. He loves acting.

That is why it is a great pleasure for the actors to work with him. He was instrumental in bringing up a lot many artists, bringing out the best of many semi-artists, and creating outstanding performances out of the good ones, and the reason behind that was his knowledge and love of acting. When I came to work in 'Kshudhita pashan', I am extremely lucky that a great director like Tapanda picked me. As a result of that, I learnt a lot of things about the craft. In that film, there was a lot of walking through corridors. Though I was conscious about my walking, I had not perfected the basics of it. It was Tapanda who took pains to teach me how to walk like a star. I started practising walking even before that. For many years after that, I practiced walking... with weights on my head. It was my good fortune that I got as good a director as him only in my second film. Prior to that, in 'Apur sansar' I did not have to practice how to walk, because Apu , walked in his own way... so I walked in my own way too. But how should a hero walk ...what should be the position of his shoulders... what should be the rhythm of his feet. . . what should be the position of his hands .. . their movements at that time - all these were taught by him in detail.

**Anasua :** And what about Asit Sen?

**Soumitra :** Asit Sen was a great believer in the dramatic components of the story, and used to extract it from his artists by infusing them with a great deal of inspiration. His treatments were very good, and he knew very well how to take a shot. His camera work was pretty good. I used to enjoy working with him very much.

**Anasua :** What were the exact working conditions in films when you all came to work ...the relations between colleagues...the total environment ?

**Soumitra :** That environment was a lot warmer in terms of human relationships. The friendships were there, and one advantage was the existence of a regional film industry, not too spread out, the character Calcutta has. It's not a particularly big city, but it is pretty crowded. The industry produced a lot of opportunities to come closer and form friendships with one another. Not that it was devoid of competitiveness - it was there then and it will be there for ever, and it is natural here... the concern about career graph etc. in a few persons. But the friendship, a



kind of relationship which grew up in the process of working together, almost graduated to the level of a family relationship - suppose everybody sharing the same food coming from my house. And the friendships were as strong, resulting in a far healthier working atmosphere. Initially I had a problem because I did not get many people having a common interest as mine, like literature and the other branches of culture. But the people with whom I had to spend most of my day - about 8 to 10 hours - and the good qualities of their nature, though not always cultural, used to attract me all the same. I can say from my side that I have got as much... if not more... friendliness from the industry as I have got sour feelings. There was another thing... the society at that time was also like that... the respect for elders. Of course, there are a few senior artists even today who get their due respect, but in those days it was a lot more different...a lot like a typical Bengali family. Chhabi Biswas, Pahari Sanyal, Bhanu Bandopadhyay, Jahar Roy... their relationship with me was that of a respectful love... they used to behave in a very friendly manner to me ...we used to gossip and joke with one another, but always keeping this in mind that they belonged to a plane which was very respectful to me.

**Anasua :** What was the general background of the actors and actresses ...both contemporaries and seniors... who used to act at that time ?

**Soumitra :** It varied. Not anything in particular, but most of them came from middle class - a few from higher middle class - families. Among them was a very highly placed cultural personality like Pahari Sanyal, who was not only highly educated, but there was a good practice of music in his household too. In fact, he was a singing star at the beginning of his career, and as an accomplished singer, came out with a few gramophone records too. But again, Chhabida was from a different background. He was from a Zamindar family, and his background, therefore, was feudal. He had a feudal atmosphere in him which was suited to him only, yet it did not hurt anyone. He had a huge frame, was extremely handsome, very fair, and used to command an attention every where... everybody else seemed dull in comparison, such was his royal presence. He commanded that high position in everything - his friendships and everything, as if he was the most important

person around. But it suited him very well, and he used to get that respect from the industry. But it did not bring out any air around him...I do not want to equate it with pride. it was his natural sense of superiority.

**Anasua :** How was the social status of film artists in those times, which was scant for the artists of the earlier periods ?

**Soumitra :** I did not see any such problem in our times. It had subsided almost...I think it had begun the process of eliminating itself from before I came here.

**Anasua :** We have heard that Dhiren Ganguly (D.G.) brought a number of actors and actresses who were...

**Soumitra :** Yes, there were a number of such artists. Mira Mishra, later Mira Sarkar, was highly educated, and came from a very well to do family. Then there were the highly educated actors like Radhamohanda (Radhamohan Bhattacharya), who was a very popular hero of his times. In our country, the artists actually come from different walks of life, not from a common background. What they have in common is their passion for acting. Perhaps that was the reason why there were people with no so called formal education, as well as highly educated ones. In the film industry, the technicians, especially the sound recordists of that period used to be very highly qualified persons. Apart from having passed M.Sc, as they always did, there were quite a few who had extremely good results too. I myself have met a few First Class Firsts in Physics, who were sound engineers in the beginning.

**Anasua :** Tapan Sinha was also a sound recordist in the beginning.

**Soumitra :** Yes. Tapanda entered as an assistant sound recordist, then promoted to independent sound recordist, and then came to direction. At the time when I came, there was not that much a crisis situation in terms of social respect for the artists. Not that much. But I should no doubt say that in the case where the social platforms were made from the concepts of attitude, there was a little hitch about the artists, which is there till now. Suppose in the case of marriage to a cine artist, there were a few raised eyebrows if you would decide to marry your daughter off to an actor. This question used to arise then, and it is raised even now, and it will be there in the future.

**Anasua :** There must have been a difference between men and women...the subject of acceptance must have been tougher in case of the women.

**Soumitra :** Well...yes. It might just have been a bit tougher for the women, but as I said, many educated women also came here to work. It was simply unheard of the women from the so called cultured families to come in this industry at the very beginning.

**Anasua :** ...that's why...

**Soumitra :** ...those who came, were mostly from the dark depths of prostitution. But the astonishing thing was their sincerity of dedication, which has I should say, remained unmatched even now, and very rarely seen. Maybe they found that success in this profession would salvage them somewhat from those darkneses, and they would be able to come into a more healthy atmosphere ...maybe this, or maybe due to other reasons...maybe those times, those people Were different...I don't know. But the concentration and dedication they showed was truly remarkable, and seldom seen in the actresses now a days. I shall say from a personal viewpoint that at least in this industry, they had treaded on more respectable roads than those they were used to walk on.

**Anasua :** Please tell us something about the senior and contemporary actresses and actors who have inspired you the most.

**Soumitra :** Many of them inspired me, especially those who were senior to me, they used to encourage me vehemently. Mention can be made of Chhabi Biswas, Pahari Sanyal, Kamal Mitra, Kanu Bandopadhyay...though maybe we'd not work together... the actresses like Sarajubala, Kanandevi, though I did not work with her, Rajlakshmidivi and others. Their parent-like guidance, the way they used to help us, at times practically whenever required... it was very nice. Chhabi Biswas was particularly helpful. I worked only in three films alongside him - 'Kshudhita pashan', 'Devi' and `Atal jaler ahaban',. He died just after 'Atal jaler ahaban'. During the making of this film... we already had a very healthy rapport, having done two more films prior to this he s with him ...he used to show me the way to act properly whenever I had a difficulty and asked for his help. As I said earlier,

there was not much of a scope in those days to systematically learn acting, and one had to gather one's experiences with the films one did. It used to take four to five years to learn one particular thing. But I did learn a lot in that one film. Whenever I had any difficulty. I had no problems in asking him to show me the correct way, And although he was ill at that time, he used to oblige. And then used to say in his royal way - "Learn fast, when you will learn all the things?"

So the relations were very nice from that point of view. I got the same nice treatment from Bhanuda and Jaharda.

You can say the same thing about Uttamda too. Uttamda was a person with a very pleasant personality. He was a very sweet person. We were aquatinted even prior to my entry in films. He was a friend of my sister's husband, and in that connection came to our house first at the time of the marriage of my sister, as a member of the bridegroom's party. We knew each other from that period, and the friendship grew strongly after coming to films. That grew into an even stronger bond when we worked together in 'Jhinder Bandi'. After that we both became popular heroes of that period. He was undoubtedly the most popular hero West Bengal has ever produced. But there was a time when I also got a place by his side...there used to be a large scale debating - quite like the Eastbengal - Mohunbagan syndrome - on who was the better hero, and who was whose fan. We had to go through these phases of our careers. But still the relation we had was truly endearing...much more than mere friendship. It was almost at the level of a family relation. That was only natural in those days. It happened that I could, without hesitation, ask him to help me out in some family problem. Or he would at times ring me up and say - "Pulu, come with me. We have to go somewhere." This wonderful working atmosphere was there. I am telling more about Uttamkumar because there were many opportunities to create a bitter relationship between us. Was the competition not there ? Indeed there was, at some point or other. But that was a very healthy one. Whenever I used to get a good role, I thought that I will show him now. Again, after doing a good one himself, he used to tell me -"Have you seen that film ? Why don't you go and see it ? Tell me what you feel about it." This thing that was there, is now unthinkable. Now a day they maybe even more...no...they cannot be more

friendlier...maybe they mix socially, but I don't think they can take the relationship to the level of family friendships.

**Anasua :** Please tell us in more detail about the artists other than Uttamkumar who have inspired you.

**Soumitra :** There were so many fields, cinema, drama etc. in which we used to be involved at that time. Take the example of Bhanuda. He was very close to me, as was Jaharda. Both of them used to inspire me and advise me so that I may do even better. Jaharda used to personally come and see if I staged a new play. These things cannot be thought of now a days. There was a time when there was a huge rift between two sections of the industry in the process of a strike called for a hundred days. But these bonds were so strong that even after many a bitter moment, the relations stayed the same way, and they never suffered.

**Anasua :** And what about inspiration in the craft of acting?

**Soumitra :** That too, I'd say, came from various artists. Whenever somebody caught my eye as a good actor, I used to watch him, had remained conscious of his work, and tried to learn. I tried to understand the reasons why he was that good. I tried to absorb the particular quality if it was not in me, and had never been choosy in that. It never occurred to me that I should learn only from Uttamkumar as because he was a star. On one hand, I tried to learn a few things from him, and a few things were automatically imbibed. But on the other hand, I tried not to follow him to keep my individuality.

**Anasua :** Moreover your styles were not the same.

**Soumitra :** Our acting styles were different. But I am a great admirer of Tulsi Chakraborty, Bhanu Bandopadhyay and Jahar Roy - these three comedians, and believe that there has been very few actors like them. In fact I don't think the world has ever produced an actor of the calibre of Tulsi Chakraborty. I have tried to learn a lot much more from these actors. Their sense of timing at the delivery of speech, was immaculate. Many may ask, what is my Connection with comedy acting ? I think there is a connection. The basic craft is the same - the mastery over language, and the mastery over one's lines. This is required by an actor, be it comedy or any

other kind of acting. The technique of evoking the emotions...this I have learnt from them as I have done from Chhabi Biswas. They had also advised me a lot... Chhabida, and then there was Kamalda (Kamal Mitra). Kamalda had a beautiful voice, and I don't know why, I had a very loving relation with him. So, they were the ones who taught me a great many things about the craft. But one thing is that I did not have to ask for their help directly all the time. I was able to pinpoint on their qualities on my own, and tried to acquire them.

**Anasua :** The urge...to know more, to absorb more...how far was this urge present in you as an actor?

**Soumitra :** This was vehemently present in us. Although I did not have that much a dearth of confidence as a novice, but at the same time there was no such idea that I knew everything. The only thing that occurred to me was that - I can. But the feeling that the craft was completely known to me in acting, never came to my mind... it is not there till now. The fact that I was in touch with Sisirbabu, and had seen him from close quarters, worked as a tremendous confidence in me. I felt that since an actor of the magnitude of Sisirkumar was so known to me, there was no reason for me to be in awe or to feel nervous before anyone else. When I first went to work with Chhabi Biswas, there were a lot of rumours about him being a little mean on his co-actors, that he heckles newcomers. Afterwards I realised that all these were baseless. None of them were correct.

**Anasua :** But it would also have been possible that there were other people who had a few bad experiences...?

**Soumitra :** Yes, that is possible. But since he did not appear to be a person to me who could be rough on newcomers, therefore I do not think so. These kinds of persons are usually very narrow. I have acted alongside him for many days, and have seen moments when he used to pull a leg or two of somebody while acting... since he had more command over the craft... but had he been of the mentality we are talking about, he would not have been the owner of the personality that he had. It was in the sets of 'Kshudhita Pashan' when I acted for the first time along with him. I was in my make-up room, and was keeping track of his arrival. Whenever he came... this is done even now a days when a senior artist comes to the sets - we

greet them in some way or other... so I went and greeted him with a Pranam. He asked me what time I had come. I said, "I had come long before, and was waiting for you... ", and then I added, "... Chhabida, may I tell you something ? Actually I'll be acting for the first time alongside you, so I am no doubt just a little tense, and I have only one request... please correct any mistakes that I should commit." I talked with all sincerity, not to please him, and he must have seen that sincerity on my face. He looked at me for some time, and then he told me something I have never forgot... that was 40 years ago... "Look, whatever you do, do it confidently. Even if you make a mistake, make it with confidence. This is the foremost necessity in acting - confidence. And apart from that, what I may call wrong may be another way of thinking it." Such beautiful words ! After that, whenever I got a chance to work with him, I tried to understand him with all my mind... why he had this mastery, why was he able to hold the emotions of that particular scene or shot for such a long time in front of the camera, why could he use the pause so wonderfully. . I tried to understand these. And I saw from the time I came, that he had developed a particular style of pronunciation, which may have been due to asthma. I carefully tried to avoid this influence, as did not want to copy him. Actually, these things were ingrained by Sisirbabu from the very beginning ...the times when he said... "Do not copy me. Try to understand why I am acting like this." Chhabi Biswas was very affectionate to Sisirbabu. He was a friend of his younger brother. At that time nobody had the guts to go into the rooms of Barda (Sisirbabu) when he would be rehearsing. When he used to rehearse, Chhabida used to stand near the window from outside and watch him. He used to say, "Whatever I have learnt in acting, has come from seeing Sisirbabu act." Let us close the chapter with a personal instance.

After the demise of Chhabi Biswas, I was called by Star theatre to act for them. It was the play called 'Tapasi' when I joined Star. Whatever may be the play like, the day before, when the full rehearsal would be done, the proprietor, Shri Salil Mitra, and Debnarayanbabu (Debnarayan Gupta), opened a make up room for me, and said, "This room belonged to Chhabida. We did not open this room for the few months after his death. But since you have joined us, we are opening it only for you. But another reason for this is that, it was Chhabida himself who asked us to

bring you to Star theatre." At this point I became very curious, and asked if it really was so. They said, "...Chhabida used to tell us - You can bring this boy, Soumitra. Then you will get a good hero... '..."...this much even I can recommend about someone, but what they said after that was this line from Chhabida - "...then he will also be able to get an opportunity to learn." Can you tell me if there is a senior artist who would do so much for the sake of my knowledge ? This is so remarkable that whenever I think of it, my eyes get wet with gratitude.

**Anasua :** Your favourite artists in Bengali cinema... in detail...separately ?

**Soumitra :** I don't know if it is possible to tell these things off hand. I have already talked about quite a few of them, from whom I have learned a few things. Chhabi Biswas was no doubt one of them. Especially his personality while acting, technically speaking, his ease in front of the camera, the ability to render a pause in the camera, his ability to sustain the pause, to project the personality - these things have always occurred to me as very worthy of a lesson. Along with these, maybe because he was a stage and theatre actor, his diction and voice projection were supreme. Even in cases where, in a long shot, the microphone would be at a distance, the sound recordist had never had to say that Chhabida, I cannot hear you, speak a little louder... I tried to learn the way he used to project his voice. And the others whom I have admired very much, though I did not work with many of them, were the likes of Manoranjan Bhattacharya, Jogesh Choudhury...I did not even meet him, but had seen his films from my childhood, and I think actors like him are rare. Even in terms of cinema only, actors of his stature are not found, his acting was so calm, so natural, so cool. And then there was Tulsi Lahiri, with whom too, I did not get a chance to work. He was a tremendous character artist. There was only one highly rated actor with whom I had worked or had been in touch. He was Tulsi Chakarborty. I worked in one or two films with him. It is very difficult for me to say something about Tulsibabu. What I find interesting is that there were very good comedians even before Tulsibabu. like Ashubabu and others... our tradition of comedy has been very rich all through. But after the advent of Tulsibabu, as if Bengali comedy reached its peak point. I always contend the same thing that I have never seen Tulsibabu had act below par. I am willing to lose a bet



worth millions if anybody can show me a film where Tulsibabu had acted badly. He used to maintain a standard in his acting all the time, and a high standard at that. The second quality was the natural acting, both on stage and in front of the camera. It was definitely not done without a change in magnitude, but how he changed gear to underact in camera, and how he raised the level of acting on stage, and when, was impossible to notice. This was a wonderful thing. Apart from that, the artists of those times like himself and Jahar Ganguly, were groomed to be good singers and dancers too. They had to undergo training like that. Tulsida told me that when they used to practise dance, the adhikari (trainer) used to sit around with stick made of date palm trees. Whenever they made a mistake in the rhythm, they used to get a thrash from him. So they were very perfect, having teamed in a very hard way. He was a very good singer. I had seen him in one of his singing roles in theatre. The scene was that of a domestic servant who is seen taking a baby out in its perambulator, and with little postures of dance, singing a song to keep the baby engaged. The song is still embedded in my memory, though I saw the play once. It was so good that it just cannot be forgotten. He had so much control over his craft.. the audience used to get their full quota of entertainment from him. But there was nothing ticklish about it, but the song and the way he sang it had such a funny, amusing quality in it that the audience used to get sufficiently entertained. Moreover, from a pure insight into the content of acting, I saw some extraordinary qualities in him - his Bengaliness in his acting...it is better to say his sense of humour, and his comedy. The comedians after him, like Bhanu - Jahar, and even later Rabi (Ghosh), were no doubt great actors. But they all had an exposure to Hollywood and got a chance to see the great clowns in action, as well as their movies, and imbibe them. That is why there has been at times a hint of a Hollywood slapstick in their comedy, if noticed carefully. Otherwise they were out and out Bengalis. In fact, they had institutionalised themselves in the Bengali middle class family in the last three decades. The reason behind that cannot be understood just by seeing one film. They had put up a show which brought to the fore the undaunted struggle of the typical middle and lower middle class Bengali in spite of the many hazards he faced in the day to day struggle for existence ... how, at times, he used to lose the battle to the bad elements, but again resurfaced with

renewed vigour. This picture of the Bengali middle class person was presented in a package of laughable characters by them in those thirty years. But if searched for, there would have been found a little bit of influence from the great clowns of Hollywood, which was totally absent in Tulsī Chakraborty. It does not mean that Tulsī did not ever chance to see the likes of Chaplin, but that was never evident in his acting. It seemed that his total acting came from the same earth as Bengal. The kind of humour he produced was only possible to come out of a Bengali. He had another great quality, which is found in all great actors. I had seen him marketing in Kalibabu's market, clad in only a dhoti and a banyan, mixing freely with the people, with a simple market bag in his hand. And he was financially not sound for a long time. 'Parashpathar' (a film by Ray) raised his rates a little higher, otherwise he had to be content with less than even Rs 100 a day. He was a gem of a person, who came up from the core of the masses, and was not a very hot shot scholarly one. That is the reason why I do not believe in these things. The value of education is there only when the education is connected to its roots - the people. Otherwise education has no role in the development of an artist. We have to think, that if we are not connected with the general lifestyle of the people, then how is it possible to act like that? This question was not a problem with him...He was born with it. Once I saw his acting in the role of a fishmonger, perhaps in a film by Ajay Kar.. 'Grihaprabesh'. It was lovely...the way he acted. I began thinking how he did it, and how did he know the behaviour of a fishmonger? Then suddenly I realised, they were not new to him. The shop owners of the market were like his friends, and why like his friends', they were his friends. I have also heard him calling them by their names. So he took up his acting from life itself, and not following any theory, but consciously. That part of his acting was only natural to him, and he did not have to put any effort into that. This is the reason why I think of him as a rare kind of actor. He would have been recognised as a great artist if he would have been born in any country, anywhere in the world. In our country, it took a very long time for him to have that recognition.. .years after his death. You will find people saying today that he was a great actor, but at that time he was taken as just another entertainer. I had a curiosity about Tulsībabu from my childhood due to one reason. Apart from the fact that I saw countless number of his films, my father

was also a die hard fan of Tulsi Chakraborty. Chhabi Biswas and Tulsi Chakraborty were two of my father's favourite actors, and that is why I had a respect for them from my childhood in a very normal way. Bhanu-Jahar were also very good... excellent... but in respect of cinema and as a cine artist, Bhanuda was slightly more preferable. Bhanuda's diction and the technique of speech was closer to normal...you could not figure out that he was acting. Jaharda was also a great actor, but he had a slight tendency towards overacting. He has done some outstanding works under some very good directors. I feel that under the other directors, who could not control things as much, he was seen to do a bit of overacting. But Bhanuda did not have a trace of overacting in his work. He did whatever his directors wanted him to do.

**Anasua :** The general audience look upon Bhanu Bandopadhyay as only a comedian. But what is your idea of him as a total actor?

**Soumitra :** He was very good. The few serious works he did...he did not get many of them... they were excellent. Jahar was also brilliant. But every actor has got a genre. I cannot do the work Tulsi Chakraborty did in spite of all my intentions. His work was a total of his physiognomy, his appearance, and his nature. But it should be calculated by how much he was complete as an actor within his confines, and how much did he have in terms of variety. Suppose I should be evaluated by my ability to create variety in my roles as a role as a hero or did the same thing over and over again all through my career. From that point of view, Bhanu-Jahar were gifted with immense variety as comedians. . you cannot make people laugh for three hundred films over thirty years without that...they become bored. To tell you the truth, even Rabi - Rabi Ghosh could not measure up to their status. Rabi had a gift of comedy, especially he showed his control over the craft and brilliance in the hands of quality directors. But at times, after seeing some of his films, he would become monotonous, and you would say, "Is this a work worth Rabi Ghosh ?" But this question did not ever arise in the context of Bhanu-Jahar. But out of the three hundred odd films they did, half of the roles were not worthy of them. But it never showed, by the sheer brilliance of their acting. This quality was lacking even in Rabi. So I just cannot see anybody else comparable with Tulsi Chakraborty - Bhanu

- Jahar. But then again, Rabi was an excellent actor. He was very disciplined, like Bhanuda. He did not ever indulge in overacting. That is why he was brilliant in the films in which he got the proper roles. And that is the hallmark of a good artist. One who cannot deliver even with good roles can be called a bad artist. Rabi delivered, not only in the films of Satyajit Ray, but in others too. He did a film called 'Manihaar' with me. So spectacular was his acting ! I saw him in numerous roles, but I cannot keep him in the same rank as Bhanu-Jahar if you ask me to compare.

**Anasua :** And how was Gangapada Basu ?

**Soumitra :** He was a brilliant character artist, and was very natural. He had the trend of Jogesh Choudhury's acting. Another artist who carried the same trend and presented us with a few very wonderful works, was Kalipada Chakraborty. I did not get the chance to see his work much. I have seen him later in Fariad as a villain opposite Suchitra Sen. He also did a very good role in Rajen Tarafdar's first film - 'Antariksha'. Kali Bandopadhyay was also an actor of a very great stature. One important thing was, Kalida was a source of inspiration for me in a sense. He was someone who groomed himself to be suited to the role of the main, but character artist...not only as the main character in the form of a hero. I look upon him as an exceptional actor. He tried a number of films to depict countless characters...not that all of them were successful...at times he did not, or could not give the required attention to all the roles, partly due to the make up of his personality. Then it looked like a work which could not be believed as the work of Kali Bandopadhyay. But whenever he really concentrated on his work, he created some excellent pieces of art... there are a number of examples of that.

**Anasua :** And Pahari Sanyal ?

**Soumitra :** Paharida also did some wonderful character roles. He had a very nice and sweet personality, which he could project in his works. So this sums up my favourite senior artists more or less.

**Anasua :** And your contemporary artists who have worked along with you ?

**Soumitra :** I have already said a few words about Rabi...an outstanding actor. He had certain plus points in him. One was his sense of timing. Then he had a suitable physique. It is also an astonishing thing that my idea of the ideal physique for film actors, like a flexible, malleable body with some kind of \ grace, was found mostly in the comedians. Rabi - a man of small frame... a bit · short in terms of height, but what a wonderfully well built figure he had ! He used to lift weights in his childhood, and that built was there in him, which is why he looked so wonderful. This physical grace in turn reflected in his acting...in his walks, movements and all the comic works he had to do. He worked only once under my direction, in a play called 'Ghatak Biday', in which he was one of the main characters. There was a comic situation where Madhabi (Mukherjee) enters the sets when he is present, and he tries to hide because she is not supposed to know that he is in that room at that time. In an effort to hide, he first remains a statue, so that she cannot see him, and then in a more spirited effort, crawls across the whole stage to hide in a closet. The odd minute or two he used to take to crawl the whole distance from one end of the stage to another, used to keep the audience falling off from their seats in laughter. And I used to stand in the wings and see how gracefully and beautifully he did the crawling, and I used to compare it with the grace of a Cheetah, it was so nice, so beautiful. It was equally funny, and the audience used to laugh their breath out every day, on every show. But many people would not know that there can be so much grace in that funny thing. Rabi had this quality of physical acting. And then he was gifted with a wonderful voice. His diction, both voice and pronunciation were too good. The voice was baritone and the pronunciation, perfect. Comedy cannot be good enough without good diction and pronunciation. One has to calculate exactly what should be the weight and timing of the dialogues. One without the good qualities of diction and voice cannot do that, and you cannot make people laugh in its absence. Another actor who was contemporary to me...actually he was a lot senior to me in terms of starting of our acting careers, but we worked in quite a lot of films together...was Anupkumar. His skills had no limit. He had the ability to do whatever he liked to do on stage, or in front of the camera. But he had a problem, and that is, he grew a tendency towards

over acting. What Jaharda did was add a little excess element in the frame of the characters. But Anu's acting style itself turned into over acting.

**Anasua :** Especially in the later stages.

**Soumitra :** Yes. But he is a skilled actor. He has a few films like 'Palatak' especially in Tanubabu's (Tarun Majumdar) films, and in 'Nimantran', and of course, the earlier ones, in which his acting was really good. In his case, as he was very close to me. another of my family friends...I got tremendous encouragement from him too. And whenever I acted in a comedy or a play, I used to tell my comedian friends that if there is any fault in my comedy acting, then the blame is on you, as you are the ones from whom I have learned comedy. Anu was one of them. Indeed, I learned from Anup - Bhanuda -Jaharda. Another of my contemporaries, and for whom I have a weakness, is Santosh Dutta. The reason for the weakness was that Santosh Dutta, like all great comedians...Bhanu - Jahar - Rabi - Tulsida...was very original, and not a copy of anybody. What happened in his case was that he had a dual loyalty, as he was a lawyer, and a successful and serious one at that. So he did not have the full grooming as an actor due to his commitments otherwise. In spite of that, what acting he did was his own. He did not copy or follow anyone. In that sense...it is my own opinion that this independence is very essential for an artist. Those who do not have it, are no artists. Others contemporary to me

**Anasua :** Please tell us about Utpal Dutta a bit.

**Soumitra :** I did a lot of work with Utpal too. We did not act in theatres together, but I have acted in theatres directed by him for the Artists' Association (A welfare organisation for poor artists). He was an immensely gifted actor. But in the initial stages, I liked his comedy very much, but not so the other roles he did. In the case of cinema, I felt that his concentration was lacking, or that he used to do the roles from a stereotyped concept, especially the negative roles were all the same. I also felt that he failed in case of roles

with a little tragic tinge. This was one criticism I had about his acting. And then his acting smelt of theatre at times, but the surprising thing was that it was rectified within a very short time. I won't say a very short time, as because he was around

for a lot of time...much earlier than us. After the advent of Satyajit Ray, maybe due to working with Ray or due to any other reason, his acting improved radically in that sense. Especially in 'Jana Aranya', and as Maganlal Meghraj. His cinema acting changed from the time he started working with Ray, and it really came up to cinema standards. I no longer smelt the theatre in his acting. Still in his acting in emotional roles, as the one he did in 'Sadhu Judhithirer Karcha', a film by Rabi, the tragic depth of mental agony was missing, which was essential for his depiction of the father whose son had been kidnapped. It did not come naturally to him. I think he was more a cerebral actor. The importance of emotion was there in his later films, when his health was beginning to deteriorate, and I saw tears rolling down on his face when it was the need of the moment. Prior to that, he was a bit unemotional.

**Anasua :** And others...?

**Soumitra :** Could you lead me ? That would be easier for me.

**Anasua :** Well...Anil Chatterjee ?

**Soumitra :** Anil was also a very good character artist. He had a little tendency towards over acting. But still I would say, Anil and Kalida... both of them had started acting a little before me, but still they could be considered my contemporary ...they had a penchant for choosing roles with an exception. They had an inclination towards character roles unlike the ones normally preferred by others. Anil also had this trait, and his works with the good directors were truly memorable pieces of good acting. Anil's acting in Postmaster ...I don't think anyone can ever forget that. And then his role in Kanchanjantha was also brilliant, but there it was of a different flair... somewhat like a playboy...very different from the one in 'Postmaster'. It was of a happy-go-lucky playboy, and was altogether different in aspect.

**Anasua :** Did you like his role in 'Kanchanjantha' ?

**Soumitra :** Yes, I liked it very much. He wonderfully depicted the role of the brat, a spoiled kid of a rich father. Anil has some very good works in the films of Writik Ghatak. They were really very good. So from that angle Anil was truly a very good

character artist, but maybe due to lack of concentration, or due to the lack of proper direction, he has shown a tendency towards over acting ...this has been seen in many films...or you might say, the repetition of certain gestures.

**Anasua :** Chinmay Roy,... .Subhendu Chatterjee ?

**Soumitra :** Subhendu is an intelligent actor. The intellect in his acting is seen in many instances. But in his case too, I missed the harmony of emotion and intellect, which is essential in the art of acting, in a number of occasions. But he did some outstanding works as the second lead... I mean the role which is very important, but not the lead one.

**Anasua :** He did that kind of a role with you too...

**Soumitra :** Yes, it was there in 'Akash Kushum', and it was very good. He also did a brilliant role in 'Chowringhee'. And his role in 'Aranyer Dinratri' was of a very high quality indeed.

**Anasua :** Likewise in 'Prothom Kadam Phool'....

**Soumitra :** 'Prothom Kadam Phool' was also a very good work. He did a film with me under Ajay Kar too. He did numerous excellent films, but from whatever lead roles I had seen him doing, I think he lacked the romantic appeal, the magnetism, the almost undefinable trait, the charm which you require in your self or in your character... which was projected in its superlative form in Bengali films through Uttamkumar...to be a hero. Although he was tall, and possessed a large frame, he lacked the magnetism in his total appearance, which is known as 'sex appeal' in Hollywood, or whatever it is you may call.

**Anasua :** Chhaya devi and Gita Dey... ?

**Soumitra :** Gita Dey is an immensely capable actress. Excellent. A bit theatrical ...she was exceptional in theatres...but she was a bit too typecast. That same old role of the dominant, villainish character. But I'd say she came out with flying colours in those roles too. But there is another actress who ranks even higher, and she was Rajlakshmidēvi. She was like Tulsi Chakraborty - never had I seen a bad acting by her. Rajlakshmidēvi had the power to approach a role, be it of the



dominant type, or of the caring kind, with the same ease, but at the same time doing something which separated the two characters.

**Anasua :** Chhaya devi ?

**Soumitra :** Chhaya devi was also a very good character actress. I have seen her even in her youth as a heroine, in films like 'Vidyapati'. At that time, she did not strike me much apart from the fact that she was very beautiful. But in the later days, when she did the ageing roles, she could draw an insight into human characters, and the mark of experience in life in them. She could depict the character of the mother with all its subtleties - her human nature, her feelings of happiness and sorrows, her expectations from the next generation etc., and it was not the character of the stereotyped mother, which is generally done by the actresses who do those roles. At this moment I can remember two of her films with me, in the role of the mother, and another in which I was not there. They were three individuals with independent characters, but all of them were mothers. One of the films was 'Shesh Prahar' as my mother, which was the first film of Nitai Dutta, once assistant of Ray. Another was in 'Baghini' as my mother, who is not happy with her son's criminal earnings. She did the role of Uttamkumar's mother in a film by Dilip Mukherjee called 'Nagar Darpan^.' She did an exceptional work in that film, as did Uttamkumar. Uttamkumar was endowed with numerous qualities as an actor. The first thing was that he was extremely photogenic. I used to joke - 'You'd look good even with the camera fitted below your glottis !' Another exceptional quality of his was that he was richer than many other lead actors in his understanding of life. He had seen life, since he had come up from a Bengali middle class family, and had seen struggle, and the people engaged in it. He fully understood where lay their sorrows and despair. But there is one role...there might be more... in which I do not find a match for him. It is the role of the eldest brother in a joint family. It was there in his nature too, as he came from a joint family himself. It was the same role which he did in the film after which he became famous, a film by Nirmal Dey. Then there was 'Dui Prithibi', and many other films, in which he acted as the head of the family with many brothers. Excellent acting ! I don't think anybody could do these roles better than him. There was another

quality in him as an actor, which was perhaps his strongest point, and which, I think, was not utilised in Bengali films as well as it should have been done. That was in the case of romantic comedy, in the role of the romantic lover, but a little comic, who is rendered a bit unnerved and unbalanced, after falling in love. The greatest example of that is found in 'Chirakumar Sabha' as 'Puma'. How many dialogues are there ? But at the same time it was so funny and so sweet ! There also he is the lover, and not that he turns into some messy character. But in love, he is running into a number of comical situations which makes the audience laugh. It was beautiful. I saw another film of his called 'Bicharak', in which he is seen in flashback as a young Monsef, a moustache donning character, who rides a bicycle to court, and has suddenly become foolish, falling in love. It was such wonderful comedy ! This romantic comedy was something he did so beautifully. He had a sense of comedy, which is perhaps there within every skilled actor. In this connection I am coming to your question about Chinmay Roy. Chinmay was also not a comedian. He was a character artist. He had the trait of comedy in him as part of the character actor that he was. But due to the dearth of comedians, he was used excessively as a comedian in Bengali films. That made his acting a bit low in quality. In the process, Bengali films lost a good character artist, and at the same time could not make a good comedian out of him.

**Anasua :** Please tell us something about Ajitesh Banerjee.

**Soumitra :** In the first few films Ajitesh did, there was the same problem - he was too theatrical. It was not exactly the perfect acting for cinema. But that problem was eliminated later on. But I'd weigh the Ajit he was in theatres a bit differently. In theatres, Ajit was a very powerful actor. And he had a very good quality - the passionate nature of his acting. He had a passion in his acting which was not cold, but I'd say a warm feeling which was spread out in his acting. He was successful in expressing it in the films in which he got a chance to show it, for example, as Srihari ('Chhiru Pal') in 'Ganadevata'. And I had seen that many times in theatres - 'Manjari Amer Manjari', and then 'Sher Afghan'... number of times. It was also seen in one of the last plays he worked in, just before he formed a new group after

dissolving the old one, an adaptation of Tolstoy's "Power of Darknesses", which he took from me and translated.

**Anasua :** Now let us move to a slightly different topic. Who are your favourite Indian artists, other than those in Bengali films?

**Soumitra :** If you mean regional by the word Indian, then I haven't seen many of them, and hence I cannot say. But among those who I had seen in Hindi films, my favourite old - time actor was Motilal. Raj Kapoor and Dilipkumar were also my favourites. In his early films like 'Musafir' etc., even upto 'Devdas', Dilip Kumar could create a kind of grace, a kind of personality in the characters. He did some outstanding works in films like 'Ganga Jamuna'. But the actor who was just of my ideal type, and from whom I derived much inspiration, was Balraj Sahni. He had what I call the trait of a born artist...natural acting. He was so natural that at times you'd feel he had no warmth. He was cold, quiet, like the people whom we regularly see in our everyday life in the streets and everywhere else, all of whom do not appeal to us as particularly excited, but merely in the process of leading their lives, being angry when the situation leads him to be so, and acting in quite a different manner when situations are different. But they are not doing these things in the general run of life... when a person is being united with his wife in the evening, that is not the self he was during the whole day. Balraj Sahni had this projection of the general Indian. He was very attractive. One couldn't take one's eyes off him when he would be sitting next. He was a Punjabi and had Aryan features. His face reminded me of the facial cuts of the Hollywood heroes...he had those folds and cuts, mainly because he was a Punjabi...which were absent in Bengali heroes. The ultimate culmination of his style of acting was towards the end of his career, in the unforgettable film, 'Garm Hawa'. When he was seen doing a lead role, he would actually be doing it from the angle of that concept of total characterization. That is why it can be said that Balraj Sahni is another artist who has been an influence on me. I have always considered that he is probably one of the best that Indian cinema has seen as an actor, if not 'The Best'. After Balrajji, it was Sanjeev Kumar whose acting I liked. In the later years, Naseeruddin Shah and Om Puri were two of my favourites. They were very serious and ideal actors in the

sense that on one hand they showed a lot of brains to draw the graph of the character they acted, and on the other hand, they had the ability to depict emotions in a controlled way whenever required.

I have seen the works of many other actors whom I liked. Some of them were heroes...who became stars...it requires a fair bit of acting ability to become one. Now these stars have a problem. After going a distance, they are usually stereotyped...they became archaic. For example, when Amitabh Bachchan started off, I really liked him. But after a few years, I saw that he was still doing the same acting. There was nothing new in it. And even that acting, due to repetition, had started lacking its subtleties. I can even give an example from the film 'Amar Akbar Anthony', where he did a few comedy scenes very beautifully. After that, I saw 'Shaan', in which also there were comedy scenes, and again the same acting by Amitabh. By then, that particular acting had become crude, stereotyped.

Once Naseeruddin said that it is not surprising that they acted like that, because they were taken in the films to do these kinds of roles only. He had to do that same part over and over again. beating somebody, kicking somebody, having an affair, and then finishing off.

**Anasua :** This symptom of over - use is seen even in Bengali films in the case of Uttamkumar...

**Soumitra :** Uttamkumar faced this danger, and like other romantic heroes, he was somewhat trapped in his star image. He suffered from a dilemma. The actor in him wanted vehemently to express itself, and at the same time the weight and lure of stardom acted as a hindrance to its freedom. Ultimately when he freed himself, due to his increasing age, he decisively took the plunge into character acting. But he died only two to three years after that. That is probably the greatest loss that Bengali cinema had to suffer due to his death. We lost the character artist... and the chance to do these roles come at this age only...which was starting to take wings in him. But still, I mean, it may be a personal bias on my personal subject or preference, I rate Uttamkumar higher than all his contemporaries - Dilip Kumar, Raj Kapoor, Dev Anand etc., and even the likes of Bachchan. I may be convicted of the fact that I am a Bengali, and that he was my friend. But that is not true. That

was because I did not find in the others the perfection along with the freeness with which he did the role of a lover. I admire Raj Kapoor for the different style of character acting he did. I admire Dilip Kumar for his ability to amalgamate the lover with a very nice personality. But in predominantly romantic scenes, even not always as a lover, who seems at times as a bit absurd, Uttamkumar could bring in a beauty, and create an ambience, though we know that not many romantic guys do carry on their romance in that form. Among his contemporaries, he was the best in terms of acting as a romantic lover.

**Anasua :** Your favourite actors and actresses in Hollywood and in foreign films?

**Soumitra :** I have liked many artists on many occasions. To tell you the truth, my memory is not at its best now a days. But I can mention the names of those who had attracted me from my childhood. As a child, I liked many in respect of their looks...I had seen the films like 'Robin Hood' but did not ever consciously think that I would act like them some day. But the actor who influenced me the most in my conscious...better to say subconscious state, was there you see, I cannot remember the names now a days

**Anasua :** Was it Coleman ?

**Soumitra :** Ronald Coleman ! I liked him very much, and was perhaps influenced by the brooding, almost melancholy style that he had. Again, from another point of view, I liked Gary Cooper very much. I had seldom seen such handsome men. I was amazed that a person, especially a man can be so beautiful! Of course, when it comes to appearance, I have some weird preferences. If you ask me who is the most beautiful person, I have seen the answer will be Gary Cooper, and Frank Worrel. You must have not seen Frank Worrel, have you? You cannot understand his beauty in photographs...maybe a little in the good ones. but it could really be seen on the field that he was a very handsome man among blacks. Then there was Sydney Porter, and another was Harry Belafonte.

**Anasua :** Actually black has a different kind of beauty.

**Soumitra :** Definitely. Very beautiful...the face becomes all the more bright. Frank Worrel was beautiful in his totality...his dignified presence on the field, his

personality...he would take your attention away from everybody else. He was particularly attractive while fielding...beautiful as a leopard. And he had a lovely face too, and beautiful eyes - like those of a poet - sad...very beautiful.

Anyway, I liked Gary Cooper too, and had seen a number of his immortal films. Naturally, there was an unconscious influence from those films. During the days between the end of school and the whole of college, there was an actor who was tremendously favourite to me - Montgomery Clift. He also had that brooding, serious kind of acting style. It is a possibility that his acting too was an influence on me, but I don't know, I have never given it a thought. I was fond of all the peculiar kinds of actors. I liked clowns, especially the classical clowns of Hollywood. Maybe everybody has a liking for them, but they were my favourites even at the time I was preparing myself to be an actor. Chaplin was the obvious choice, then there were Buster Keaton, and then even Laurel - Hardy.

**Anasua :** And what about actors other than Hollywood ?

**Soumitra :** I have seen more foreign acting in the later stages. 'Bicycle Thieves' was on one hand an excellent film, the actor in it was on the other hand not my choice of a role model. But when I saw Russian Hamlet, Smoltonovsky appeared to be a brilliant actor. I had seen him later in Dostoevsky's 'Crime and Punishment' too, in the role of the lawyer perhaps. There was a time when I really liked Jean Paul Belmondo. Of course, many pundits would raise an eyebrow... "What is there in him to be admired ?! ...especially when in the later stages he went into too many commercial films. But he had such an easy grace. The fact was that, it was due to a conscious effort that he could manage the projection that apparently, he was not acting. This effortless quality was something I liked very much in him. And more so because he did not have the trademark hero-like appearance. There were a few more French artists I liked.

**Anasua :** Marcello Mastroianni ?

**Soumitra :** I liked Mastroianni very, very much. There was again a quality in him, that although he had a tremendous romantic appeal in him, he did not confine himself to it, and did quite a few character roles.

**Anasua :** You must have liked Mifune ?

**Soumitra :** I am coming to Mifune later on. First let me finish with the European actors. I liked a few English artists at the time when the likes of Lindsay Anderson started making films. And then the crop of the much later Elollywood that included Dustin Hoffman, and Robert de Nero...

**Anasua :** You did not mention Marlon Brando.

**Soumitra :** I was not particularly a fan of Brando. He was good...very good. He had the height, the health, and a magnetism in him. I liked him. Actually the period when I saw them, my whole was pre-occupied with theatre. So my mind wasn't prepared to be influenced. But the time when I saw the likes of Ronald Coleman, it was from my childhood. That is why he was my dream hero. I liked Michael Caine, Richard Harris, Alan Bates to mention a few of British films. Oh! There was the Polish actor Chibulsky who also was my favourite. He was also a lot like Mastroianni. In spite of having enough romantic appeal and a good appearance, he explored various other characters too. The same with Bergman's actors...especially Max von Sydo. Toshiro Mifune. when I first saw him, in a film festival at Calcutta, from that time itself, I became a great fan of his. I liked him again because I felt that the lead character actor should be able to cover a wide range. When he did a romantic scene, he appeared to be a totally reliable lover. Again, when he is in battle or is fighting, he looked really valiant, not just a make-believe. He had such a nice physique... it appeared that he had a nucleus of energy confined in his body...it was so good. There were a number of hunks in Hollywood, but he had a softness too, like,what should I say...he was not just a heap of muscles. That is why I liked him so much. When he would be acting in the role of a pauper, and again in the role of a rich man, he could so easily differentiate the two. And truly enough, being the vehicle of the ideas of Akira Kurosawa - that very fact made him so distinguished and different from others. Kurosawa was perhaps my most favourite director.

**Anasua :** Really ?

**Soumitra :** Yes Somehow I feel that he was the Shakespeare of cinema. I don't know... maybe this idea did not match with yours.

**Anasua :** Didn't match much.

**Soumitra :** Kurosawa was really my favourite. He was the only one...of course, there was Satyajit Ray... who had a lot of variety in terms of themes. There are many who do their films with a particular style all through...maybe there are many varieties of the same style. But these two had no resemblance between any two films they did. The director (Kurosawa) who did 'Seven Samurai' also did 'Lower Depths' ! When I saw 'Seven Samurai', I felt the Hollywood action films were infants in comparison.

**Anasua :** 'Roshomon' also was tremendous.

**Soumitra :** 'Roshomon' was extra - ordinary, almost philosophical. Kurosawa was my favourite, but his favourite was Ray. On the other hand, Ray also liked Kurosawa. He liked Kurosawa's movies very much. Another reason why Kurosawa was my favourite was that he had a very powerful observation about the other aspects of life, along with his philosophical attitude, like the struggle of life, the struggle within the classes, and the resulting violence, which I have not seen in the works of other directors. In Manikda s movies, since he did not come from the section of society where these struggles take Place, this aspect was absent. But these things are vitally important as the expressions of life Take for example, the imagination and vibrant expression of the vigour, the violence, the enmity, and the devious plans which he manifested in his adaptation of Macbeth. These seamy sides of life were absent in that form in Ray's films.

**Anasua :** Yes. They were a lot more delicate.

**Soumitra :** Much more delicate. How far can a man symbolise in his films, is evident in the scene in 'Throne of Blood', where there was the effort to tame the untamed horse in the background. This symbolism was wonderfully there in Ray's films too, but again you can see the difference between the two. Take the train as a symbol in Ray's films. In 'Pather Panchali', the train was something very remote...so is the reality of life. The day Apu sees the train, he thinks of it as something like a dream, coming through the picturesque fields. But what happens when he comes



back ? Indir Thakrun dies - the first jolt of reality. In 'Aparajito', the train has come more closer, as has reality. It is no more distant, and it can now be seen from the terrace. That too is like Japanese films - beautiful. And take the Apu of 'Apu sansar'. He almost lives inside the trains, in the Tala yard, where from he goes to his office, and comes back, in search of jobs.

**Anasua :** Aparna too leaves following the same way.

**Soumitra :** Aprnaa leaves, the train takes her away to a great distance. After Aparna's death, it was the same railway tracks where he goes to commit suicide. So he is in the thick of the development of the symbol through the trilogy. It was very fascinating. But you can see that in Kurosawa s films, the symbol of the horse depicting a violent ambition, and the violence in the scenes are pretty much there in their lives, which is absent in ours. This is why I adore Kurosawa. And of course... I have seen many excellent works in films from Europe ...but I have not seen any other director, not even Bergman, who did so many films, to display that vast an array of variety as did Kurosawa. That film where a surgery is done by forcibly pinning down the hands and feet...what was that film ? Kurosawa's ?

**Anasua :** 'Red Beard' ?

**Soumitra :** Yes. 'Red Beard' was a different film, and then 'High and Low' was again completely different.

**Anasua :** What about Charlie Chaplin ? In one occasion you have written that he was the greatest ever actor...

**Soumitra :** In every sense. All the qualities that we discussed till now that should be there in an artist, were there in that single person. His inventiveness, his creativity, his intellectuality, his ability to express his emotions, his power to handle an emotional situation, and at the same time the heights of beauty to which he took his craft,... which is especially required in the silent movies, which were stylised, and therefore the acting had to match..., were simply too good. It was a great experience to see the films. Where a man is seen dancing...I mean, running in a peculiar way on a table, it becomes even more graceful and beautiful than ballet. And I don't think anybody in the world could do the sheer physical acting which

Chaplin did. He had everything from every aspect which an actor required. Since he acted in silent films, he had a fear that he would not be so successful with the advent of talkies. He was no doubt not gifted with a good voice, but whatever acting he did in the talkies afterwards, especially 'Limelight', did it ever come to notice that he did not have a very pleasant voice? It never occurs that he had an odd, hissing voice. How wonderfully did he use his voice! The scene where he is seen talking with a girl while sitting on a window, and where he suddenly asks - "Where am I?" ...see the level he took his voice to! He was too good. You cannot be better. And then again, when an exponent of stylized acting like him had to act in realistic films like 'Limelight', he had to shed his stylisation altogether. How could he possibly manage to do it? That meant that the total craft was within his grasp.

**Anasua :** Monsieur Verdoux ?

**Soumitra :** Monsieur Verdoux ! I think he was undoubtedly great as a director...more for his ideas than for his technical genius. His ideas were so extraordinary! A man eating a shoe, but so ceremoniously.... like a British Lord...

**Anasua :** 'Gold Rush' ?

**Soumitra :** Yes, in 'Gold Rush'. These ideas reflect how far a man had seen People, their lives and the tragedy in them. And had known what hunger was. The fact that he had realised the importance of hunger over every expectation is the reason why he could produce such results. But at the same time, I cannot differentiate between the creative souls of the actor and the director. His films as a director were so good only because he had an actor in his crew called Chaplin. Could he possibly make any other actor act like that? That was because his ideas coincided with those of the actor. They were the same. The pain of hunger which he decided as a director to bring into his film was already known and felt by the actor in him.. he had gone through it in his life. It so happens that Charles Chaplin the director had Charles Chaplin the actor in his hand, and he knew that the world's greatest actor is in my hands and I can make him do whatever I want.

I shall not say that it is my immodesty, not even once, but when I came to act in theatre, I mean again in 1978, in 'Naamjiban', a measure of assurance of this kind

worked in me too. I thought like this - since I was a star, therefore the audience will take the tickets just to see me, and therefore I could do whatever I wished as a director. I decided to do the theatres differently from the other Bengali theatres. Plus, I had the confidence that I had the actor Soumitra Chatterjee to do one main character.. .yes. I am in no way comparing myself with Charlie Chaplin, but I know that this confidence comes to one that since I am the actor who will do this role, therefore I do not have to worry about that. And if the same role had to be done through another actor, I would become out of my mind. How can I make him do the role? He won't be able to understand !

**Anasua :** Now to a slightly different topic. Please give us a total picture of the span of Bengali cinema, pre and post 'Pather Panchali'.

**Soumitra :** These are very difficult for me to say.

**Anasua :** Still. From your point of view.

**Soumitra :** Pre and post 'Pather Panchali'...a little bit has come out of our discussion already. From which angle do you want to know?

**Anasua :** Totally from the angle of film-making.

**Soumitra :** I learnt all these things at some time, but now I have forgotten everything. Now a days these do not stick to my memory. The Bengali films started in the same way as did the foreign films in the beginning, with moving pictures. Like in the form of a moving train, or a moving person...this object could photograph living forms. Then the stories started to come. As the stories came, they were mostly from the theatres. At the same time, Bengali theatre had an eye on Bengali literature too. Due to this reason, for a long time, at least upto the 60's, Bengali films had a decent status. Since the films were based on the literature, therefore they had a semblance of life in them, and expressed a designation of life. The films began to be shot mostly indoors from the times of Barua saheb. In a way, it did a whole lot of good in terms of improvement. But on the other hand, it probably sent the industry into a Problem too. The semblance with life, the aspect of physical reality, which Was relayed by exact locations and exact living conditions, gradually diminished. It moved away from the realistic sets, which we

could see later on with Satyajit Ray's sets done by Banshi Chandra Gupta. The sets became a bit too unreal. In that sense both Bengali literature and Bengali life got an opportunity to have a fuller expression through 'Pather Panchali' and the other films of Ray's contemporaries. But still I would say that being a narrative medium, Bengali films could not progress at the same rate as did Bengali novels, Bengali drama...not as much, due to the dearth of good playwrights, but almost there...and Bengali short stories. Could Bengali films expose and explore life as much as Bengali literature? Not even today. That is because of the same old question of money. In this system, this business of cinema demands more responsibility towards the factor of entertainment than towards the return of the money invested in it. But that is not the case with Bengali novels. There was a time when the novelists were all full-time writers, but then the times were easy and they could survive on writing only. But now a days, apart from a few immensely popular writers, most are in some profession or other, with writing as a side business. So they are not worried about getting the returns for their investments. Writing a poem requires only a Pen and a piece of paper...how much is the investment? How much investment is there in the actual making of a song? Even if I take the example of a sculpture, how much is the investment I make in buying the stone and the equipment? It is nothing. But while making a film, there is the necessity of investing a large sum of money, and consequently the question of returning the money comes into play. Therefore the films always have to keep an eye on the entertainment part of it - this is the resistance it faces from its very birth. But at times I think that each form of art has its own limitations in its working conditions. The challenge lies in removing that limitation. Then why can't cinema do it? The foreign films have succeeded in doing it, as could the Rays in our country ...Ritwik Ghatak was successful in doing it, then why can't the others? Actually one factor has been the lack of tendency to do it. Was it due to Ray's level of education that he was able to make such life-like films? No. that was because he was an artist, and his attention itself was directed towards life and people. It is very difficult to find directors with this artistic insight. Here there is a paucity of this artistic sense which compels man to turn towards life and find his roots. This paucity has forced me to suffer from a frustration at least personally. Because the

type of acting I search, and has been searching, has been that through which I could understand life and people, and at the same time could express my experiences. The kind of films we have here substantially reduces the scope for such acting. If there had been a few more such films, I mean, had there been a few more Satyajit Rays... not from the qualitative point of view, but from the number of films they did...I could have got a few more chances - this is my realisation. There are a few people who jokingly complain that this sense of unfulfilment is only my luxury, as the number of memorable films that I had worked in is unmatched by any other actor in this country. I say that this is nonsense. Is this just the question of working in more number of good films? I rather tend to think for the last forty years that all the movies I shall work in should be good ones. That is where my thirst, my unhappiness, my unfulfilment lies. I do not follow the dictum that 'artists are never satisfied. But this is my natural yearn.

**Anasua :** From which period did the concept of Stardom come to films in Bengal ?

**Soumitra :** I do not know the calculations well enough. But it was there for a very long time. Whether from the very beginning or not, that I don't know... in those days it would be the theatre stars themselves who came to be the stars in films too, as in the case of the likes of Durgadas. The stars who became so from cinema itself were Pramathesh Barua, Kanan Devi etc. - and they were very big stars. Afterwards came the likes of Rabin Majumdar, Asitbaran, and then the craze started around them. At that time the media was neither so powerful, nor had so much coverage. The sheer urgency in the audience not just to meet their curiosity, but just to see the stars like Durgadas and Asitbaran, came to the fore in its liveliest best in the case of Uttamkumar. One thing pains me much now a days. Who is there to take the place of the likes of Uttamkumar ? Can you tell me the name of the star for whom I shall be that eager? Nobody's there. The people used to get the tickets just to see artists like Uttamkumar, Suchitra Sen, Bhanu Bandopadhyay, Jahar Roy, and later to some extent for me and Apama (Sen). But what after that? If Uttamkumar was acting in a particular film, it would run for at least six weeks just for his presence, even if the film was a flop. My films would run for three to four weeks only because of me... the people would go and see it

for at least four weeks, not less than that, even if it was a flop. And things were just to be seen if the film was a hit! A hit film does not depend on the star all the time. But attracting the crowds to the halls does depend on a star. That was something we were able to do to some extent. But does that happen now a days?

**Anasua :** The people do not even go to see Bengali films now.

Anyway, the way Uttamkumar became embedded in the memory of the people, we have not seen the stars before him having the same thing.

**Soumitra :** They were perhaps not so durable. But the craze had been seen in capsulated form, in the case of Rabin Majumdar, and Asitbaran.

**Anasua :** But Uttamkumar was something close to overwhelming. How would you explain that?

**Soumitra :** These things came with the change of times. It was this period from when the print media went to an altogether different level, wasn't it? And then, this was the period when a number of skilled directors came to work in mainstream commercial cinema. They all knew their jobs pretty well. But in the case of Barua saheb, this public craze was there. This is a fact that when the print media had no place in the general psyche of the people, at the same time, after his death, when he was being taken for the final journey, it was mind-boggling to see the rush of people. They cried for the demise of 'Devdas'. Not that cinema was not known then...but it did not have enough importance in the general psyche of the people. And not only that, cinema was utterly unpopular in the household. The children were not allowed to see them. From that stage, the situation gradually became more free. The notion underwent a change that yes, cinema was worthwhile, because by that time the glamour and money in cinema became established.

**Anasua :** Don't you think that the concept of love within the people was becoming gradually more normal?

**Soumitra :** Yes. In the early days, love marriage was somewhat...I mean there. 30, 40, or even 50 years before us, there were love marriages. But what was the number?

**Anasua :** Very less.

**Soumitra :** Very less. Abysmally low. I cannot remember a single love marriage in our family, I mean in the generation before mine. It started with our generation, and even then my elder brother did not have one. Me and my sister were the two who married their chosen partners. My younger brother did not. And romantic stories have been the main the main source of sustenance for films, and more so for Bengali films, because the history of our land, and of our people is not marked with battles, revolts, and adventures... I mean...it is not there in the lifestyle of the ordinary Bengali. His biggest adventure has been to see the tiger in the zoo, where it hides in its cage. So in that scenario, the acceptance of any story - material except love was just not possible. So the pair of Uttam - Suchitra became so popular and successful. After that, there were some happy coincidences, like the emergence of some very popular music makers, particularly song makers and singers like Hemanta Mukhopadhyay. The credit of the popularity generated for 40 - 50 years by the Hindi films, which involved enormous amount of investment... in spite of some of it getting wasted...should go equally to the likes of Lata Mangeshkar and Kishore Kumar as it should to the stardom of Raj Kapoor, Dev Anand and Dilip Kumar. And Indians, especially Bengalis consider songs as an essential component of a film. Somehow a hero or a heroine or some other character, mostly a hero or a heroine breaking into a song for no reason is so much acceptable to a Bengali.

We are not that crazy ourselves, but a trait is visible, when, for no reason, we persuade a friend or anybody who can sing a bit to go melodious at any gathering whatsoever. You won't find this in the European lifestyle. For them, songs are just a little more formal.

**Anasua :** Do you think that the pair of Uttam-Suchitra was instrumental to create this idea of romanticism, or did they only work on the already existing concept ?

**Soumitra :** They only consolidated what was already there.

**Anasua :** You mean to say that the type of romanticism in the Bengalis was itself like that ?

**Soumitra :** Must be. Why else should they accept Uttam-Suchitra like they did? They couldn't have done that without some identification somewhere. And Uttamda particularly,...not so much for Suchitra - she was too beautiful,...in spite of being very photogenic and handsome, had a very young-man-next-door feeling around him. He did not appear as someone very far to reach, or intangible.

**Anasua :** But Suchitra was a lot like that.

**Soumitra :** Yes, it is true. I have always been a fan of Uttam Kumar between the two of them.

**Anasua :** How did you manage to command a parallel position through a completely different type of characterisation to that of Uttam Kumar in spite of the enormous popularity he had, during the '60s?

**Soumitra :** That was because the picture of the hero the average Bengali wanted to see - that thirst could not be quenched through only one hero, however big a star he may be. There are a number of different people, a number of different subjects in life, different kinds of young-men, and their different types of love. There are myriad facets of his struggle in life, which remained to be seen. Maybe they found that alternative hero in me. Maybe this was the reason... I am not the best judge of it.

**Anasua :** The difference between the two of you - was it fundamentally the difference between two ways to see life?

**Soumitra:** Yes, but we had a lot of things in common too.

**Anasua :** Yes, there were, but don't you think that the two separate fan - clubs were divided due to that difference only?

**Soumitra :** It might be the case. Actually, this phenomenon is very difficult for me to explain, as because I am in the centre of it. I think this division encircling two heroes is something which is there in the lives of Bengalis themselves. Otherwise, just imagine, why should have a stupid tussle like that involving East Bengal and Mohunbagan go on for nearly a century?



**Anasua :** But in that, the factor of Bangals (East Bengalis) and Ghatis (West Bengalis) also comes into play....

**Soumitra :** Yes, that factor was there, but that too is almost mitigated. Now a days it is not a hard and fast rule that only the Bangals should be East Bengal fans and vice versa. But of course, the division is still basically along those lines.

**Anasua :** But on much looser terms.

**Soumitra :** Much looser. Mohunbagan has many Bangal supporters....

**Anasua :** And then there are many supporters of Mohammedan Sporting too.

**Soumitra :** That is true, and it should be like that too, in this modern era. I support the team I like most.

**Anasua :** But in the case of the heroes or heroines, that is hardly the case. Then the choice is of a different kind...lot more personal.

**Soumitra :** Yes, it enters the psyche. Maybe it happened in these lines - the emergence of Ray and Ray's films did not confine themselves to the likes of 'Pather Panchali', 'Aparajito', 'Jalsaghar' and 'Parashpathar'. His films started to touch the subjects of love and life too, went to all corners. This penetration was manifested through the hero called Soumitra Chatterjee.

**Anasua :** It means that you agree, that the intellectual Bengali was, through you, somewhat

**Soumitra :** It might be somewhat true, but you see, I could not have been around for thirty years being patronised only by the intellectual Bengalis. I could not have lived off only that much popularity. I did all kinds of films. And not that all of my superhit films were by Ray. I did only 16...no, 15... no, 14 films under Ray.

**Anasua :** 14, leaving Sukumar Ray's one.

**Soumitra :** Yes, if you take out 'Uttaran', it comes to 14. Out of these 14 films, you see, 'Apur sansar' was a superhit, 'Devi' was not, 'Tinkanya' was a hit, 'Charulata' was a superhit, and then there were a few films which were neither hits nor superhits. Films like these were also there. But my 2<sup>nd</sup> film was outside Satyajit Ray, and it was a super hit - 'Kshudhita Pashan' - the biggest money-getter in the history

of Bengali cinema. Jhinder Bandi' was a hit of the same status, and I wasn't even the lead actor...of course, it was a kind of character role, and it is true that the role was even more attractive than that of the hero. That person seems to be more romantic than the hero himself. Whenever we Bengalis think of the name - "Mayur bahan", a very beautiful image usually used to come to our imaginations. That expression is there even in the novel, when Sharadindu (Banerjee) writes - "Mayur bahan... of course, he looks like the god Kartik too!" So, this is there in the imagination of Bengalis themselves. Therefore, from that angle I think that it has only enhanced my hero image.

**Anasua :** From the viewpoint of the concept of a star - where do you place yourself - do you think of yourself as a star?

**Soumitra :** Of course, I do.

**Anasua :** But definitely in a different sense?

**Soumitra :** Yes, definitely. I do not believe that a star should do the same thing over and over again. For instance, once there was a star in Hollywood called 'Candyvellous', who was quite ugly, or you can take quite a few examples from the present Hollywood crop itself. There was a British actress...I forgot her name, who worked with Merchant Ivory...who was not at all pretty, in fact quite contrary. But they had the power of acting, and the ability to attract. You can take the case of Humfrey Bougart too. He is considered to be a handsome man, but...

**Anasua :** ... but he was not that good looking...

**Soumitra :** But he was not good looking. Did he have the looks of Gary Cooper? Definitely not. And he did many negative roles. He was more seen as a gangster or something like that than as anything else. So, there is no harm in calling myself a star. My notion of a star is one who has the ability to induce the viewer to come to the cinema hall, buy tickets for him and see the film. For those who have one, this is the actual concept of box office. Box office is that imaginary box due to which the tickets are sold. From that, the ticket counter itself came to be called the box office. From that concept, Ray had a box office. This was said by Kanandavi. She herself had a box office. So did Pramathesh Barua, Rabin Majumdar, Asitbaran. The

viewers purchased tickets to see Uttam Kumar, and Soumitra Chatterjee. Therefore, I do not have any reason not to call myself a star. I had tried to be myself, and not like the others, and I felt that people would come to see me. I had tried. Now it is for others to decide whether I have succeeded or not.

**Anasua :** You know very well that there is a glamour in films, to maintain which, Uttam Kumar had always tried to keep his distance from the masses. But being a star yourself, though not going into the general lifestyle, you had to, as an intellectual, maintain a contact with people. How did you manage to strike a balance between the two?

**Soumitra :** I had to do it a bit forcibly. I very much used to feel the problems of stardom...I could not go anywhere with others, I used to get mobbed...now that I have become aged, my nerves cannot take it. So, whenever I feel that a place might be too crowded, I prefer not to go at all. But that is due to another reason. That is because I feel tired. Earlier, I did not care about these things. I used to roam about here and there. Uttamda used to regularly tell me not to do so. Suchitra also used to tell the same thing. Uttamda used to say - Pulu, why do you do these things...roaming about everywhere... going to the market...these things ruin stardom.” Even when I put on the pair of glasses in ‘Samapti’ of ‘Tin Kanya’,...I don’t know whether I should tell this...Uttamda said - “Why did you put on that old-looking pair of glasses? It will hamper your glamour.”

**Anasua :** But it is impossible to imagine you without the glasses, isn’t it?

**Soumitra :** Yes....so this is a difference of outlook, and nothing else. I wanted my stardom to stand on my acting.

**Anasua :** I have read in your writings, where you have said that every artist is confined in his or her image the confinement is small in some cases, and large in some.

**Soumitra :** Confined in an image, because that is only natural. Take my example. I know that I am known for my ability to do peculiar roles. But shall I be successful if I attempt something which does not suit me? I cannot be. Can I do the part done

by Niranjan in 'Ganga'? I just cannot, though probably I am a more able actor than Niranjan.

**Anasua:** Do you mean physically?

**Soumitra:** The physical part...the appearance. I wanted the role of 'Gupi' from Ray. Why didn't he give me that? Would I have done anything less than Tapen (Chatterjee) as an actor? No, but when he read me the script...as he did with all his scripts... I just jumped up and said - "Manikda, please give me Gupi's role. I want to do it"...he said- "You? Gupi? No-no, I just cannot think of it". Then I asked - "Why? Don't you think I'll be able to do it?" He said - "Not that. But I just cannot match you with the picture I have in my mind. I cannot somehow bring myself to think of you as a man borne of poor peasants." And then came Tapen's extra-ordinary performance. I think he was born to do that role only. And what Ray thought was right! He had this shrewd sense working in him when he did the castings. It was brilliant. I have seen that in 99.9 % of the cases he was right. Barring one or two cases, he never made a mistake. Much earlier, once I thought he made a wrong choice.

**Anasua:** In 'Simabaddha'?

**Soumitra:** No, not in 'Simabaddha', but in 'Devi'. The role of the professor that was done in 'Devi' by Kalibabu - Kali Sarkar...the total get up of Kali Sarkar does not sum up to be that of a professor. He is good enough for a servant, or a Nayeb or a Gomasta, but he does not ever appear to be a professor. And once in 'Ghare Baire'...

**Anasua :** Swatilekha (Chatterjee)?

**Soumitra :** Swati - somewhat.

**Anasua :** We feel the same thing about another character...I don't know whether you will agree or not... 'Babita' in Ashani Sanket .

**Soumitra :** 'Babita' of 'Ashani Sanket'.....yes, a little bit. The appearance.

Mainly the fact that she has made herself into that... the eyebrows plucked and all that...

**Anasua :** Not only that. Do you remember the scene where she throws herself on Gangacharan? This expression of love is not generally found in the village girls.

**Soumitra :** There were bits of problems here and there.

**Anasua :** Did you feel the same thing about the character of ‘ Shyamalendu’ in ‘Simabadhha’?

**Soumitra :** I was the one who was supposed to do it in ‘Simabadhha’. Afterwards due to some reason he left me and took him. But apparently that was not his miscasting. If the actor did not have the acting in him, what could anyone do? That is another question, but after seeing him,... does it not feel very hard to believe...from a character like that, he had such a handsome appearance, the looks of an executive, with all the smartness required, but he had no acting in him!

**Anasua :** You have written that you wanted to do the part of a hero from the point of view of a character artist. That topic has transpired quite a lot from the discussion we had till now, but please tell us a bit more about it.

**Soumitra :** There is not much more to say about it. Actually, human beings are the factors which actors live on. And being human beings automatically led to have characters. That is why I want to be a character actor. In the stereotyped image of the hero of our Bengali films, the character is almost completely lost. Secondly, the idea of a hero... which is depicted in Indian films and in those made here too,... who is endowed with all the qualities a human being can have, like he can sing superbly, is supremely romantic, can get the biggest of jobs, is so strong that the goons topple off with a single blow of his fist... that he is almost a god, does not suit with my idea. That was the reason why at that time many people - now the number has diminished with the advent of time - could not accept the normal idea for a hero. They could not, for example, accept the beating ‘Narsingh’ receives in ‘Abhijaan’. They thought - “... he is a hero, and somebody beats him up. Couldn’t he fight back?” But that, is life.

**Anasua :** The fact is that artists need to stay away from general lifestyle. But the experience has to be gathered from the people itself. How did you manage to...

**Soumitra :** I succeeded because I did not sever my contact with human beings.

**Anasua :** But, that is only a section of people...

**Soumitra :** No. It is not always that. I'd rather say, the greater population of India is that which lives in villages - rural people. Wherever and whenever I go to shoot or to visit, I mix with the people, I live with them and try to understand them. I have not forgotten the part of me that I had before coming to films, before having such fame. That part was just like these common People, and I treasure that part of me till today. Moreover, since I do a few more different kinds of works, as in films and theatres, though the association is not as benevolent as a hospital or a Police station or a court, they are definitely as varied. There are so many types of people you get to see in films and theatres, all busy with their own works, that if you can keep your eyes and ears open, you can hit the target standing in the same place. You do not even have to face the enemy. How else could have Tagore seen? How else could Ray see? There are so many types of people who come to us. There you have to keep your senses alert. You have to be open minded, that you won't shoo away each and every fan who comes to visit you. I do so to most of them, but whenever I feel that no, this man is interesting, there is something else in him, so why not speak to him for five minutes?...

**Anasua :** Why do you shoo away most of them?

**Soumitra :** Most of them are like that - "Dada, please get a role for me in your films"...what can you say to them? When I see that there is nothing worth seeing and understanding in them, I say that now I'm very busy, so please come later. That is purely a human sense of assessment.

**Anasua :** Please tell us something about the favourite film that you acted in.

**Soumitra :** This is too difficult!

**Anasua :** Still...?

**Soumitra :** This is very hard to say . Because whenever I work in a film ,... barring the few films in the last few years , which I'd be happy to forget - I did them only for the sake of a livelihood - but whenever I have worked for Salil Dutta, I have done it with extreme concentration . And this lesson was taught me by Satyajit Ray very early in my career . It was a film towards the very beginning ... I shall not

mention the names of the film or the director... in which I had to do a romantic scene with a heroine. The heroine was firstly older to me, and then the scene was a typical Bengali movie romantic scene. In that scene,...which was a S.P. - Suggestion - Preference - scene, with me as suggestion and her as preference, I almost had my back to the camera - three quarters. I did not have to do much in the shot...she was the one who was saying the dialogues and doing all sorts of things. The absurdity in that scene was too much for me, and my intellectual snobbery... which, in other words, is stupidity... was still there in me. So due to the presence of the stupidity, I was laughing, as I had my back to the camera and no one would be able to see. But Ray, when he saw the movie, noticed the smallest twitch of the muscle and the smile at the end of the lips, which no one else could. When I went to him the next time, he asked me in a reprimand - "Why were you laughing in that scene?" Then I confided the cause in him and asked that in such a situation was any reaction other than laughter possible! It was a third-class scene! In reply he said that no, the scene may be third class, but if you think in that way, you will not be able to work properly. If you want to be a professional actor, you have to believe and concentrate in the scene. You can never afford to laugh at it. What you did was wrong - such severe was the reprimand! I am a very quick learner of these things. That was it. I have never ever in my life committed the same mistake again.

**Anasua :** You have acted in many different roles other than the lead one. How did you feel while enacting them?

**Soumitra :** I can mention a few, I mean, those which are coming to my mind now. There might be more. 'Sansar Simante', 'Koni',.

**Anasua :** One thing in the context of 'Koni'. There are a number of monologues in the film, which feel somewhat odd, I mean,...

**Soumitra :** Yes, monologues. I think I have seen.

**Anasua :** Don't you feel that these made the subject a bit weaker?

**Soumitra :** That was the move of the maker. Nothing to do.

**Anasua :** Yes, definitely. That means the character was liked by you.

**Soumitra :** Yes, I'd still say it was one of the better kind of Bengali films. These words - exactly this sentence was used by Manikda to describe that film. He saw the film much later. He could not see it when it was released...he might have been ill or something. Since it was a government production, they arranged the film in Nandan to show it to Ray. I went to meet him the day after. He said - "Yesterday I saw your 'Koni'. Your work was good"...he did not say much more than that as a compliment to me., and the film too was nice to see - one of the better kind of Bengali films. I really liked to work in the role of 'Koni'. I could express a facet of my mind, and an element of my love too - the activity of sports, which I love very much, though swimming was not, I mean, exactly my forte. But sports in general is very dear to me, and Perhaps there is a hunger for it in many of us. A fighter is a man who is capable of struggle, and can inspire others to struggle. That person is there in everybody and so in me too. I was very happy to express that person in me.

And then there were 'Sansar Simante' and 'Ekti Jiban'. In fact I have even loved to work in many commercial films. For example, I liked working in Babumoshai'. Then there was 'Agradani', and the surprising thing is that my satisfaction has been vindicated. Even today, when I go to a village to work in a one wall Jatra, the people come to me and say that they cannot forget my work in 'Agradani'. I feel very good, and I feel very satisfied when I realise that my satisfaction at that time wasn't wrong after all!

**Anasua :** In 'Aparichita', you have...

**Soumitra :** 'Aparichita' was another film I liked. I liked it very much. Do you have any queries regarding it?

**Anasua :** Yes. That role...we have heard that Samaresh Basu wrote it being inspired by 'Idiot'...?

**Soumitra :** Yes, he was.

**Anasua :** Please tell us something about that character - the peculiarities.

**Soumitra :** Yes. This was one of the few characters I had seen before my own eyes.

**Anasua :** You have seen such characters ?



**Soumitra :** Somewhat. I knew somebody. I had his characteristics, his innocence in mind while acting. And at the time of delivery, I don't know why, I felt ...you know, there is a concept called 'Wrishi Wrin' in the Indian aesthetics, which is the concept of inheriting something, neither from life, nor from the people, but from the earlier cultural heritage... so I felt like inheriting something of that sort. I tried to keep Pramathesh Barua somewhere in it as the model of acting. But I made sure that no one should think that I was copying him. The work was pretty good, and I think Uttam Kumar also did a terrific job in it, though the lion's share of the credit went to me. Maybe because his was the unsympathetic character, or due to anything else, but his characterisation of the spoilt son of the business family was brilliant.

**Anasua :** What about the role of 'Chira Thakur' in 'Baghini'?

**Soumitra :** I enjoyed doing 'Baghini' too. It felt good all the more due to the director, who was a very attentive and conscientious one. Then I liked many other types of roles, such as that in 'Tin Bhubaner Parey. Samaresh (Basu) was someone who wrote absolutely what he saw in people, he had a friend who was the model for that story. I do not know whether he is still alive or not. He lived in Naihati.

In fact I too have seen such characters, and I think there are many people who have seen such character in their lives - a typical roadside punk who gradually undergoes a change to lead a serious life. And remember the third part of the story? When he became a professor? And the event where there is a slight involvement with another girl? That whole third part was written by me. I mean, the script.

**Anasua :** Really?

**Soumitra :** Yes. The director was my friend. He gave me that responsibility.

**Anasua :** 'Ajay' in 'Akash Kushum' ?

**Soumitra :** I really liked it. It was very good.

**Anasua :** You had a completely different role in the first part of 'Jodi Jantem'.

**Soumitra :** Yes. But I do not vividly remember 'Jodi Jantem'. I did not dislike working for it, with Dilip. But I do not remember very clearly. I could say if you can prompt me the names.

**Anasua :** Yes. 'Chhutir Fandey'. I did not see it, so it will be nice if you could elaborate a little.

**Soumitra :** 'Chhutir Fandey' is a very light comedy. I like doing comedy very much, so I liked acting in it. Otherwise, there was no depth in it.

**Anasua :** And they say you did a number of roles in 'Sudur Niharika'?

**Soumitra :** I did three roles in it.

**Anasua :** How was that? Anything interesting?

**Soumitra :** Not particularly interesting. I took the interest since the roles were of three different persons. I do not remember much else.

**Anasua :** 'Ganadevata'?

**Soumitra :** I liked doing 'Ganadevata'. I like working with Tanubabu. But there were a few unfulfilled wishes for me too. I felt that it was not the full manifestation of the 'Ganadevata' Tarashankar created. That character was more down to earth. There is no director over here who is able to show such things. To do it, we require persons who would have come out from within those masses, as was written by Tarashankar. Novels like 'Ganadevata' are rare in the Bengali literature.

**Anasua :** You did another different kind of role - as 'Nidhubabu' in 'Amargeeti' and then 'Wheelchair' was completely different.

**Soumitra :** You can say 'Wheelchair' is one of my favourites. I had worked in very few films with that kind of human warmth and I really worked hard for it too. I practised to drive a wheelchair for nearly one year. Luckily for me, the shooting did not start on schedule and I got a few months more to practise. They gave me a wheelchair to practise, on my request. I did a lot of practice in many ways because that physical detail was very necessary. Then the film got postponed. The first producer left and it took a long time to fill in the gap. But the greatest compliment I got after 'Wheelchair' was from a fellow actor in the film, who sits in a motorised

wheelchair himself. I had and still have a very good friendship with him. He is a regular theatre goer. He has seen my theatres, among many others. After seeing 'Wheelchair', he came to me and said - Soumitrada, while seeing the film it felt as if you were also wheelchair bound in reality, like one of us. I did not feel that you were any different". More than the physical accuracy, I tried to emphasise on the fighter human being, who never ever loses a battle in life and who wants to see life in a bigger perspective.

There are a few more films, which satisfied me. Like 'Basanta Bilap' which I liked because of the comedy and...what should I say...I have an almost unstoppable thirst to do a comedy after a number of serious films.

**Anasua :** Then let us take the case of 'Malyadan'.

**Soumitra :** I liked it very much. The film also was good. Ajay Kar was a very good director. The film was made out of a good story and a number of artists did outstanding acting in that film. A number of them - Nandini (Malia) of course and then Sabitri (Chatterjee) and Sailenda also did a pretty good job.

**Anasua :** And how about Salil Dutta's 'Stri'?

**Soumitra :** It was fun doing 'Stri', though it was difficult due to the inadequacy of management. I won't say I derived as much pleasure in doing it as I did from Salil Dutta's 'Babumoshai', or another film I did called 'Khunje Berai' which did not do so well. That was because these films were closer to contemporary reality.

Mamkda also liked 'Babumoshai' very much. He liked the film itself. Manikda had that quality which is ideal to us. That was, he never discriminated against commercial films. He himself never used to think that he was a maker of art films. What he found out about a film was that whether the film was done with care and hard work and how much it had fared cinematically. He never used to think about the quality of artistic concept projected in it, at least while evaluating a film. When we met after he saw Babumoshai', he said - "Listen, I saw your 'Babumoshai' on television. Salil did a very nice job. Can you tell me where he did it?" .... I told him about the locations.... "...he really made it with care. He did a hard work too."

Manikda used to measure that. Of course, he did not consider it to be a high-level art, but his preliminary conditions were those.

**Anasua :** Now please tell us something about Ray's films.

**Soumitra :** I have touched the topic a number of times now. I don't know what more to say.

When I look behind at the films Ray did, half of the times they do not appear to me as separate films. From my point of view, it seems like a single, long, continuous work going on for so many years. I am saying from my experience of working with Manikda. I have said a lot about 'Apur sansar', the first film and the second one with him was 'Devi'. I don't have a clear memory of 'Devi' and I saw it only once after it was made. The character in 'Devi', to me, is one step ahead even of Apu'. That means, he hails from the village, but gets educated in the city and due to that, becomes the owner of a scientific insight. It is due to his education that he revolts against the superstition, or whatever it is, of his father receiving a dream-message from the gods and worshipping a girl as a goddess. He tries to get his wife out of the situation, but not only does he fail to do so, she....the recent prints do not have this scene, it has been cut off....the scene where she gets out of the house as if possessed by madness and runs through the mustard fields until...I think the name of the boy was 'Uma' or something...

**Anasua :** 'Umaprasad'.

**Soumitra :** ...'Umaprasad' - until Uma stops and embraces her by the river bed - that scene of the frame of the immersed Durga idol floating and the last words 'Dayamayee' says before she dies - "I am not Devi". That negation of godliness was something which appealed to me very much at that time. I remember this much only. The main character in this film is not 'Umaprasad'. It is 'Dayamayee' and her father-in-law - Uma's father.

The next film I did was 'Samapti' which had somewhat the same skeleton. I mean, a village boy, being educated in the city. But I had a feeling which worked very much while doing this film. I, kind of looked behind at the age that we left behind and the mistakes and follies that we committed at that age, with a little sense of

amusement. The character itself was a little amusing too. He goes to see a girl to marry with a lot of preparation but eventually loses his shoes and has to return home barefooted through the mud. He tries to look the energetic young man when he jumps from the boat, but lands up straight on the mud and there...what should I say...his vanities and pretensions are shattered. We all have this thing in us at some stage of life - this effort to make ourselves a bit more presentable. And whenever it fails, it gives rise to very funny situations. The fun part of it is not discernible at that age, but it really seems very amusing when you look behind and think how stupid you were at that age. I have looked upon the character in the same light myself. And then in 'Mrinmayee' too, the process of graduating from a girl to a lady is depicted only in three shots. This character is named 'Apurba' in Tagore's story, but since it had a resemblance with 'Apu', it was changed to 'Amulya'. That graduation with age did not take place only with the girl. The boy too becomes a bit more mature with the passage of time. He gradually sheds the childishness in him and turns into a serious adult. At the end of the film, the real love between them takes form. Although they were married and everything before that, the girl was too young to understand the real meaning of marriage and although the boy had an interest in her, he too did not understand the whole thing. This transformation in him was very fascinating to me. And then again, he keeps a picture of Napoleon in his room, does indulge in a bit of hero-worship, is not himself a hero but has all the hopes and aspirations of a normal person. This transformation of all these things has been depicted through this film. The scene at the very end - that during the unification- that has been very touching to me indeed.

What was the next film after 'Samapti'? Perhaps...

**Anasua** : 'Abhijaan'.

**Soumitra** : Yes, 'Abhijaan'. One thing worked in me while doing 'Abhijaan'. It was one of the very few films in which all the characters had been well acted. The artists who worked with me were mostly seniors and very able ones, like Gyanesh Mukherjee, Shekhar Chatterjee and Charuprakash Ghosh. Only Rabi was my contemporary... in fact, he came to films even after me. So that was the reason why

I took the role as a challenge. The roles I had been doing prior to that had been so different - those of a good, soft, educated Bengali middle class - that many people had the doubt in their minds whether I will be able to do it or not. The role called for some elaborate make-up too. It was tried to bring the image of a suburban taxi driver in me. I myself also tried to make my voice a bit deeper by projecting the lower notes more. And while doing this film, my control over the craft and my confidence level increased tremendously. If you see the films before 'Abhijaan' and those after it, you will notice a gradual change in them. One advantage I had during the making of 'Abhijaan' was that I had seen the type of character I did before my eyes. When I was in Howrah, as I was not exactly the run-of-the-mill good boys. I was very naughty of course and used to go to an *adda* in the Howrah maidan where I mixed and smoked with all kinds of people, many among whom were anti-socials too. There were a few bus drivers and private taxi drivers among them too. I used to spend a lot of time in such buses and taxis... I cannot give a particular explanation of that behaviour but I liked to do so. And maybe because I had a curiosity about the machine - automobile, I started to learn driving very early. During 1945, I was in the fifth standard, when a military Jeep used to come every day to my father. I would trick the driver into letting me drive it. Automobiles used to fascinate me. Perhaps, that total background helped me in 'Abhijaan'. I had seen the likes of these people and from that experience, I imported one thing into that character - the language. That touch of a broken Hindi at times...actually, coming to think of it, it was perhaps not there in Tarashankar's story too. And it was not there in Manikda's script too. Firstly, Manikda was not supposed to do that film. It was set to be directed by Bijoy Chatterjee. But then Manikda was persuaded to do it himself... Perhaps, he was not entirely satisfied after handing the script over to them, that it would be done justice. After he took over, the first place we went for shooting was Dubrajpur, where the "Mama-Bhagne" hills are there. When in the morning the cameras were being readied, I approached Manikda with the proposal to speak in the broken tongue in between, since the character had a Rajput past in Tarashankar's work. In fact, the examples of Rajputs settled in Bengal for generations were there in front of our house in Krishnanagar itself. There was a classmate of mine, called Batuk Roy, son of Biren Roy. They were Rajputs, who

were in Bengal for quite a few generations. They were out and out Bengalis in all the senses but maybe due to their obedience to tradition or due to a caste-pride, the sons used to go to marry on horseback and with swords in their hands. Otherwise they were Bengalis like us, with no difference whatsoever. But it was not due to his Rajput past that I wanted to speak like that. It was due to my previous association with these kinds of people.

**Anasua :** With drivers?

**Soumitra :** Yes. And almost all the people with whom I used to associate at that time, were Bengalis, with one or two exceptions. Other than them, there were a few Muslims, but they too were Bengali Muslims. And if you have any prior experience about the Muslims in Howrah, you should know that they are the most orthodox of Bengalis. They even did not dress in the traditional Muslim dresses. They used to wear dhoti-shirt or dhoti-punjabi, which are typical Bengali dresses. And one more thing which I used to see during my days in Howrah was that a majority of them worked as dress-makers in New Market area and in Watgunj, where there are a number of dress-making factories. There are many in our make-up line too, like wig-makers etc. So, from that point of view, the few Muslim drivers who were there in that group - I won't consider them anything else than Bengalis. So, I noticed one thing in common that they had. It was evident that while they mixed the broken Hindi in their dialect, there was a sense of swagger, a sense of one-up-manship, a sense of heroism in that. They used to speak in that particular tongue to convey the message that they were a bit more than just typical Bengalis, a bit more independent. And you will notice that this tradition is more there in this transport line more than anywhere else. The tendency to speak like this... though it has grown more now a days due to the influence of the Hindi films...was nevertheless there from that time itself. I decided to speak like that from my experience with them. So, I told Ray of my intentions. He then asked me how I wanted to do it and I showed him with a few dialogues from the dialogue - sheets of the film itself. He said - 'Okay, I will see to it' and nothing else. Then during the rehearsals too, I did in my own way and after the monitoring was done, just before the take, I went up to him to seek permission once again. He thought for a while and then said in that

particular tone - "All right, you can do it in that way, but the only thing I am worried about is that how will the love scenes look like with that kind of dialogues. But still, you can go ahead and then, the dubbing is in our hands only."

Although he kept the matter hanging in mid-air by saying that the dubbing was always an option, at the same time, he did not hesitate to accept the proposal too. Because, from the next day itself, when he handed me the dialogue sheets, there would be an inclusion of such words in them. You can say this was entirely my addition or contribution, whatever it is.

So, this was how 'Abhijaan' was done. And because there were some very good actors working with me, I myself also liked working in it. You have to better your acting and your abilities to match with them all the time. That effort also was there in me. We used to work with a lot of energy. It used to take two hours to put on the make-up. A trial shooting was also done with that make-up in a village in Boral. So, when coming back, it was me who was driving the car.

**Anasua :** The Chrysler ?

**Soumitra :** Yes, I was driving the Chrysler. That car again has a history of its own. When the producers - I mean Durga Mitra, who was Manikda's sound recordist and Bijoy Chatterjee - bought that car, they kept it with me, as I had told them in advance to give me some time with the car to be able to drive it flawlessly. I used to use it and found that though the erstwhile owners did not use it much, it was in an almost new condition. So, when we were returning from that trial shooting, it was a serpentine road on the way back from Boral and I was driving a bit too fast. At a turn, the car almost hit a man on the road. At that time people were able to recognise me as Soumitra more or less. But he took me completely for a Punjabi and showered his choicest abuses that he reserved for the Panjabis in general. It was then that I realised that the make-up was successful and it had transformed me completely. Even Rabi was also of the same opinion. During the shooting, the make-up took two hours to get on and then you had to get it off too. And moreover, when we went to shoot for the first time in Birbhum, it was very cold, while during the last time, it was unbearably hot, about 114 degrees Fahrenheit. We used to shoot in that heat. But we all were good friends and actors and we spent



our time well together. I had to get up at 3 in the night and sit for the make-up and after getting ready by 5 - 5:30, we used to go out to shoot. In that heat and because the sun would come to the top, it would not be possible to shoot later than 10 - 10:30. I used to come back, get the make-up off, eat and again sit for the make-up at about 1:30 to 2:30. After we got ready at about 4 - 4:30, we would go out to resume the shooting and after shooting for the whole evening and doing the night-scenes, a lot of which were done here on the roads, we would come back at about 8:30 - 9 in the night. After that, we used to sit in that car, it was mostly driven by me, even while transporting, because for the six cars the production had, we were one driver short...and sitting in that convertible, we would freak out with crates of beer, at times by the side of Ajay, or by the banks of Mayurakshi, or in a field, sometimes under the moonlight, or sometimes in complete darkness. We used to have dinner at about 12:30-1 in the night and then after merely two hours of sleep, they used to wake me up with tea. And again, I used to sit for make-up. At that young age these things did not bother.

**Anasua :** Please tell us your experience while working with Waheeda Rehman.

**Soumitra :** The working experience with her is nothing independent from the other ones, except the fact that the lady was not only a very polished and good actress, she was also the favourite of actresses among my friends. Not only the friend - circle over here, but that outside also was a great fan of hers. It was a matter of joke those days that whenever I used to get a role opposite some heroine, they used to ask me why it should be me getting the role opposite one of their better heroines. But when they heard of my role opposite Waheeda, they were unequivocal in congratulating me that they were happy that I was the one of them who got this opportunity. This big fans of Waheeda were we. Really, as she was beautiful, so was her behaviour and equally sophisticated was the way she communicated. In that way, the experience of working with her has been a sweet one. We have not met for many years now, but still, the other day someone went to meet her and she had asked about me. I can give a funny anecdote. After finishing the outdoor shooting, when we came to Calcutta, I tried to convey to her the tremendous admiration my friends had about her and told her that they had a

popular *Shayeri* (actually it was my elder brother, one and a half years elder to me, who conceived it) about her and that if she liked, I could tell her that. She asked me what it was and I told her - “*Do cheezon ke liye dil chahte hain ban jaun musalmaan/ek hai sheek kabaab, dusri Waheeda Rehmaan*”. She broke into a laughter and then replied, “*Dekhiye Soumitrajee, aapko musalmaan banna hai to baniye, phir Waheeda ko sheek kabaab mat banaiye*”. From that angle, she was very jovial, very humorous and very gentle, very nice. Once it was Amitabh Bachchan who described her as “the epitome of Indian womanhood”. I also felt the same thing. Really, she was as if the mirror image of Indian womanhood! But then her womanhood was never only the motherly one. It was complete in every sense of the term. She was very attractive too.

**Anasua :** Next film - ‘Charulata’.

**Soumitra :** ‘Charulata’ - the story was in our syllabus and it was a favourite one too. It was one of the greatest stories of Bengali literature. There is nothing new to say about the character ‘Amal’ in that film. I prepared for this film as I did for all the other ones. I prepared his background, the probable picture of his family, a family tree with the probable names of his parents...things like that, which were not mentioned in the story.

**Anasua :** The whole thing was imaginary?

**Soumitra :** Yes, it was. Actually, all these created an environment in my mind. I felt that I knew this character fully. And then because there was a scene to play the piano, Manikda hired a table piano and sent it to my house. He also taught me how to play it with both hands and I used to practise like that. And then Again in ‘Apur sansar’, while playing the flute, not that everything was perfect, but due to practice, I could go nearer to a perfect fingering. In fact, before the film, I indulged in the learning of the flute religiously from Gour Goswami. Now I have forgotten. And all this was only due to Manikda.

**Anasua :** Didn’t you learn horse-riding before ‘Jhinder Bandi’?

**Soumitra :** Yes. Before that film I practised horse-riding very much. Actually, I started horse-riding right from ‘Kshudhita Pashan’ and kept continuing. It was

particularly intense during 'Jhinder Bandi'. I rode for a few years since then. I learned riding quite well at one time. In 'Jhinder Bandi' where the fast-riding and galloping scenes were there, I did not take any double, I did them myself. To some extent I liked to ride. I still admire horses. Anyway, I did a lot of these things, but one thing which I did in 'Charulata' was not done by any other actor in the world. I had to change my handwriting. This is one thing which is so much involved with the personality of a person...it grows with the development of his personality and nature. What was my age then...the year was '63, that means...since I was 25 in '60,...my age was around 27 -28 at that time. My handwriting had considerably matured at that time and was quite presentable with some practice, as were the handwritings of my mother and my elder brother. But our handwritings were in the lines of somewhat like that of Tagore - roundish, pearly. Ray told me that there are a number of close ups of the handwriting and of the process of writing. This kind of writing, since it was Tagore's story, had to be that of the times before Tagore's, or during his childhood. But the point was, the general handwriting of Bengalis has undergone a radical transformation due only to Tagore. So, the handwriting in the film had to be pre-Tagore, otherwise the film would lose its logic. Therefore, he said, I had no alternative but to change the handwriting. I asked for his help, since nobody was as expert in calligraphy as Ray was. He brought me samples from several old texts (*Punthi*) and photocopies of old letters. Then he taught me the characteristics of the handwriting and the difference in the strokes by writing them himself, the main difference being that the old kind was somewhat straight and not roundish as that of Tagore. And then for the next 5-6 months, I kept on practising. When anything else did not come to my mind, I used to copy from books, or wrote something or other in diary form. I had an advantage that I loved to write, so it did not pose me much problem. In this way, after a great deal of writing, my handwriting changed and it changed for the rest of my life. So that was how I had to change my handwriting for 'Charulata'. Then I had to grow long hair, grow long sidelocks and it was even tried to change the hair into curly locks, but it was found that it was very difficult every time before the shooting. So, the make-up artist had to do it as much as he could. I had retained a moustache, so I did not require a false one. Even at that time, I tried not to keep any other shooting but

Manikda's, as I wanted to give my complete attention to it. Anyway, this is how 'Charulata' was made.

What was the next movie?

**Anasua :** 'Kapurush'.

**Soumitra :** 'Kapurush' - from one angle, I mean, from the angle inside the character, I felt that this too was a story of a love triangle, like the former one. But it was easier as the context was modern, that is, the era in which we are in and the characters are all like the ones we see every day in our own lives. Therefore, I did not have to do anything new in that. The pleasure of working with Manikda can be characterised by one incident. There was a scene that the three persons are going on a picnic and the character sitting behind...what was the name?

**Anasua :** 'Amitabha'.

**Soumitra :** I forget everything now a days. So, as 'Amitabha' is sitting behind, he feels a reaction when he sees the closeness of the husband and wife sitting in front. At this point, Manikda told me that it would be nice at this moment if we could insert a song which Madhabi would hum. And he asked me at that instant to suggest a song fit for the situation. I suggested the song - "*E pathey ami je gecchi bar bar...*". Manikda approved and asked Madhabi to sing that particular line. I had this kind of a collaboration with Manikda. Although it was he who did most of the thinking, none of our contributions got neglected. And conversely, as in the case of the change of handwriting in 'Charulata', I do not know what would any other actor in my place do. The relation was such. After that, I could not work with Manikda for a few films.

**Anasua :** The next film was straight to 'Aranyer Dinratri. That was again a completely different kind of film.

**Soumitra :** Yes. The people who were the characters and makers of this film were all my friends. Sunil (Ganguly) was my collegemate and one year senior. Shakti (Chatterjee) also was a very good friend of mine. We used to chat in Coffee House. When Sunil's first novel - 'Atmaprakash' came out, I felt very good. I liked 'Aranyer Dinratri' too, but in the cinema, Manikda actually shifted far away from his novel.

But since basically I knew the characters and their lifestyles, I liked to do that film maybe because of that. My own character was mostly a creation of Ray and was not there as it appears, in the novel. This character had a sense of superiority due to the upper economic and social rung he belonged to. This sense of superiority is shattered in contact with this girl and he realises how shallow his existence was. This girl ... she has a sense of depth in her, the thoughts she has treads a completely different road...these things fascinated me very much. And then, being able to work with Sharmila (Tagore) after a long time - that was also a nice experience. And the group of males we had on that occasion...particularly due to the presence of Rabi in it, we had a very good time outdoors. This reflection of a well-knit unit is there in the film too. I remember one suggestion Rabi gave me while acting. It was the scene where we were seen drinking together in a local joint and chatting away. During those moments, we used to chat between ourselves and ask each other whether the acting was all right or not. In this aspect we both had an advantage as because we were both drinkers and there had been many a time when we drank together too. So, we did not have to learn to act like that. But still, on location, there used to be no real liquor and we had to act while drinking tea - liquor instead. That is why I asked Rabi whether I was doing all right or not. He said that it was okay, but could still be better if I could add another thing - the cough that a drinker has while drinking. I thought that was a brilliant idea and added a cough or two during the scene. That was Rabi's suggestion. So, this kind of co-operation was there between us at that time.

**Anasua :** Coming to the scene where two ladies see you dancing twist...Ray moved away a lot from the concept of nothingness in the novel. Now, there is a part in the novel where the characters are seen coming out of the jungle, stark naked. There was a complete nakedness in that part. Why did Ray move away from it? How far does his concept of nothingness match with that of Sunil and his contemporaries?

**Soumitra :** Since this does not match with Ray's concept, perhaps this is the reason why I can't afford to throw any light on it. Though Ray might have heard about or seen that kind of utter anarchic bohemianism, he might not have liked the idea himself.

**Anasua :** Then where do you think the novel appealed to him?

**Soumitra :** Its cinematic potential. Four urban men, going into that kind of a place, with all the rootlessness of their modern minds. From that point of view, there were a couple of things which came from Sunil's novel to his films in a big way. There is a scene, where the film has spent a total of one and a half minutes, where the four of them discuss extensively on whether to shave or not. They indulge in numerous unnecessary questions like - "Will you shave today? I have decided not to. He says he will shave tomorrow. What will you do?" Satyajit Ray created the feelings of nothingness superbly by depicting how a few intelligent, educated persons aimlessly wander about such an inconsequential matter. From that angle of the modern time, the characters were very fascinating. That felt good to work.

**Anasua :** The song that Pahari Sanyal sang in the film...

**Soumitra :** Yes, that song which...

**Anasua :** At that time his voice was somewhat cracked.

**Soumitra :** Yes, it was cracked. Manikda made him sing it. The song itself was an extra-ordinary composition. Using that song at that moment was...

**Anasua :** Now, you worked with Simi Garewal in this film.

**Soumitra :** She was very able and good. She was painted over her whole body to look like a santhal. I had a point that the Santhal women are not that sharp in their features. Anyway, but that is not always available...it is very difficult to get.

**Anasua :** But was her selection very appropriate?

**Soumitra :** At least there was nothing which would be very jarry. But had I been there, I would have tried to find out a more Santhal-looking girl. Actually, Manikda thought that she acts so well, maybe the role can be got done by her. And once it is within the cinematic illusions of reality, it is not always necessary to get the perfect thing.

**Anasua :** 'Ashani Sanket' was next.

**Soumitra :** Yes. The film 'Ashani Sanket' was actually thought of being made, for a long time. In fact, 'Ashani Sanket' and 'Ghare Baire' were the two films that I heard

were going to be made right from the days of 'Apur sansar'. these were the two favourite subjects for Manikda. And whenever the discussion came up - in fact he said on the first occasion itself - "...it will be nice to do it. Our Soumitra is already there as 'Gangacharan' - with his Brahmin-like appearance." He used to say this humorously. The time after which it finally happened, my consciousness and intellect also underwent a development. Due to this, a tremendous hunger developed in my mind - to do a role like this one - which was not a part of just a common family-movie of love or sorrow, but has a social significance. As it was a story involving the greater society, therefore from that angle, 'Ashani Sanket' used to fascinate me very much. I used to feel a tremendous attraction for the story because it was one which depicted a very old disease of India - famine, which has perennially seated itself on the Indians, which is as glaringly true as the poverty itself. There was another reason why I used to feel attracted towards the story. It was because the incident in the story by Bibhutibhushan was based on Nadia district, the local dialect of which I knew. Due to this I wanted to do it. I got that opportunity in 'Ashani Sanket'. And by that time -I think it was made in 1972.

**Anasua :** Yes. Made in '72, released in '73.

**Soumitra :** Due to its being made in '72, by that time I had 12 to 14 years in the film line as an actor. Therefore, my skills over my work also developed a bit. That is why I liked to do it and then Manikda gave me a lot of freedom too to think about and execute the character. I had only one point of disagreement with Manikda. As far as my observation and memory went, up-to that time when the film was made, or sometime later too, it was the custom of the Brahmins to be absolutely clean-shaven. They did not usually keep beards and moustaches. That is why I did not want to keep a moustache for the role. The sketch Manikda did of me, to decide on the costume, had a moustache on it. When I told him about my opinion, he said that we'll test and see. When he went to see the location, Manikda took me along with him, as I wanted to go and see the villages more closely. We visited numerous villages in the process. Manikda did his own job - seeing what is there and what's not, while I noticed people and noted down their characteristics to my ability. I sketched them with my inexperienced hands - their habits - how

they scratched themselves, how they positioned their sacred thread, how they used their towels (*Gamchha*), in what positions they sat and how they positioned their hands while standing. I kept noting down these details. At the same time, I kept feeling that the moustache did not fit. Manikda took a few shots of me there, mainly for the locations, with costumes, since they usually change a lot afterwards. A few stills from them are till now with me. So, I told Manikda, “Manikda, have you seen? Not many with moustaches around. The Brahmins don’t usually keep them.” He said that it was right, but it is also right that there were always a few who kept them. We shall take that advantage.

**Anasua :** Was it to bring a change in your popular image?

**Soumitra :** Yes. It was because of that. So, I agreed to it. He said he was going to have me wear a pair of glasses too. “What kind of glasses ?” I asked. He said that they would be fit for that particular period. I said “All right, please search for the right one, but before that, let me search for it.” I bought the pair of glasses eventually.

**Anasua :** Chakraberia...

**Soumitra :** They used to sell old stuff at the ‘Chakraberia Hawkers’ Corner. I searched it out and showed it to Manikda. He approved immediately, stating that it was indeed a good one.

**Anasua :** I read in a portion from your diary that you wrote perhaps after the shooting for ‘Ashani Sanket’ was over. You have said that right at the time when you were beginning to feel you could do the role of ‘Gangacharan’ best, the shooting ended.

**Soumitra :** After working for many days and just when the character is within your grasp, if it ends at that time, and there is nothing more to do as an actor, you wish the whole thing started all over again so that you could do even better. This is nothing but a subjective feeling.

So, I bought the pair of glasses. For the part of the moustache, I thought - well, if it is going to be there, then it will also have to act... something like that.



**Anasua :** Tell us something about the character - how he uses his social position in the sequence where he asks for rice.

**Soumitra :** He uses his power, his status, the slightly exalted position he enjoyed in the village as a Brahmin. This person is slightly more cunning and slightly more intelligent than the villagers around him, but not to a level where he exploits them. The exploitation is very slight - that is for only his survival, not more than that. And when his country, or his society finds itself standing against a far greater force, he gets crushed under it, with those villagers around him. That force is famine. This thing was very fascinating to me. There were quite a few people who praised me for the dialect I used in it. But I do not claim any credit for it because it was so natural to me. I am a person from the district of Nadia, and have spent my childhood in it. So, I can speak in its dialect very well. But even then, there are not many established heroes who will generally want to do that role with the *dhoti* halfway up his legs. I did not have such mental blockade and I did it all by myself - nobody had to tell me to do it.

**Anasua :** We have heard that the role of 'Narsingh' in 'Abhijaan' was first offered to Uttamkumar.

**Soumitra :** Yes, but he didn't do it because it required deglamorization. He also didn't do the role of 'Aghor' in 'Sansar Simante' .

**Anasua :** After that, you did 'Sonar Kella', 'Jai Baba Felunath' in 78 - 79, in the role of 'Feluda', our favourite character. Please tell us something about it.

**Soumitra :** Yes. From the very time when 'Felu' was written, I have been an avid reader of his stories. I liked everything in him. When he did the illustrations in the beginning, I somehow thought that they had a reflection of Manikda in them. When I told this to Manikda, he made fun of me, saying - "Really ! But people come to me and say that I draw them with you in mind !" Whatever, I felt that the character of Felu was actually a projection of Manikda himself. Felu was actually the manifestation of his thirst for knowledge and curiosity for different kinds of subjects. From that angle, 'Felu' and 'Shanku' are the two faces of the same coin. When I heard that I 'Felu' would be done, and that I'd be doing the character, the

biggest pleasure that came to me was that - I hadn't yet worked in a film for my children. I had never done a film which I could take them to show - they were just little kids then - because those films were not the ideal food for their minds. That is why I liked it.

As you were saying earlier, when Felu became a cult figure and people started to tell me that I was most memorable as Felu, then I would be angry - what is this? I did so many roles, and out of them it is not the one in 'Ashani Sanket', or the one in 'Apur sansar', but it is the one in 'Felu' that I'll be remembered for? Anyway, while approaching the character of Felu, one thing that occurred to me was, unlike other western detectives, almost all of Felu's detection was a sleight of the mind, as was of all the famous detectives. Others have a lot of action in their detection - there are fights with the antisocials and criminals which is rare here. I think that the roles of his intelligence, his curiosity about various things, and his questions on life have become primarily important. And most of the expression of that intelligence comes through the eyes of the actor. Of course, things like the raising and lowering of the eyebrows, or the curling of the lips also denote intelligence, but whether a man is intelligent or not depends on his eyes. I tried to express through the eyes that Felu was a thinking person. And there too comes into play the fun of working with Ray. He allowed a free hand otherwise, but whenever he gave a suggestion, it was too good, too perfect. When in the scene in 'Sonar Kella', where Felu finds out from the spelling of the name 'Hajra' that the man is an impostor, I was enacting it with my hand on my forehead to reflect the image of a thoughtful person. Ray told me, "why don't you drum your fingers on your forehead?" That single suggestion brought about an intensification in the scene - it is evident from the film itself. We worked like this. After this, when 'Jai Baba Felunath' was made, I did not think almost anything new, because the ideas were all crystallised by that time. I just tried to recapitulate the earlier expressions and kept in mind that the process of thinking should become evident there.

**Anasua :** You also had a logical quest in your life.

**Soumitra :** Yes. It was in me, as it is in many others. The creator of Felu had it in quite large doses. That is why we were so agreeable, there were so much in

common between us that we practically had to think of nothing new. I chanced to see some of Manikda's astonishing abilities...in fact I have seen them all the time. I remember a few of Felu's. These may be quite good anecdotes too. At that time, shooting was being done at the Jodhpur circuit house. A letter was required as a prop. The assistants brought the envelope, but without the seal on it. The shot would be taken immediately. He instantly drew a seal on it, just as if the envelope was rubber stamped. We matched it with originals afterwards - both were identical. We felt these things as very amazing.

Then the shot where there was a Jamini Roy painting in Felu's room...

**Anasua :** In the background...

**Soumitra :** Yes, in the background. That painting was not by Jamini Roy. Manikda drew it. He copied it from a Jamini Roy original.

**Anasua :** But it was unrecognisable !

**Soumitra :** Absolutely. It is now in Soumendu Roy's place. He took it. Then another funny incident happened in the scene where a crab was let loose on the bed. Nothing hilarious, a simple fun. It was in the early 70s when power-cut were rampant. Just as the crab was released on the bed, the lights went off.

**Anasua :** You were on the bed then !

**Soumitra :** I was lying on the bed. Everybody was pretty panicky. Not that I wasn't afraid, but at that moment a peculiar philosophy came to my mind, and I thought - what could be done if I'm bitten by a crab while working? Let it be. So I sat still. Then the torches and flashlights came, and they caught the crab after opening the floor doors. It had gone down to the ground by then. Incidents like these happened.

**Anasua :** In 1980, it was 'Hirak Rajar Deshe'.

**Soumitra :** Yes, in that film too it was fun that I could do something for the kids.

**Anasua :** And the character too was completely different.

**Soumitra :** Completely different. But though it was different, try to think, it was almost the same classical protagonist which is there in the other Ray films. There

is a character who is rebellious, free from superstitions, one who believes in education. Most of them give prime importance to education. From 'Apar Sansar' to 'Narsingh' - who reads books to educate himself. But in 'Hirak Rajar Deshe', the character, is a teacher. He is voicing for democracy and freedom only because there is education in him. That is the reason why he stands up against the despotism. So, from that angle, I really liked to do it. I also liked the story of 'Hirak Rajar Deshe' very much. The writing was perfectly original. That had no connection with 'Gupi Gayen' or Upendrakishore, Ray's grandfather. It was Ray who wrote it. I remember the time when he wrote it - how he wrote it. At that time, he did not go outside, but didn't stay home either. I mean, he went straight to a nearby hotel after getting up in the morning, so that nobody disturbed him, and it was only after finishing dinner that he came back to his residence. The process was repeated the next morning. In this way, he wrote it in 4-5 days. And the songs just enthralled me. I think it is possible only for a highly sensitive person to write songs like that. This film can be labelled as a real political film, a political statement by him. The lyrics which say that "The one who harvests the fields has nothing to eat, and the worker in a diamond mine has not a penny", strongly indicate the side which he takes. This has happened very rarely in his career. He has symbolically depicted the emergency period in our country and the nasty role despotism played in it, still fresh in his memories. His way of protesting was through his creativity, not through meetings and processions elsewhere. This, I think, was great. I still remember that when he first finished reading me the script, I just said - "genius, sheer genius. It can't be done without it." Anyway, I liked doing it too.

The next film was perhaps 'Ghare Baire'.

**Anasua :** Yes, "Ghare Baire".

**Soumitra :** It was the same thing - I had been hearing for a long time that 'Ghare Baire' was going to be made. There is a small history behind my selection in 'Ghare Baire'. In the initial days, whenever - after 'Apar Sansar' there was talk about 'Ghare Baire', he used to say that I'd be doing the part of 'Nikhilesh'. Perhaps he thought that my public image of a gentle, soft person would be fitted for the role. Since

then, we had grown closer, and worked in a few more films together, and then he would say - "No, you can do both 'Nikhilesh' and 'Sandip'. You will have to do the one I'll not get elsewhere. If I get a suitable 'Nikhilesh', then you will do the role of Sandip, and vice versa" To tell the truth, I liked to do the role of 'Sandip' because it was more actable. Then after some days, I mean, from 2-3 years before the making of the film, he used to say regularly, that we'll have to find a 'Nikhilesh', and that I was going to be 'Sandip'. In the tests that he took once or twice, he made me deliver the dialogues of 'Sandip'. He had decided that I'd do that character only.

**Anasua :** Still Nikhilesh was not found ?

**Soumitra :** No, but he had decided that I was going to do 'Sandip', and not 'Nikhilesh'. Then finally he chose Victor (Banerjee) for the role. I think that was another instance of his immaculate selection of cast. At that time there were quite a few persons...now a days their numbers have fallen, since many years have gone by... who raised an objection that Soumitra was good for 'Nikhilesh', and who asked why wasn't I chosen for the role of a bad man - Sandip? The reasons I have heard from others - mostly from his family circle, was that he said - "Firstly, there are quite a few long speeches in this film, and moreover, the attraction of 'Bimala' towards 'Sandip' was vital. She had such a lovely, handsome husband who was noble and kind-hearted. She had no unfulfilment in her life. Then why should she be attracted towards 'Sandip' ? Secondly, and it was there in Tagore's writings too, it was Sandip's oratory power which overwhelmed her. There is no other actor around who has the diction and pronunciation of Soumitra. And not only that, Sandip must have an attractive trait in his appearance. So I needed a romantic hero like Soumitra in the cast." I think his thoughts were right. I can say this in connection to his casting - I wanted to do 'Gupi', but did not get it. Then too he was right in his reasons not to take me. Another instance can be mentioned where I was even cast, but then I couldn't do it. That was in 'Kanchenjunga' where I could not give him the dates he wanted, and so, was rejected.

**Anasua :** What was the character ?

**Soumitra :** Arun. I could not ultimately manage the dates, because he wanted to shoot continuously for one month. But I was there in the original cast. Anyway,

after that he took Arun (Mukherjee), and completed the shooting. Arun also did a fantastic job in it. After Ray came back from the shooting, he said to me - "Oh! I was really lucky that I didn't take you." I said - 'Why? Would I have done that badly?' He replied - "No. you would have done pretty well, and not at all badly, but I was really saved by not taking you." I was desperate - "What is it that you were 'saved' from?" He then explained - "Look, if you would have done that role, the suspense in my story wouldn't have been there. The audience would have sensed well in advance that since it is Soumitra in the role, a romantic relationship would have definitely developed with that girl," ... which is very true. "By taking that new face for that role, I have succeeded in maintaining the suspense of the story." The suspense was indeed there, and Arun too did a terrific job. There was another instance...the last instance, where I did not get the role, I wanted to do.

**Anasua :** "Agantuk" ?

**Soumitra :** Yes, "Agantuk".

**Anasua :** The character played by Utpal Dutta ?

**Soumitra :** Yes. What happened was, when the script of Agantuk was completed, I went to Ray's house one morning. He used to read me all his scripts, and so he asked me if I had time to listen a script. I confirmed and then listened to it. After reading the script, he said - "See, I have a problem with the cast. The four to five actors who have worked in our last few films are the only good ones left now. It is becoming an increasingly difficult situation for the casting part. I cannot figure out whom to cast in this particular role." I asked him what was the age-group he was looking for. When he said it was 55 or nearabout, I offered myself for the role. He said, "Yes, you can definitely do it, and I also know that you will do it pretty well too. Everything will be fine with you. But I'll have a problem with the story. There will be no suspense in it if I take you. The audience will tend to think from the very beginning - "Why is this family so worried about the stranger? He is Soumitra Chatterjee. He must be a good man!" This problem will be there with my story. I want a kind of a grotesque image, one who can also have a negative image."

**Anasua :** And that is terribly correct with the choice of Utpal Dutta.

**Soumitra :** But...this was my opinion, and that of Manikda too - he agreed with me completely on this point....Utpalda could deliver only a part of the character, and could not perform the rest. Utpalda had to be made to act like that with a lot of guidance. Manikda was very surprised. When I went to see the shooting as I used to do from time to time, I saw Manikda showing the acting to Utpalda. It came as a surprise to me - what was there to be shown to Utpalda ? And even after that, Utpalda really couldn't bring that acting in him. Manikda asked me - "Can you tell me what happened ? This was not supposed to happen with Utpal.! He had done so much work with me before, but suddenly he became so overawed! He was tensed all the time." Even the song had to be sung by Ray...that little song! Anyway, but it was lucky too that Utpalda did some brilliant work in some parts of it too. And the expertise Utpalda had over the foreign languages...that too I could have done without much difficulty, but Manikda was right when he said that the audience would have a premonition about me that "What is the worry about him? Since he is Soumitra Chatterjee, he is bound to turn out to be a good person!" He didn't take me for that reason.

Anyway, what was the next film?

**Anasua :** 'Ganashatru'.

**Soumitra :** 'Ganashatru'. Manikda had decided on 'Ganashatru' for a specific cause. He often used to say that all the good directors had done films based on a play or two, but he didn't do one. When he was prohibited from extensively working outdoors due to his illness, he decided that this was his chance to make a film based on a play. He chose Ibsen's 'Enemy of the People'. It was a pretty good adaptation. And neither me nor anybody else had to ask. . . probably I was the obvious choice for the role, and I really liked doing it. An incident happened towards the evening of the second day. He was, as it was, suffering from a chronic heart ailment, and because of the pressure and the number of people from the morning, he was not well before the shooting. On the very first day, I had doubts whether he would be able to shoot or not. Because he did not come to the sets as he used to, very early in the morning. He was pretty late. In fact, he arrived only at 10 O'clock, when the programme was scheduled to start. Anyway, then the

shooting started. As he was not in his fittest self, the energetic person he used to be, we therefore talked him into some restricted movement. He was advised to sit on chair and direct, as the Hollywood directors did. He protested - "No-no, how could I possibly do that?" But we insisted that he had to take care of his body, as because it was the completion of the shooting which was primary.

Manikda conceded. He sat on his chair, only occasionally getting up to direct the change of the camera angle and lens etc. Otherwise, he used to give all the instructions from the chair itself. But one day I noticed that even when Babu (Sandip Ray), the operating cameraman was at the camera, and I was at the other end, probably due to that reason only, which I couldn't realise then, he was not telling anything to anybody. Neither to the cameraman, nor to me. I began thinking - maybe Manikda has lost that alertness. He was frequently falling ill at that period. I felt I could not even see the self he was while the documentary on Sukumar Roy was filmed.

I started wondering - why isn't he telling me anything? Whatever I was doing, he said - "OK, next shot...take the camera over there." He just got up, set the camera and again sat there on his chair. I was wondering if this was the result of being overdrugged, since he was under a lot of medication at that time. The next day too, almost the whole day went past. After lunch, a shot was being taken, and, according to my belief and knowledge, I gave a wrong emphasis at a point. Immediately I thought - "Oh no! I was wrong. I was wrong!" Manikda said "Cut", and looked at Babu. Babu said - "I'll take the shot once more. I had a problem with the focusing." When I sat beside Manikda on the sofa, he said - "Soumitra, since the shot is being taken once more as it is, why don't you correct the emphasis on..." I said, "I know, I made a mistake, Manikda." He said, "Yes, then you can make it okay this time." Then I was relieved that he was perfectly alert and was noticing everything. He didn't tell anything because it wasn't needed. But I was indeed worried on the first day when he wasn't commenting on anything - good or bad, and wasn't interfering at all.

The change he made at the ending of 'Ganashatru' was very justified to me. Firstly, because Ibsen wrote it out of reaction, when his 'Ghost' was vehemently attacked



by the critics. In our context, that reaction was not there. Secondly, at the time when Ibsen wrote it, the media was not that important. The importance of media in today's context does not allow a man to be totally alone. He has to be surrounded by a few supporters which is the most hopeful sight for the future. Manikda brought in that change in context, that this character too has some support. It is not possible that he is totally alone. He brought in the change which is ably depicted by the dialogue, which actors vie for a chance to deliver, and which was a favourite from our childhood - 'The strongest man is he who stands most alone'. By 'most alone' it was meant that he cannot be completely alone. I liked it. My wife went to see Ganashatru when it was released, and at that time the shooting for Shakha Proshakha was going on. When she told Ray that she liked 'Ganashatru', he asked her - And how was Soumitra ?" She perhaps said that Soumitra was pretty good too, and he replied - "Wait till you see him in 'Shakha Proshakha'. You shall see how well he has done in it." He never used to talk like this in the past. Then at the time of 'Shakha Proshakha', a peculiar thing happened. Incidentally, he gave us the first ever original script published in the magazine 'Ekshan'. Later he updated it. He had a very basic courtesy in him. Being such a great director, he could have taken the liberty to say anything to anybody, but he never did that. He told me once at that time - "Soumitra, this role of the brother, 'Prashanta'...the way it stands, it has very few dialogues, hardly 25. But the character is very important. I just cannot take anybody for this on whom I cannot rely. Will you do it for me?" Just imagine ...."do it for me" ...! I would have done the role even if he would have told me to be a chair and stand on the sets! But that was his way of approaching me with it. So I said, "It goes without saying that I shall do it. Why do you have to ask me?"

Afterwards, when the shooting drew nearer, he read me the script, handed me the copies, and then said, "Let me tell you something. I have given you all the freedom in my whole life. I have accepted whatever way you wanted to interpret, and whatever you wanted to do" .... this was the first time he said these words ... "but we shall think about this character together." I replied- "That goes without saying, since whatever I do is nothing but the reflection of your thoughts only." He then explained to me the need to sit together and discuss about the character. He said

that the behavioural pattern of a mentally deranged person can be of various types, which I may have seen, and he had seen a lot too. But it was vitally important to decide on any one particular pattern which would suit the script too. Otherwise, it would be a mismatch if I would be doing something which he would not have in mind. So, it was important to sit together and discuss. I agreed and said that these characters have certain unique mannerisms. “Yes”, he said, “Mannerisms. I have thought of the mannerisms of this character” ...and then gave me a detail about how the character uses his hand - when he listens to western classical music or song, he maintains the rhythm with his hand, which has become his inherent mannerism. At times when he gets angry, he bangs his hand on the table. At times, he thumps mildly. I liked this idea very much. I have known again these kinds of persons from very very close quarters. You can say, I have more than a natural sympathy...I have a natural commitment towards them. I have seen these mentally handicapped people very intensely, and I should say, they are a part of my life, for personal reasons the details of which I am not going into. Manikda also knew of this. I told him that I had thought of another thing in the context of mannerisms. When he asked what it was, I mentioned that sometimes they have certain ticks, certain spasms in them. Manikda agreed to it, but at the same time cautioned that it should be applied at the vital moment. I said that I had thought of applying it in not more than one or two occasions. So, these were a few things we decided on together. I think you remember the scene in the dining room, where this character gets angry and bangs his hand on the table. Manikda had only asked me to give the hand- movements in it, but I added the movement of the neck to it. And when the shot was completed, Manikda took his head out of the black cloth and said - “Excellent. It was very good.” Manikda really liked my acting in ‘Shakha Proshakha’. And I also think of it as one of my best works in cinema.

**Anasua :** You have not acted much in comic roles, but it seems that you have a real talent there. In fact, many of us feel so. You had also mentioned about your interest in it. It’ll be nice if you could say something on this. I don’t know if I’m correct, but your so called image of the city youth somehow breaks down to the type you were saying while talking about Tulsi Chakraborty...the ‘Bengaliness’ in the character becomes evident. I remember the character in the film ‘Padmagolap’.

It somehow brings into mind the inheritance handed down by Bijan Bhattacharya etc. Would you please comment on this?

**Soumitra :** I completely agree with you that I have a particular interest in comedy, and I feel that a man is not complete without a sense of humour. At the same time, I believe in the definition of humour by Charles Chaplin - "Humour is the gentle and benevolent custodian of mind which prevents us from being overwhelmed by the apparent seriousness of life." If a person does not possess a sense of humour, he bends down and probably collapse in his struggle for existence. Maybe I inherited this from my family, my father was a witty and humorous person. My elder brother possessed it and I also have this in me in large doses. But in me, this humour is entangled in many other activities. Now, this has to find an expression - what an artist basically does is to give expressions to his inner self, his understanding of life, his experiences, his imaginations, his dreams. He pours out all in his work. And so, I love doing comedy as a means of relaxation. I want to do these, because most of the time serious films are a bit taxing on one's nerves and comedy releases the pressure on one's emotions. But I'm not armed with as much as is necessary to regularly go on doing comedy. And what you said, that my comedy has a certain amount of Bengaliness in it - I agree with you upto a point, but I cannot tell you with that much certainty. I don't know, because I feel that for a successful artist, his roots should have a fundamental binding. The roots should bind him to the soil, the people. This understanding tried to find an expression and that is why he is an artist. Now, if I have some value as an artist, it must be in my Bengaliness only. It is not in how much internationalism I have in me - this forms just a part of my experience, but the major part is my being a Bengali. In this respect if my Bengali character finds an expression in my comedy, if the fact that I came from a small family residing in a small town, if those memories, those feelings, those experiences find a shelter in my comedy, it could be. I'm not the best judge of it. My Bengaliness is upto that extent only. But I'm not very sure that comedians outside my country have not influenced me. From my childhood, I have grown up seeing the films of Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, and Laurel-Hardy. That their craft has not influenced me - I'm not very sure of it. So, I cannot agree

with you fully. But I'm not clear myself, in this context. You have just brought up the discussion, so I gave it a thought.

**Anasua :** Actually it is absorbed in your being, so maybe....

**Soumitra :** Yes. Maybe, it has blended in me, but I'm not the best judge of it. I cannot say that myself.

**Anasua :** In the comedy roles that you have played, which do you like the most?

**Soumitra :** Obviously 'Teen Kanya is one of them.

**Anasua :** That was a bit different...

**Soumitra :** 'Baksha Badal' - I liked it tremendously. I acted in a film by Tarun Majumdar, I think it was 'Ektuku Basha'. That was fun. And in that, everyone around was a comedian, except me. I also liked doing 'Basanta Bilaap'.

**Anasua :** And 'Babumoshai' ?

**Soumitra :** 'Babumoshai', obviously. In many films like these, at times it was a nice experience. Oh yes, there is another film in which the comedy part was very interesting and I really loved doing it, although the film did not run very well. And my co-actors also liked my performance, and both of them were extremely good comedians - Utpal Dutta and Sabitri Chatterjee. That was an Aurobindo Mukherjee film - 'Mantramugdha'. The comedy in it was very beautiful. Once in a while I really liked acting in a comedy character. But now a days, I don't get such roles anymore. The latest comedy role which was really worthwhile, was on stage, a play...my own production - 'Ghatak Biday'. There was another one - 'Chandanpurer Chor'. My friends from group theatre liked this one better, but I completely disagree with them - 'Chandanpurer Chor' was very shallow, it lacked real substance. But 'Ghatak Biday' - it was more philosophical. In this play, the sets were not good. I was very frustrated about that. The person who was responsible for it did a mess of it, and the person who did the lighting was something with whom I had to do it... you have got to yield to certain practical situations in films. So, lights and sets the two main things in production, which gives it glamour those were not upto the mark. Mainly due to that reason, and then due to a kind of false intellectualism that a few people have, that if a production is a commercial success, then it cannot have

much substance in it, my group theatre friends did not give much value to it. But the play from which I adapted it, was called Matchmakers by Thornton Wilder, and this was also adapted from an American play 'Merchant of Yonkers' by an American playwright much before him. This was again adapted from an Austrian play, which in turn was an adaptation from an Irish play, which originated from a British play, and that was more than a hundred years ago! So, in this span of time, the play was adapted time and again, and it was a superhit everytime. Could it have been this immortal, had it been just a funny tale? This must have been a concept of a universal man, and when Thornton Wilder brought it, it was in a beautiful modern form, which I tried to keep intact. In fact, he mingled something of Moliere with the original. The play was almost like Moliere - the story of the struggle of a universal man...the comedy lies in that only misunderstandings in romance, mismatch in matchmaking that was the fun, but basically it is the story of man's struggle. It was especially the story of the struggle in life by the matchmaker - Madhabi. It was an extra-ordinary play. The problem here is, nobody sees the basic play, but only view it superficially. The original play is evaluated by the mistakes in production, and the play is judged by that. And 'Chandanpurer Chor' was a very good production - fairly artistic - but the play, I won't call it superficial or bad, but it lacked depth. It had some witty dialogues, but nothing new. Even I'd say that these were some problems even in the adaptation part some incompleteness. It is based on a French play - 'Thieves Carnival'. A play growing out from a country has some basic inherent characters. If that does not have some universal attributes, then it cannot be transplanted in another soil. This was its bad point - that it somehow does not match with our environment.

**Anasua :** Why don't you write the plays yourself?

**Soumitra :** I cannot make a plot - well, I can, partly. If I have to do more than that, I have to be a full-time writer, stay only with that, but I hardly have so much time. I have to do it along with other things, isn't it?

**Anasua :** In the case of 'Pran Tapasya', the changes that you made during adaptation I really liked them from what I read in the reviews.

**Soumitra :** That is something that I can do - I can write dialogues too, can do everything, even think of a character, but to think of a storyline - this first, and then that...this is something that big writers can do - I can't do so much. It's not that I haven't written any. 'Nyaymurti' is a completely original play, but there is no shadow of anything... not even of a story or novel, but it can be understood that I need the help of at least a storyline. That play, 'Janmantar', which I have not been able to do. Don't know if I'll ever be able to do it - I reconstructed it from a Prafulla Roy novel. But if you see both together, you would understand that it is almost a new creation. But if I have to think about that too, the amount of concentration that is necessary - I cannot give that much, with so much shooting, play and many other responsibilities - I can't.

**Anasua :** Your favourite director in Bengali films ?

**Soumitra :** Goes without saying... Satyajit Ray.

**Anasua :** The maximum films done by you after Ray is under Salil Dutta.

**Soumitra :** In respect of numbers.

**Anasua :** Yes, in numbers. So, how do you like Salil Dutta as a director?

**Soumitra :** Good. He was pretty good in commercial mainstream cinema. But he could not keep pace with time. Tapan Sinha was successful in doing that, and to some extent, even Ajay Kar. He was even older. But he and Tapanda both progressed a lot in films, in terms of content. In terms of form, both Tapanda and Ajay Kar were always interested in cinema, but the biggest quality in Tapanda was the ease with which he moved from mainstream 'Storytelling' to serious and more serious cinema. His 'Ek Doctor ki maut' and 'Aadmi aur aurat' were superb. Even 'Wheelchair' and 'Atanka' where there were a few blemishes, but the content was serious. It had relevance with the present social circumstances - this is something that appeals to me. That this man has not stopped. He is moving, advancing.

**Anasua :** Ajay Kar.

**Soumitra :** Ajay Kar made good films from within the mainstream cinema from the beginning - from 'Jighangsha' onwards. He was basically a technician and so, emphasised on the technical aspects.

**Anasua :** He had an inclination towards new inventions too.

**Soumitra :** Yes, he was very inventive. He invented the process of attaching zoom to the Blimp camera.

**Anasua :** Even in front projection...

**Soumitra :** He made the arrangements for them over here. He found that out himself. He did many such things. But one thing that was necessary for him was a well written screenplay. Someone had to write that for him - you cannot expect everything from a director. In fact, it is rare for a director to write his own script. It is the trait of only a few big directors. Manikda used to say "If only Ajaybabu gets a good script..." He did a couple of very good films like 'Ananya'. But Ajaybabu was not interested in the things like social awareness etc. So, he could not advance as much as Tapanda did.

**Anasua :** What about Harisadhan Dasgupta ? I think he did only one feature film - 'Eki Angey Eto Roop'.

**Soumitra :** No, he did another titled 'Kamal lata'.

**Anasua :** You acted in 'Eki Angey eto Roop'.

**Soumitra :** Yes, I worked only in that.

**Anasua :** How did you find him as a director ?

**Soumitra :** Very good. Really, very good.

**Anasua :** Was he competent ?

**Soumitra :** He was a vastly knowledgeable person. He was a superb documentary maker. His 'Panchthupi' was simply excellent. Then the films on Tata Steel were also very nice. I don't think the prints are available now. I had seen 'Panchthupi' more than 40 years back, I think.

**Anasua :** We have heard a lot about that film, but I have not seen it yet. The arrangements for showing documentary films over here are poor, so...

**Soumitra :** Very bad. The awareness about documentaries is very low indeed.

**Anasua :** Yes, about both documentaries and short films.

Anyway, please tell us about Bijoy Basu, Ajit Lahiri, Asit Sen.

**Soumitra :** Bijoy Basu was a very conscientious director. He really concentrated and thought about films. I acted in two of his films. 'Baghini', and another, the name of which I cannot recall correctly. Perhaps it was 'Sargadyapi Gariyasi'.

**Anasua :** 'Basundhara' ?

**Soumitra :** No no. I think the novel was called 'Sargadyapi Gariyasi, by Bibhuti Mukherjee.

**Anasua :** Yes, I remember. 'Matir Swarga'.

**Soumitra :** Yes, 'Matir Swarga'. That was the name of the film.

He had a tremendous Bengaliness in him. I mean, in his work. He used to really concentrate on his work. His works were on a few contemporary realities, the country liquor business, the problems in the villages due to it, and so on...

**Anasua :** ..and how the educated class is drawn into it...

**Soumitra :** Yes, how they were getting involved - the economic crisis that was prevailing in the country was reflected in the film, and in this aspect, it was a good film.

**Anasua :** Aurobindo Mukhopadhyay ?

**Soumitra :** He too was good. I did only one film with him 'Nadi Theke Sagarey'. In it I had a co-actor who had since then made it big in Bombay, and is now famous...Mithun Chakraborty. Debashree (Roy) acted in the role of my daughter - just a little girl then. To tell you the truth, it was not a memorable film, but I liked some of his works because of the subjects. For example, he made a film based on a story written by his elder brother Banaphul, which was something like this - a train has become stranded midway, and the film time was equal to the actual time. It was very interesting, mainly because of the story. At one time, Ray wanted to make a film based on the same story. He even wanted to do a remake afterwards. It was a very cinematic story.



**Anasua :** What about Dinen Gupta ? You have acted in a few of his films.

**Soumitra :** Yes. Among them I remember only 'Basanta Bilaap', and 'Indira'. And what else was there maybe one or two more.

**Anasua :** You did four or five of them.

**Soumitra :** He was a very good technician and regarding the acting part, he always worked with veteran actors - professionals . So he didn't have to guide them so much.

He understood the camera as well the editing part. His own films have some very good camera work, but he could never really deliver the goods as a cameraman under other directors, like Ritwik Ghatak and others.

**Anasua :** 'Ajantrik' - I think that was Dinen Gupta's camera.

**Soumitra :** Yes, 'Ajantrik', 'Ganga' too. That quality of work is missing in his own films.

**Anasua :** You have worked a lot with Tarun Majumdar.

**Soumitra :** Tarunbabu is the most technically efficient director in mainstream cinema. It is almost a mystery why he was not inclined towards good cinema or better subject. Though he himself has explained that the responsibility of returning the money people had invested in him was simply too great to take a risk, I do not think that was a satisfactory explanation. He did 'Sansar Simante' and 'Ganadebata' - at least he tried to turn a bit away from the usual track. His mastery over the process of film making can only be compared to Satyajit Ray, and nobody else among his contemporaries. But the search for a different subject, which was visible in Ray's, Ritwik's or even Mrinal Sen's films, could not be found in the films of Tarun Majumdar. He did a few sweet films 'Balika badhu' etc., and they were not bad, though being typically mainstream cinema for entertainment. But still through them one could see the reflection of life and society. After that, he could not keep pace with time, but one could definitely learn from him the art of making a film.

**Anasua :** What about Mrinal Sen? In the beginning you did 'Punashcha', 'Pratinidhi', 'Akash Kushum' one after the other, and then after a long gap, 'Mahaprithibi'.

**Soumitra :** The primary thing in cinema, that is, shot taking and editing, was not as strong as Ray or Ritwik in Mrinalda's cinema. But when I did 'Mahaprithibi', I saw that the treatment had matured. He treated the whole thing beautifully in spite of the small space in the house. I feel Mrinalda's strong point is his urge to view life from different angles, and his quest for different subject matters. Maybe he drags that to an extreme where he sees things from his point of view only, and the objectivity is a bit lost, which is essential for a creator of a narrative form. That is the reason why people say about Shakespeare - 'he is present everywhere, but visible nowhere. This does not happen with Mrinalda always. Of course, I did not see some of his best films, like 'Oka Uri Katha', which I heard was very nice. I have seen 'Matir Manish', and it was really nice.

**Anasua :** How was 'Calcutta 71' ?

**Soumitra :** Not very good..maybe a bit phoney at times. Still, he is after all a serious filmmaker, does a film seriously, and has to say something about life, one may not always agree with him. Technically, his strong point is his dialogues. He writes very beautiful life-like dialogues...he is a writer after all. I really liked his dialogues, and so I loved to act in his films.

**Anasua :** In 'Akash Kushum', he used that form...to freeze a shot. What is your opinion about it?

**Soumitra :** That was Truffant's '400 Blows' - 'Joule et Jim'. He was influenced by it.

**Anasua :** He was obviously influenced by the French new wave.

**Soumitra :** That I think he was totally...

**Anasua :** ...used it a bit too much ?

**Soumitra :** Yes. It was a bit over used, and was not perhaps fully assimilated in him. It was there in 'Charulata', at the end.

**Anasua :** That was something superb !

**Soumitra :** Definitely. I just remembered something. I think I was to some extent responsible to provoke Manikda to think of that kind of an ending. When he read me the script, I was not entirely satisfied with the ending. I kept telling him -

“Manikda, something is missing here, which was evident in the novel.” Manikda said that he did not find anything more suitable for the end, since the practice of divorce was not there those days.

**Anasua :** How was the end in the script ?

**Soumitra :** The coming back to Bhupati was the same , and then a short scene where ‘Charu’ says “Come , let’s go inside”, and Bhupati replies - “Is the home, the same as before?” a reconciliation between husband and wife after which they the two lonely person’s hold hands and enter their room to live again their lives of disharmony. Though Ray ended it like this, I somehow did not like it. The very next day, I went to his house and he said, “I’ve changed the last scene yesterday night, I want the end to be in a still shoot. He will reach out with her hand and she will reach out for his, but just before they meet, the shot freezes... rock hard.”

**Anasua :** Charu’s dialogue was there.

**Soumitra :** He struck off the others and only that “come, come back home” by Charu remained. Everything else was frozen...as if the wheel of time stops. Excellence ! what a finish !!

**Anasua :** You haven’t worked in a single film of Ritwik Ghatak ?

**Soumitra :** Yes. I was set to do one, but did not materialise. It was the one on the group theatre movement.

**Anasua :** ‘Komal Gandhar’...

**Soumitra :** Yes, that was it .He talked to me about that.

**Anasua :** The Character of ‘Bhrigu’?

**Soumitra :** Yes, the one done by Abanish.

**Anasua :** Yes, yes...

**Soumitra :** He wanted me to do that role. Afterwards somehow, he changed his mind. Then there was another one. He thought of making a film on a story based on the capturing of elephants...in memory of Lalji. That did not materialise after

all. In fact, I even found a producer for that film. That was the first time he was hospitalized for detoxification. Anyway, from one angle it was good that I didn't do any films with him. Whatever film by Ritwik Ghatak I have seen, I have liked them very much indeed. But on a personal level, if I had worked with him, I don't think it would have been possible for us to get along well. We would have fought with each other. As it is, I was a bit short tempered and arrogant, and moreover I had spent the better part of my life controlling the tremendous amount of anger I have in myself. If we would have worked together, I'm afraid it would have come down to blows.

**Anasua :** What is your evaluation of Ritwik Ghatak as a filmmaker?

**Soumitra :** Well, I just cannot give him the same compliments as bestowed upon him by Satyajit Ray's generosity. I don't think he was as complete as Ray. Especially in the first few films, like 'Nagarik', although the cinema was unmistakably there, at the same time there were certain amateurish things too. These, in comparison, are not seen in the first films of Ray. And then his way of painting life, and his reflections are very dissimilar to Ray's, but these are natural, being two unique persons. Some similarities are also there - both of them have chosen social subjects for their films. They are all social, and not political films, as done by Mrinal Sen. As Manikda had been making so many films for such a long time, we see that some of his films end with a note of frustration and despair. Example can be given of 'Jana Aranya', and partly of 'Shakha Proshakha', which is positive in some way, but at the same time cynical too. The similarity in the films of both is the positiveness, the hopefulness, the faith in the future. In 'Titas Ekti Nadir Naam', the last shot where the boy is seen walking away, playing on his flute, reminds one of a typical Satyajit Ray end. As because they belonged to the same generation, they had the same kind of hope - about humanity, about man, and about his future - and they were expressed in the same fashion by both. But at times, there was a good quality in Ritwik Ghatak, which was not seen in many of the others - the use of theatricality to make it cinematic. He used a component, a dialogue, an acting or a treatment in such a manner that it might have been theatre, but at some point, it is reaching an excellence as cinema too.

**Anasua :** In this aspect he is totally different from Satyajit Ray.

**Soumitra :** Yes. In this aspect, they are indeed different. But I don't think he had that complete artistic vision that Ray had. I did not find this in the works of Ritwik. But he is undoubtedly the only other director, who not only was a serious filmmaker, but also had basic cinema in him. Cinema, which is basically an arrangement of shots - the mobility in them, their expressiveness, the art of storytelling through the shots, to bring the narrative - these were only found in Ray and Ritwik Ghatak... as if this came from the inside. In later years, we find this in many different filmmakers like (Shyam) Benegal etc. In their films too, you can find this interesting element, but still, it does not contain the magic which we find in Satyajit or Ritwik. It seems that their works depict only their competence in film making, and their technique, and not the art. Of course, I should not be saying these...I am not a critic.

**Anasua :** If you compare between the two, don't you feel that out of the two, Ray was more cosmopolitan, while Ghatak was more nearer to the soil ?

**Soumitra :** Only according to the content, and not according to the make. I do not agree with Manikda's statement that Ritwik was more a Bengali director than himself, because you cannot depict a Bengali in those times better than he did in the 'Apu' trilogy, or in 'Parashpathar' and 'Charulata'.

**Anasua :** That was indeed excellent, but not the contemporary ones. Look at 'Komal Gandhar', and the youth at that time of the group theatre movement. That period....

**Soumitra :** Yes, that period is there, but was it done in a very nice manner ? It stands little chance in the context of modernisation. Rather, 'Jukti', 'Takko', 'Gappo' was more contemporary to me. And that is really a modern cinema. He uses his medium as a personal statement, as a poet uses his medium. There, he completely ignores the entertainment part of it.

**Anasua :** 'Ajantrik' ?

**Soumitra :** 'Ajantrik', 'Bari Theke Paliye'....In 'Ajantrik' again, the theatrical element that are present, remain theatrical. They do not turn cinema.

**Anasua :** Tell us something about the important technicians of your period.

**Soumitra :** Firstly, I should comment on the cameramen. At the time when I entered this profession, and for a long time after that, the camera department was very rich, and there were quite a few very good workers. Among the earlier ones, the best example was Ajay Kar. He was one of the pioneers, working in the early phase. His camerawork was very modernised - his films looked very bright and clear. That was because he understood the technique. How to process it in the lab, what would be the result - he knew everything. He also understood the camera angle, and so he could develop as a director too. He was a good director. I did a lot of films in the earlier part of my career. He made a lot of cameramen out of assistants. One of them is Bimal Mukherjee, who worked as a cameraman in many of Tapan Sinha's films - 'Kshudhita Pashan', 'Jhinder Bandi' etc. He was also a worker who worked painstakingly. He was very serious, and his work reflected Ajay Kar's schooling. He had very clear photography - it was mainly black and white. But the person who revolutionised photography, not only in Bengali films, but also in the Indian cinema, was Subrata Mitra. It was mainly evident from 'Aparajito' - it had a lot of indoor shooting.

**Anasua :** His first film was also 'Pather Panchali'.

**Soumitra :** Yes.

**Anasua :** What was his background ?

**Soumitra :** Background...well...he came somehow in contact with Ray through music. He was a good Sitar player. I think he used to shoot with still camera too, after coming in contact with Ray. He inspired him to work with movie camera, and within a short period, he reached a high with that - 'Pather Panchali' had a lot of experiments - not that much perfection, but in 'Aparajito' , one almost cannot understand the difference between indoor and outdoor. His lighting scheme was so beautiful and then it was in it that they invented the 'bounce-light'. Earlier, this was not used in Indian cinema. To use diffused light, tissue or filter would be used to diffuse the light. Actually, the light that enters a room is bounced light. This bounced light was created by them - in many ways - now it's simpler - the basic

technique is although the same. They started it... the likes of Subrata Mitra. A white reflecting cone was used, and that was not a mirror substance - it was done by some white cloth or paper - the light reflected on it and then bounced. But Subrata Mitra had an artistic sense. He brought a painting like quality in the picture. Many others have worked with bounced light, but that touch was missing. He was an artist - used to play the Sitar, but did not continue. 'Pather Panchali's music was done by Ravishankar. But after completing his work in 2-3 days, he left, and then suddenly there was a necessity of some more music. Then Ravishankar was not available. So, Ray made Subrata play the Sitar instead. Among the ones he played, one is a famous piece, many people think it was done by Ravishankar, but actually it is Subrata's. the scene where the sweet seller is seen carrying sweets on his shoulders...that was Subrata's music. In later years, Subrata became interested in sound recording, and in that too, he reached a pinnacle. A very talented person. Afterwards, the cameraman who worked with Ray was Soumendu Roy. He worked with many others and that is how he taught himself. He was the camera assistant in technician's studio and worked with many other cameramen, but he learnt the most from Subrata Mitra. And after that he also turned out to be a formidable cameraman. Then in Ray's unit, there was a sound recordist called Durga Mitra, who was also very good. Even now, when I see the old films, there balance, clarity, the crispness enthralls me and it is of a very high quality. When I came into this profession, there were many sound recordists of very high standards. They were also highly educated, as I have said before. Atul -I hardly remember the surnames...I think it was Bose, and then Nripenda were a few who were attached to this new profession. There were some others, my contemporaries- very skilled cameramen like Anil Gupta. He worked in many films by Asit Sen, and of many others. Most of the cameramen at that time were concerned mainly with making the shot picturesque, whereas Subrata Mitra and his school developed the art of maintaining the source of light in such a manner that it became more realistic. Next, there were many good editors...Ramesh Joshi, Ardhendu Chattopadhyay, whose student Dulal Dutta worked with Ray, and had a fantastic sense. I have worked with him directly, when I made a one-hour film for Doordarshan. He was my editor. Most of them had the sense of a plot. They had the ability to think of

editing from the point of view of storytelling. They knew how much could be retained and how much was worth cutting. They were not just joiners or cutters; they were really editors.

**Anasua :** Yes, the sense was there.

**Soumitra :** They had the idea. A few of these editors have worked in Bombay, though they had started in Calcutta, like Hrishikesh Mukherjee, who is now a director famous all over India. Tapan Sinha started his career as a sound recordist. He joined as a sound assistant, and then became a recordist. It was afterwards that he became a director. Theatre were also some skilled make-up artists - Madan Pathak, Panuda, Goswamida, Rameshbabu etc. But the person who saw make-up from an artistic and logical viewpoint was Shakti Sen, who was an art school pass-out. Ananta Das, after him, advanced the technique. He was highly skilled, and at the same time, experimental. He was a good photographer too, and was also interested in sound recording. When we went for outdoors, he used to record many things like chirping of the birds, sound of the boat, and afterwards he started to cover Ray continuously - whatever he said. He had a few miles of tape from this recording. But after his death nobody could find it. Maybe it is there in his house, but the family members refused to hand it over. It really could have been an interesting archival material. How Ray used to interact during the process of shooting - how he worked, how he directed, how was his ways of relaxation, and how was he when in a lighter mood - it would have been a fascinating study.

**Anasua :** Please tell us something about the background of Ananta Das.

**Soumitra :** Ananta Das. .. well...I don't know very well When he came into this profession, he was very young. He worked as an assistant with many people, and then finally became Shakti Sen's assistant during the making of 'Neel Akasher Nichey'. I think he assisted in doing the make-up of a Chinese on Kalida in it. After that he started working as an independent make-up artist, and then from 'Abhijaan', he joined the unit of Ray. He was there till Ray died. Another make-up man was Sailen Ganguly. But there is one point which must be mentioned in this connection - in those days, make-up artists hardly gave any thought to the real purpose of the make-up, so most of the time, it was overt and almost turned out to



be a mask. They also did not bother much about corrective make-up - like giving a sharp look to the nose, or making the lips a little thinner in appearance. They followed certain rigid conventions during make-up, like they would never miss an opportunity to put a shade at some place, or to highlight a few spots. But when Shakti or Ananta worked, they kept in mind the real purpose of putting a shade, or a line.

**Anasua :** In this context, we have seen Uttamkumar in certain odd make-ups too.

**Soumitra :** Yes, especially at the beginning. For quite a long time, Uttamkumar put that kind of traditional make-up. In fact, after acting in 'Nayak', his idea of make-up changed. He did not like the traditional make-up anymore.

**Anasua :** Were you the first one as an actor to break his trend ?

**Soumitra :** You could have seen me with those make-ups in one or two films. I used to object, but....

**Anasua :** In the beginning, I suppose.

**Soumitra :** Yes, in the beginning. There is a heavy make-up in 'Swaralipi' etc.

I objected. This sense came to my mind after working with Ray, and I understood very early that I look better through the camera under light make-up. To tell you very frankly, in a sense, I really like to have make-ups. But that does not mean a fascination towards heavy make-up. When I sit in front of the mirror, and see the transformation taking place, this helps me to transport myself from my personal life to that of the character. My concentration develops with the change in my face, and the changes in its shades...this is a psychological assistance for me. Perhaps all the artists have the same feelings about make-up. Since I had an inclination towards character acting, I had to use beard or moustache or do different kinds of hairstyles from a very early stage. And as this process goes on, it carries my mind towards that character. From my very childhood, I took to the stage, and that is why I had to don make-ups, and moreover since I had an interest in it, I myself could do it a bit. I can till now, but now a days I have lost the touch due to the lack of practice. When I was a M.A. student, my father was posted in Madras. There was a famous make-up artist called Haribabu, who stayed there. He had a large

collection of books, and had a make-up studio in his residence. All the big stars, including Shivaji Ganeshan and Sarada used to go to his house for their make-ups...such a high position he held in the Madras Film Industry. He stayed just beside my father's quarter, and was good friends with him in connection with the Bengali Association. When I used to go there to spend my vacations, I used to go to his place to chat. I used to borrow his books on make-up, read them, and ask him questions. He used to explain everything, and even demonstrated them by doing make-ups on my face. Anyway, so I had an interest in the subject. There is no dearth of such films where I have taken only the wigmaker to put on the wig, and did the other make-ups myself.

Production Managers - as technicians, they are also very good. Anil Choudhury, Ray's production manager, was very efficient, his assistant Bhanu Ghosh Dastidar was also very good. Although his intellectual level was not very high, he was very skilled, and never used to say no to the director's requirements. We used to joke - 'if Manikda asks for a cloud too, he will say, "Yes, Manikda, in a minute." They never took a shortcut, relatively corruption was less, and their main interest was to make the production successful, and not in raking in unscrupulous money. And then, there were a few very good assistant directors, a few of whom became directors afterwards. But they knew that being an assistant director was also a job, and that they were supposed to help the directors. Ray himself had many good assistants - Sailen Dutta, Subrata Lahiri, Nitai Dutta, Ramesh Singh etc. Tarun Majumdar, Dilip Mukherjee too worked as assistant directors in the beginning of their career. When I worked with them, they themselves had become directors by then. But those assistant directors had a grasp over the basics of the cinema medium.

Actually, even in the commercial stream of cinema, there was an involvement, a seriousness in their work.

**Anasua :** You have perhaps acted in three or four documentaries.

**Soumitra :** What were those ?

**Anasua :** ‘Rabindranath’, ‘Sukumar Roy, and another under Tapan Sinha... ‘Ajana Shatru’ or something like that.

**Soumitra :** Oh yes, the one on AIDS....

**Anasua :** Perhaps.

**Soumitra :** Yes, on AIDS. There I played the part of a doctor. I don’t recall if I have acted in any other documentary.

**Anasua :** Please tell us something about ‘Rabindranath’.

**Soumitra :** it has been a long time since ‘Rabindranath’ was produced, in 1960-61. While doing it, I had a lot of fun. I did it as Ray told me. By that time, the relation with him took such a concrete shape... And besides, the way I looked up on him from the very beginning...that I was ready to do whatever he told me. Actually, from the time of ‘Apar Sansar’, when I had long hairs and beard, there were rumours which spread like wild fires, that I looked like young Rabindranath. According to some, I looked like Jesus Christ. In the documentary ‘Rabindranath’, I was in the picturisation sequence of a song from ‘Balmiki Pratibha’. There it was not implied that I was impersonating the role of Tagore. But I think Manikda consciously chose me so that a likeness to young Tagore with beard on me would come out. And it is true that in spite of the very short span of shooting, I really liked it. At the time of ‘Sukumar Roy’ - then Manikda was not working for a long time. He was ill, and we were all very worried. I used to go to him from time to time and used to repeatedly ask him when he was going to start working. He was very disciplined. He did not take a plunge into the full fledged work disobeying the doctor. Then on the occasion of the birth centenary of Sukumar Roy, a documentary on him was scheduled to be made. Ray told me that he needed our help to make the film. We were collective in our choice that working in Ray’s film was the greatest tribute we could have given to Sukumar Roy. Then during the production, I had two responsibilities. . .one was acting as ‘Ram’ in ‘Lakshmaner Shaktishel’, and the other was reading the commentary. That was the first time he took the help of somebody else for commentary reading. Before that, in all of his documentaries, he himself did it. I asked him - “Why are you asking me to read?”

Why won't you do it yourself?" He replied - "No, there are some of my father's verses in it. You will be able to do them better." However, I did not feel it was the real reason behind it. He would also have done it well, I believe. He generally did not recite, but even if he did, I do not think he would have done it any worse. Another argument he gave was that - "The documentary is after all on my father. It would be embarrassing for me to read, at least in some places." That may be the reason why he chose me. Later he was very happy with my work. When I told him that I liked the film 'Sukumar Roy' very much, then he said - "...and your contribution was no less."

**Anasua :** What was your experience while reading this commentary ?

**Soumitra :** I have been doing this kind of audio work before a microphone from a very early age. Particularly, since I have been working with radio, and moreover I was young at that time, so the problems with my breathing were not there. So, I enjoyed doing this work. And I remember, when the recording took place in the NFDC theatre, Manikda, along with his wife was there all the time. Everybody liked my rendition. At the very end, where the scenes about his death were shown, where Tagore comes and sings to him, and then the end comes with the rhyme from Abol Tabol - "Ghaniye elo ghumer ghor...", there I used a somewhat sad tone in my voice, without making it sentimental. This is my ideal of art too. An art should be emotionally strong, it should move a person but at the same time, it should not have any sentimentality. I mean, the same thing by degeneration may become sentimental, or it may transcend into something strongly emotional. To me, the ultimate goal is to trace the graph of that emotion - to catch the feeling. I don't like the overt sentimentality in that. After the take was over, I said to Manikda, "Manikda, I have brought a mild sadness here, but more than this perhaps..." He answered, "No no no, more than this will spoil the whole thing. It is all right." Later I heard that he said - "Soumitra has read the end so well that it brings tears to my eyes."

Among documentaries beside this one, there is another that you mentioned - the film by Tapanda. That was a...what should I say...a propagandist film. A very urgent, important propaganda, which should be done. In fact, only yesterday I

narrated as myself in a government sponsored short documentary on AIDS. This is an imminent problem of the country, the society. That is why I liked working in it. In fact, this kind of work can never be done against your conviction, if you don't like doing it from your heart.

But I gave voice to many documentaries. Yes, many. I don't have a count... perhaps 10 or 12. Those who are following my career, they can tell. One was on Abanindranath, another on sound pollution produced by Abirlal Mukhopadhyay and party. There I gave voice. Again, all these were, in some way or other, of my interest. There was another. In that, Hemangada's (Hemanga Biswas) song is used...a political documentary named 'Manusher Jaijatra' or something like that depicting the coming of the left front in power. In it I gave my voice. That was again out of the awareness I had about politics. There were a number of other documentaries too, which I do not remember, among which was one on the 'eye'. Oh yes ! A documentary on lettering in Bengali script, by some Abhijit Chattopadhyay. It received a prize also - evolution of the Bengali script from the time of William Kerry of fort William onwards.

**Anasua :** There was a documentary on Bengali theatre too in which you gave your voice.

**Soumitra :** Yes, I worked on many of this kind.

**Anasua :** Well, in this long career in acting by you spanning 40 years, you must have many memorable events. Please tell us about some of those.

**Soumitra :** I don't have them in my memory. Because although there are a few incidents that occasionally come to my mind, I do not usually categorise them as memorable. I don't know why...maybe I never really had the inclination.

**Anasua :** Why ? Which aspect of your nature is reflected by this ?

**Soumitra :** In fact, I live more in the present - don't I dream of a rosy future too ? I think - of the future, and for the future, but it is not as practical as the dreams. I mean, I do not think in the lines that 'this will come in handy later, and so I'll keep it'. Most of the stills of my films are lost. Virtually I don't have any review of any of my films. Very rarely, once or twice, I felt like keeping those, but later they also

disappeared. I couldn't maintain a proper organisation for them, by putting or pasting on a notebook.

**Anasua :** Why ? Do you have less self-consciousness ?

**Soumitra :** No. I'm enough conscious about myself. I really relish it when people say nice things about me. But in those organising works, you need patience. First of all, I do not like to brag. If someone else collects those, let him do that. In that respect you may say that I'm against self-campaign. This is true. If someone else praises me, it's not that I don't feel happy. Of course I feel happy, very happy. Who doesn't ? But doing something for myself - that is not my character.

**Anasua :** The question may be cliché, but still the future generation will definitely want to know the memorable events of your life.

**Soumitra :** But I cannot figure out in which aspect should they be memorable.

**Anasua :** Whatever you feel is memorable. Everybody will be eager to know that.

**Soumitra :** Apparently it may not be too important an event to be memorable. Rather I feel, as I said earlier, that while working in 'Charulata' my handwriting changed for life. That was a memorable incident. Because, there are not many actors who had to do such a thing. But then I did it because it was my duty. Now, when I look back, I feel it was a tremendous thing. True memorable events are those which came in the process of my devotion, application and the hard work I put in my career. These are rather more memorable to me. The two-hour long process of make-up during 'Abhijaan', the way I used to prepare myself, or later, in the film 'Koni', where I myself had designed the make-up by making a sketch of mine. Generally I can't draw. I mean, I don't have the ability to draw the likeness of a person, but I can think of his appearance. I thought it for myself how would the spiked hairs, the moustache and the glasses be. The make-up was done by the make-up artist following that sketch only. Then I had to apply dark shades all over my body, since I was not sunburnt enough at that time. The amount of hard labour I had to put for 'Sansar Simante' - I remember there was a scene where a thief flees through a window. Have you seen the film?

**Anasua :** Oh yes.

**Soumitra :** The shooting was done in two parts. The long shots were taken in the New Theatres no. 1, the India Lab, the laboratory building where film processing was done earlier on. The shooting was done on the first floor of the building. That floor was very high...much higher than today's buildings.... the way the buildings were in those times. There, from a rainwater pipe, I had to hang. There was only a small one-inch ledge...a pathetic excuse of a foothold. The day before the shooting, the director Tarun Majumdar told me that it would be done there. Immediately I got worried a bit. So high, and no support ?! Tanubabu asked me "Can you do that, or are you getting afraid ?" You see, it was a matter of male prestige to be afraid, so I put up a brave front - "No no, what's there to worry about? It's all right. Just do one thing, can't you arrange for a larger edition of a nail and put it near the ledge, so that I can place at least a foot on that...I mean...a slight foothold ?" So, it was also placed. I remember, I regularly used to exercise at that time, and was fairly strong too, but it was not apparent from the outside. I used to practise dumb bells, and had a fair amount of muscle power. That is why I was confident that whatever be the situation, I could hang on to that for at least half an hour. But what I did not take into consideration was the role human psychology played in a tense situation. Anyway, after having my make-up, I was placed there with the help of a huge ladder of CESC (Calcutta Electric Supply Corporation).

**Anasua :** With that ladder ?

**Soumitra :** Otherwise how could I have been placed there ? A normal ladder wouldn't have reached there. And then, after the ladder was taken off, there was absolutely no protection below. You know, that was the condition of backward film-making in our third world country. There was no net or anything to catch me if I fell down from there. And although the missiles that were thrown at me from below were all made of paper pulps, nevertheless, they have an effect on the nerves. If I suddenly got startled and my grip loosened, I was doomed. And to make things worse, there was a healthy technician who was shouting absurd hopes from below - "Soumitrada, don't worry, I'll catch you if you fall!" Just imagine, he was giving me that hope that he would catch me if I fell! He himself would have died of my weight if my body hit him while falling from that height! I did not

calculate the eventuality that I may be afraid at that actual moment. And it is a fact that fear reduces the body strength by half. All the muscles, hands and feet start trembling, and the ability to apply one's strengths goes off. And immediately, I thought of kicking myself to have agreed to that foolish stunt. I was then big enough a star to refuse it, and could have demanded a double in my place. If I had an accident, then the film industry had nothing to lose, but my family would suffer. Anyway, I regained my nerves, and the shots were taken. I had to get up there twice or thrice. In those shots, it is myself and not a double who was acting.

**Anasua :** You got up there again for the second and third times ?

**Soumitra :** Yes. Two or three shots were there - long shots. The most amusing thing is that, a replica of that was prepared and my close-ups were taken on that replica in the studio floor only. If that was the case, as Ray also told me after seeing the film, "If Tarun told you to get up there and give the shots, why didn't he zoom on you ? Then it would have been more thrilling for the audience, when they would realise that it was indeed you who was giving the shot. Otherwise it was not even clear. A double would have made no difference. He should have taken the shot by zooming in from very long to close, when it would be apparent that yes, it is indeed Soumitra Chatterjee who is hanging."

When talking about memorable events, these are things that come into mind... many of them.

**Anasua :** Can you remember something more humorous ?

**Soumitra :** Humorous events like these have happened many times. In 'Ashani Sanket', I had learnt several Mantras from 'Purohit Darpan' etc. which were to be used for the village ritual. When I was chanting those during the shot, an old woman from amongst the village-folks those were used for the crowd, suddenly started shouting -"This one is chanting all the wrong words ! From where did you get this Brahmin ? This one does not know a thing !" Funny incidents like these happened. In another shooting, we had gone to Daltongunj, inside the Betla forest. Anubha Gupta was there, as was Satya Bandopadhyay (senior). The shot was being taken with all of us. Suddenly, Ajit Lahiri, the director, said that he was going to



take a few shots in a different part of the location. So the others remained there, while our shooting continued in a different place, inside that forest only, with a skeleton unit. At that time, a large black cloud appeared. I asked Ajit to go back quickly or the rain would come soon, and others would be waiting below the tree. The rain really came down within a few minutes. We somehow managed to get into the jeep. After getting back there, we found them absolutely drenched. Anubhadi was falling off with laughter, and Satyada, who had a moustache in the character, had it on his forehead, and not on his lips anymore. Ajit exclaimed - "How come your moustache has gone up?" Satyada answered - "Brother, you are the director, so we must obey you. You ordered us to stand here below the tree, and we followed it with a high respect. You ordered me to keep this moustache, and so it also followed you with a high respect, and therefore has found its place 'high' enough." That is one example of how rain makes things funny.

Another very funny event occurred when I acted in a film named 'Job Chamoker Bibi'. In that, there was a scene of saving a sati. Much of the shooting was done at Falta, near Diamond Harbour. The house in Falta where we stayed had a very long barrage near it. It was about one mile away, and it was erected for the river Ganga. By the side of the river, it was an extremely nice scene, with the green grass and the water which rose during the high tides. It was covered with sediments. The river was very wide there. It was there where the funeral pyres etc were arranged. The scene was, as far as I can remember, I dressed as Job Chamock, was supposed to ride on a horse and rescue the girl (Sati). For that shot, a beautiful horse was also taken from Calcutta. I was dressed in a bright and colourful costume made out of satin, with a wig on the head. I decided to ride the horse to reach the location instead of riding the car, as I liked to ride horses very much. About two thousand people had gathered there beside the barrage to see the shooting, and when I arrived there, riding a horse, a tremendous excitement spread all over. It was really a glamorous entry, and I was greeted with a cheerful roar from the crowd. But as the shooting progressed, I observed that a black cloud was appearing from the other side of the river Ganga. The directors usually never pay attention to this ...they remain so engrossed with their work that they sometimes forget the practical conditions of film-making. I said, "Dear Jayanta, either be quick, or pack it

up. Otherwise everything and everybody will be drenched. Costumes will be soaked, everything will be spoilt.” He kept telling me - “Don’t worry, dada, everything will be just fine.” And then the cloud ultimately spread all over and it started raining in torrents. Since it was almost the end of monsoon, the rain did not last long, but it was merciless for half an hour. But that half an hour was enough to spoil everything. The two thousand people, the technicians, the artists and myself with my glittering dress and all, were completely soaked. Colours started flowing out of my clothes and covered me and my wig... it was an awful condition. And that two thousand people who gathered there to see me, lost all their interest in shooting, and started going back over that barrage. The barrage was dangerous then, quite a contrast to what it was like when dry. The ground was clayey, soft like curd. You could slip any moment, and so everybody had to walk cautiously.

There I was, among those people, walking alongside them, being one of them. And nobody was even looking at me. They no longer had an interest in me, and was only concerned with their own safe retreat. I was wishing I could get out of this clown-suit as early as possible. We also get these kinds of humorous experience while working. They are really memorable.

**Anasua :** Anything else ?

**Soumitra :** The incidents come to mind in the course of the discussion only. Apart from that, we have indulged in a lot of fun and frolic, but those are personal.

Even in the many films I have done with Manikda, we used to do a lot of odd things. I have even pushed a trolley ! There were times when all of the crew were engaged in some job or other, like holding the reflectors, managing the lights, and so on, and we have run a little short of manpower, so I would be pushing the trolley with the make up and costume on. I remember, in ‘Ashani Sanket’, he did not notice me pushing the trolley, and was directing during the rehearsals to push it a little faster, and, after the shot was taken, he took his head out of the black cloth and said, “The trolley was okay, good”, and then, noticing me, “... oh my god ! It was you pushing the trolley ? What are you people up to ! You are making him push the trolley too !” I would say “No no, Manikda, it was me who did it myself.”

So this was the way I looked upon it, such was my involvement with film making that at that time it did not at all feel derogatory. In any case, I don't think any work so derogatory, for that matter. These are the kinds of incidents that come to mind. Again, when we were working on 'Teen Kanya', I remember Manikda shooting a sequence, the last one, where it was the outdoor portion of the search for 'Mrinmayee'. It was the period when he was simultaneously working on the documentary 'Rabindranath', since Teen Kanya was done on the occasion of Tagore's birth centenary itself. That was the part when the picturisation of the song 'Hridaye mondrilo damaru guru guru...', along with the scene of rain falling on the river Padma was done, and also the part where I was seen jumping into the mud, and my shoe getting stuck in it. When we arrived there, it was absolutely dry, and not a drop of rain was there in sight. It was tried to make the road wet by pouring water on it, but it was so dry, all the water got soaked, and there was no mechanical means at that time to bring in a lot of water from Ganga too. In the process, ultimately the rains came, and I got to witness the superhuman energy Manikda had. The assistant was running behind with the copies and all, but he said, "Leave the copies, put the camera over here, and this will be the lens..." He would take a shot here, and then run to some other place and take another shot. I myself was running with the battery of the camera on my shoulders, and Manikda was there, standing in neck deep water, taking the shots. He took the whole sequence, including the full song, in only one hour.

**Anasua :** But that was a lot of shots !

**Soumitra :** Numerous ! The whole unit was running, and what was the reason for that total involvement ? It was because he led from the front. He Was the one in that unit who toiled the most. People generally see the talent, but not the hard work one puts in. the tremendous effort he put in his work...it all actually came from love, the starting point of all great achievements.

**Anasua :** Did you feel this involvement while working with other directors ?

**Soumitra :** They were nearly as dedicated, but were too high to be compared with today's directors. In Manikda's case, his talent made a lot of difference. But the others were tremendous too. I have seen Tapanda in difficult times, when he was a

serious heart patient. He would climb steadily up a steep mountain and take a shot, while he could have easily told the assistant to go up there and do it. He was tremendously involved in film-making, and that was what felt good. These are the things you remember.

**Anasua :** A very large difference is seen when we compare those days with the present ones in terms of the quality of acting and screenplay, both in the so-called commercial and parallel cinema. Can you please tell us why we feel like this?

**Soumitra :** There are many reasons for that. First of all, there is a dearth of directors who know how to write a script. They only know the technical aspects of the film. The directors in those times were equally good in both the aspects of it. They were better in understanding cinema as a medium, and many of them had a dream to make something creative. Not only Satyajit-Ritwik-Mrinal... I would say that in their own way within the mainstream, even Tapan Sinha, Ajay Kar, Bijay Basu and Asit Sen were much more involved in their work. I cannot see this thing now a days.

**Anasua :** But there was a phase in between too - Goutam Ghosh, Buddhadeb Dasgupta, Aparna Sen - what about them ?

**Soumitra :** These few ones - they are the exceptions and not the trends. But the ones I mentioned - these three or four were not the only ones. The rest were also significant in their working process - they also took films very seriously. Now, Aparna Sen is capable of writing well enough. She has a tremendous photographic sense. She has been brought up in the environment of films. It is easily understandable that there must have been a seriousness in her interest towards the film medium. But if you think about all the others from the same angle, it may not be that true. You can find several such people each of whose father was a technician and he had also been brought up in film-milieu. Maybe now he is a director, but he doesn't have that much interest in it. It depends upon the person concerned. In this context, you had a question very close to this. Should I move over to that now only ?

**Anasua :** Yes, please.

**Soumitra :** The question was about institutional training - wasn't it ?

**Anasua :** Yes, yes.

**Soumitra :** Previously we used to believe in institutional training on acting. Or we used to think that it might be helpful, because we all had to learn acting by piecemeal - something we learnt in this film, something else in that. A lot of time is eaten up in this process. What we had learned in five years could have been taught in a very systematic way within two years. I used to believe in it. Later I felt that this may be true from one angle, but is there anybody who have learned acting in such an institutional way ? There may be some examples - in foreign countries, and some in this country too. Particularly from Pune and N.S.D., there were some. An extra-ordinary actor like Naseer (Naseeruddin Shah) - he was a product of N.S.D. Later he also went to Pune. And then there was Jaya Bachchan.

**Anasua :** Smita Patil ?

**Soumitra :** Smita Patil ... Shabana (Azmi) was also a student of that institute perhaps. That crop - an excellent crop in Bombay Film Industry - all of them emerged from that institute. But it is also true that after them no such important actor has come out of the institute as yet. There was one boy - fantastic - extremely potential - Danny (Denzongpa). If there was a film industry in his area, he would have become a very big star. Since he is not acting in his own language, and his features do not match with this country's milieu - he is getting typecast all the time. He had tremendous amount of acting in him. I had seen him in his student hood at Pune. I had gone to Pune once only as a visiting lecturer. Then they were students . He was there, and Jaya was a part of the outgoing batch then. They had a class on improvisation, where two students had to act on a given situation. Oh my god! What an emotional reserve the boy had got ! Moreover, what a malleability, flexibility as an actor ! I was overwhelmed ! But with those features, in Hindi language, he became typed.

**Anasua :** What do you feel now ? Institutional training...

**Soumitra :** Now, I think institutional training does not provide much help. The only thing is that, you can teach the fundamentals. But who will learn, who will not...it is

after all a knowledge - all the art forms are perhaps like that... they can be learnt but cannot be taught. If you wish you can learn. But all that depends upon your tendency or inclination and your love - whether you have love for it. If you love your job, then you learn faster, you learn more things than if you don't have that alchemy - that love. That is the most important thing. We were really a bit insane. There is one thing that I do feel about Uttamda or myself. There were so many routes to distraction in front of us - both of us were very successful actors - let me leave aside Uttamda - how much more successful can one be...but I was also fairly successful - but most of the time our mind was engaged in the work, instead of enjoying the fruits of success. This is a fact. I'm not telling it out of pride or out of an old man-like nostalgia for the golden days. I'm telling it from an absolutely objective analysis. Now a days, I really do not see it. How far we had gone to learn acting ! Take for example, I have even practised walking at home with weights over my head, whenever I got time, even till ten to fifteen years back... that means upto about thirty years of my total acting career of forty years! It was not necessary, I was already successful for so long. Take the film "Wheelchair" for example. To act in it, I have practised wheelchair for more than six months. This is because I haven't taken acting as a means to show myself. Actually, showmanship is a primary mental instinct - one wishes to show oneself to people - wishes to be praised, but it has to develop into self expression. One has to determine that I'll show what is inside myself, and not the outer me. And, after all, the most important of this all is the evaluation of one's life - the way one lives, the way one has viewed life - observed people, observed one's country, its surroundings, and the situation of its people. One should act with the sole objective of projecting only a fraction of that in one's acting, for this reason only people act, otherwise it is not worth. I have gone through these hard works only to project that picture truly.

**Anasua :** Therefore do you think that the quality of acting has deteriorated these days because that sincerity is lacking....?

**Soumitra :** That sincerity is lacking - that atmosphere is no more. I mean, if such films are continuously produced, where there is no semblance of life, where human

beings are just not like human beings, they are only a few readymade formulae - then how can good acting be possible ? It's impossible. And those who are making these things don't have the control over the craft. You can see, these things that are called 'Mega-serials'- these have spelt a doom for Bengali acting. Everybody is ailing from a disease now - from an infection - that is, who can cut a sentence into how many parts . As we are talking now, how many times are we fragmenting a sentence ? It has to be learnt if one tries to act. If I say like this while talking to you - 'Anasua do you know when I was getting out of my house then it was ten o'clock but the sun was then very hard...'? Can a person talk to another in this manner? But in every serial, you see, this kind of acting is going on - awful! Yesterday I was seeing a film, 'Atmiya Swajan' by Raja Sen. I hadn't seen it before. They held a show for it at Nandan. Aparna was there, Basantada was there. Aparna told me the same thing - Soumitra, see, these Bengali mega serials - they have made such a mess of the acting. The boys are still better among them - Sabyasachi (Chakraborty) acted well, Tito, I mean Dipankar Dey was also good, some others also, one called Pradip- he was good. But the actresses were rather poor. And I should not say but the acting of Supriya (Devi) was also mere acting, and nothing else. They were doing many things well, with confidence, nevertheless. In a scene of hot exchanges, Ritu (Rituparna Sengupta) was very good, very lifelike. But in all other places, in expressing sorrow or love, they are fragmenting the sentence and speaking melodiously. As soon as you fragment a sentence, melody comes out from it. To prevent that melody to come out, even if you fragment a sentence, you need a certain amount of skill. There you have to change the graph of your voice - if I tell it in usual terms, the voice should come at the upper part of the graph, and not the lower part. Then only the melody disappears. The melody comes out if it is not done. They are not learning this underplay in those mega serials. It is not at all necessary there. There - what should I say - actors are cannon fodder. They are brought there to do this much of work in a single day - they are only fed with the dialogues. What kind of acting they are doing - no one bothers. That is why I said that the atmosphere is lacking - that is the truth. You see, when these actors and actresses are working in Rituparno's (Ghosh) film, how are they acting relatively better ?

**Anasua :** Competence of the director ?

**Soumitra :** Yes. Competence of the director - he has the ability to point out - he points out that - don't fragment a sentence so many times, you speak it in a single course, and so on. In our times the directors could also show how to act. Of course, there were many directors who used to say - "Dada, you do as you like". Bhanu-Jahar used to get the directions to create a funny situation, and then the directors themselves would break into bouts of laughter. They just did not know how to direct Bhanu-Jahar. But they were not the majority...they were the exceptions. But the majority of the directors did know this... in their own way. It did not always match with me, and I found it a little backward in style, but that was a very valid method. That atmosphere is lost. Now, even in the institutions, would there be any provision for learning these things ? In the newly erected Satyajit Ray Institute, there is no provision for acting. The course at Pune has also been closed. But you think of that crop of Pune - that magnificent crop - that boy, Navin Nishchol...he was also a good actor - many of them were fairly good actors, not all of them were brilliant like Naseer or Om (Puri), but standard enough - then there was Jalal Agha, the son of Agha Sahib - he was also a good actor. But there is no certainty that good actors will definitely come out of these institutions. You see, the private institutions here - the people who are teaching there, particularly some, are really very good - they are at least eminent in their fields - for instance, Gyaneshda or some others who taught there - there is no reason for not learning anything from them. But the thing is lacking from the very atmosphere.

**Anasua :** In fact, what you were saying - instead of passion towards acting, a showmanship is...

**Soumitra :** More than showmanship. Only money - earning money. I don't understand why they cannot make them coincide. Showmanship, earning money, self-expression and creation of art - all these can be coincided. There is this facility in this profession. Didn't I have the necessity of money ? But, I can tell you firmly that I haven't chased it. It always feels good when you get money. The need for money remains there all the time. Whenever I got the chance to earn or get money, I did earnestly cling to that. But that doesn't mean that the whole of my concern



was taken by it. In fact, now I feel sorry that today I also have to go to the studio with the hope of getting the envelope at the end of the day. I work only for money now. Because there is nothing else for which I can work. What is there except money in these films ?

**Anasua :** Challenge of good acting in bad films...?

**Soumitra :** It's very rare to find a good piece of acting in a bad film..

I'm not saying that it is absolutely absent - many would say that it is a fallacy, but it is not at all so. There are many kinds of acting that you can find in different films. A remarkable performance can be there in a very bad film. Take for instance...I don't know whether I should call it a bad film if I see it now, I have seen it long back - 'Chiriakhana'. Of all the film of Ray, I found it the most disappointing in respect of his talent. If I see it now, I might just feel that it is brilliant. There is always a possibility of reassessment. At that time I found it bad - but aren't there some remarkable pieces of acting in it ? First of all, there is a truly fantastic acting by Sushil Majumdar in that film. A very good acting is there by Jahar Ganguly, even Chinmay Roy acted well, and an outstanding performance by Uttamkumar. I would not say technically, but stylistically, from the aspect of style, the acting by Uttamkumar was even better in 'Chiriakhana' than that in 'Nayak'. How great a born actor he is, one can see it in 'Chiriakhana'. Working only in one film with Ray, he had been able to grasp his concept of acting. The same was done in 'Chiriakhana', and from then on, the style of his acting had changed - the act of throwing his voice in an undertone had developed and was demonstrated first in that film, 'Chiriakhana'. How amazing it is to see he had adopted this style only working in one film with Ray, which was 'Nayak'. No doubt, he was then a profoundly experienced actor, and his control over his craft was so excellent that he had been able to grasp it quite easily. It's a great quality of an actor, isn't it ?

**Anasua :** Definitely !

**Soumitra :** Much better than in 'Nayak'. In that film, Ray had used only his talent to a great extent.

**Anasua :** Yes. His image of a successful star...

**Soumitra :** Yes. But in 'Chiriakhana' you see, he had done it pretty consciously, such acting of a thoughtful person like 'Byomkesh' - Uttamkumar is thinking deeply - calm - cool and quiet - silent - speaking in a lower pitch - this kind of acting have been rarely found so far.. without any flamboyance !

**Anasua :** Present day cinema are also content-wise very ...

**Soumitra :** Really - it's a great crisis - prevailing in the whole world. Just for instance you see, there are so many films that are being produced in Hollywood by using sophisticated hi-fi technology, but what are all these basically ? There is nothing called human element! They are all the same - Star war has been started - an insect, an alien or something like that is descending - there is a fight going on...there are various horrible scenes, creating suspense - but the basic suspense is really missing - that kind of suspense we have already felt in 'King Kong' or in many other films in the past. Hollywood now deals only with these, and nothing more.

**Anasua :** In this context do you feel that cinema as a medium has come to a threshold where it is facing a challenge for its existence as a whole at the end of this century ?

**Soumitra :** Yes. Because, cinema has to compete with video, so it's now being a burning question - either it has to absorb video, or get absorbed in video. It is a question of survival, you know.

**Anasua :** Do you think that the survival is possible this way ?

**Soumitra :** I don't know. No doubt, it's very difficult, hut maybe...

**Anasua :** Computerisation in cinema, which owes its origin mainly to Hollywood, where things have been more and more computerised, don't you feel that cinema is losing its very essence ?

**Soumitra :** Almost so. But at the same time, in case of Spielberg, undoubtedly a genius of a technician, when he tells a story on the screen, he can create a successful entertainment. Just think of 'Jurassic Park', a film almost like 'King Kong' ! How beautifully he created such thrilling moments ! Just see, at the beginning, when the helicopter descends on a valley between the two mountains,

how wonderful the scene is ! Everybody feels astonished and charmed ! Again, when that same person makes 'Schindler's List', he can easily handle an extremely serious theme. So it will finally depend, either in the case of cinema in general, or in the case of Bengali cinema, it will all finally depend on the advent of the makers and the directors. If those who are gifted, those who have visions, those who have literary and artistic sensibility, come to make films, certainly they will be able to achieve success or to reach the top through this set-up only.

**Anasua.:** Most of your contemporary actors who were your friends also, have expired already....

**Soumitra :** Yes, a large number of them passed away.

**Anasua :** So - you told earlier that you don't feel like working in this atmosphere of the Bengali film industry. What exactly is the environment around you ?

**Soumitra :** Oh ! Sometimes I myself can't understand how is the condition around me. I can just say that there is one or two who are my contemporaries, for example Subhendu, slightly junior to me, and Dilip Roy, slightly senior to me - our relationship with the present generation is very cordial - that much I can tell you. All of them are very respectful, at least to me. In all our welfare activities, if they want to collect money or something like that, they always want me to stay with them. It's okay, but how they interact and socialise with each other - that's the Question. Our kind of relationship is missing somewhere. They just behave like colleagues working in any other field. But I think something much more than this was present in our times. And at present I feel there is a lack of background of something... I should say, aesthetic...I mean...

**Anasua :** Cultural background ?

**Soumitra :** Yes, cultural. Culturally, these people, in fact most of them have no... you see, most of the Bengalis like to listen to music, even to sing, at least they have some interest in music. But these are mostly superficial. They never feel eager to know the thing deeply, or to know the history of it and so on...they don't know, I'm sure. They don't go to see the painting exhibitions. They rarely read books. It is very sad. You have to act with your 'language' - so you have to know literature, so

at least you must have that sense. Even Uttamkumar engaged himself in reading novels, for the sake of cinema only. He used to read a large number of Bengali novels, and sometimes in English too... to pick out suitable stories for adaptation, you know.

**Anasua :** Regarding these, we are facing a total decay in this generation as a whole.

**Soumitra :** And now a days you don't have to read anything -everything is visual. It's amazing that everything is intending to go towards specialisation. I'm not happy about it, rather I cannot accept it. Suppose Manik Bandopadhyay, really a class novelist, but nobody is interested in reading his works today. His readership is restricted to those who are the students of Bengali literature or who have specific inclination towards it. They are aware that Manik Bandopadhyay- a world class laureate- is worth reading, and they read him. They are obviously a small section of people. Even if you comb the entire Bengal, you'll hardly find a few thousand people who are specifically interested in Manik Bandopadhyay. But that time, when he was writing, things were different. Not the college teachers -I mean - not only the college teachers but common housewives also were waiting eagerly for his latest novel in the special Puja edition. That was an event, they were very keen about it. They would finish their cooking, would send their kids to the school and then would sit relaxing and start to read that book. These people, this sort of readers, they are the main bulk of culture. And we, as a nation, have come a long way away from this. So, this is not an exclusive happening of film only.

**Anasua :** What is your assessment about television media?

**Soumitra :** Problem is, you cannot just deny all these. This development - you have to accept it, you have to bear with it. Pete Seeger, you know, told me one thing -I met him in a programme here two years back- he told me, "we are now in a peculiar standpoint where today's technological progress has opened up its vast and astounding potentiality in front of us. We are venturing into outer space, we are experiencing so many things, but, at the same time, this same technological progress is playing an important role in consumerism - it's forcing us to buy commodities- one after another. You cannot help being fascinated by their ecstatic

grandeur.” Even when I myself find an Opel Astra or a Mercedes on road, I am bound to stare at it. What a beauty of a machine ! But still, we have to be conscious enough - Pete Seeger told me the same thing - “we have to be alert about it’s use, to what extent we can apply technology and beyond what we should not go”. You see, there is a very thin line between use and misuse, and we have to know when we must stop. I would rather prefer to keep aside all technological progress if it hurts humanity. When technology is being used only and only for the sake of consumerism and profit generation, can it, by anyway, be helpful to humanity and to the development of human civilisation? No. You have to think about all these. Ultimately if you are an artist or if you have any concern for human condition, human progress, human existence - then we have to think that to what extent this technology is truly beneficial for our advancement, and how much is superficial in it. Same thing you can say about TV. Our culture, I mean, our culture of today is a mess, a real hotpotch, an uprooted one. In the last 200 years, we have been letting this happen and till date we could not break the vicious stranglehold of that slavish mentality and culture. Earlier we, the Indians, imitated the sahibs and now we are doing the same of those ‘Hindiwalas’, those people from the cow-belt. These films that are being made there - I’m telling you sincerely-I really feel disturbed. Those actors and actresses- they are nice looking, they have the control over their body, they are gesturing very skilfully to create what do you say... sexual titillation -I don’t mind- but tell me one thing, who are they ? Are they representing our country ? Our people ? They talk and sing in a hotchpotch language, they sing ‘Sexy sexy sexy mujhe... etc. Is this a song from India ? This is not even an English song, it does not belong to anybody. What is this ? The people they are representing through these songs - to which region do they belong ? What is their address ? Where do they work ? These all are absent in those films. They are all synthetic products. They are alienated from the mainstream of the people of our country. It may be possible that the people are seeing these things in the cinema halls or the televisions and video-parlour, and getting a momentary pleasure out of it. But that pleasure can be derived even by having a chocolate ! When you go to the saloon and ask for a massage, it also gives you that pleasure, but is it really necessary for your basic health? For your health, what is needed is a pollution free

atmosphere. Anyway, I think I'm talking rubbish. There was a letter to the editor of 'Aajkal', written by two boys. They want to watch Discovery and National Geographic channel in TV but cannot, as their parents are only interested in those Hindi songs and dance. They appealed to raise mass opinion in their favour. I never could bring myself to think that anybody could voice such protests at all ! Another letter with almost same content was published nearly within 15 days. So, its a good sign ! Somebody is out there, vibrant, alive ! Saying - OK, if I have to watch TV, I'll go for Discovery or National Geographic which can broaden my knowledge."

**Anasua :** Let's talk about some other things. Do you improvise on your acting while shooting?

**Soumitra :** Well, yes, definitely there as a scope of improvisation in my process of acting - but not during shooting . What I do, even in my stage acting, I make a basic structure- not only for a single shot but as a whole. It's bit sketchy and often vague, but it helps. I add something more during acting which comes from my impulse and experience and I rely on it. If I can think this beforehand, then that basic structure does not look that vague and often it takes a specific form. And in rehearsal, I work out the minute details, add one or two more elements so that a shot does not lose it's richness. But, you know, improvisation can be planned and simultaneously can be spontaneous for me...

**Anasua :** You consult with the director before the shot?

**Soumitra :** Yes. If I think I will do something specific to add a meaning or dimension to the shot, then I talk to the director that, look, I'm doing this here. And, generally, we agree on that. But, if I start doing lots of new things within a shot for improvisation, so that my co-actor is puzzled and will be in a real soup. I don't want to do that. If anything special strikes me even within the shot, I cut the shot- it's an advantage, you know - consult with my co-actor and retake it.

**Anasua :** One shot is there in Samapti - I noted it specially- you were having your meal and a cat came suddenly. Offering some food, you told it - "Take this, cat...". Was that an improvisation done by you ?

**Soumitra :** Not exactly. That was the instruction by Ray. I don't know whether it was there in the script or not, but the idea to keep that cat within the shot was his. The cat was familiar to him . He told me to give the food and to tell that particular dialogue.

**Anasua :** That particular gesture and dialogue suit you so well, it seems that it is yours. Earlier you were talking about concentration on acting before the shot and that it is the reason why make-up is important to you. Apart from this, can you tell me how you prepare yourself... the dialogue sheets...

**Soumitra :** Well, it's difficult to get the dialogue sheets in every shooting for preparation. But, if it's a serious film, they often give the script one or two days earlier. At least, I have to know the dialogue before entering the set. Generally what I do is, when I sit for make-up, I call the assistant and ask him to read out the dialogue and the scene. If the film is a good one and the director is serious, I get the dialogue sheet earlier. Even if I do not get it, I usually have the script, and prepare myself likewise and before shooting, I only ask about the particular shot we are going to take. That all depends on what sort of film you're working. There are several cases where I even don't get the script. But still, for a bad, third graded film also, I want the dialogues before entering the floor.

**Anasua :** And, definitely, you don't memorise dialogues ?

**Soumitra :** No, no. Rather I cannot do that. If it's a long one, I read it several times, that too within the floor. I tell them I'll practice it during rehearsal. It's better for me. Ray also told me, don't practice. That kills your spontaneity. And not only that, I think, he might also have felt some difficulty. And what is the problem of the director ? What happens, you know, when I am trying to memorise a dialogue, naturally I'm acquiring a particular tone, a particular gesture, a specific throwing of words. The director may not like that, he may require some other tune, different gesture. That's why Ray did not prefer it. "Memorise it during work, within the actual process" ...he used to say. Not that he never told me to memorise. Like, during the shooting of Ghare Baire, he wanted to take the speech in a single shot and he asked me to memorise it. But, then, I was more matured and experienced.

**Anasua :** Tell me how you prepared yourself physically for the acting or, do you do the same even now?

**Soumitra :** Physical activities which you have to do for a particular character, I learn or acquire those when I confront that character. Say for example, horse-riding or using a wheelchair, these are physical activities which I had to learn. But, when I was learning, I surprisingly noticed one thing. This very activity of riding a horse or a wheelchair helps me to an extent to form an insight in to the character that I'm doing. Why I'm telling this is that, I can perceive the world from a different angle of vision, which is not there for a person standing on the ground. Often it's very mobile. I can acquire a certain psychological gesture, which was characteristic of Mayurbahan, who rode a horse in 'Jhinder Bandi'. When I'm using a wheelchair, I'm in the position of a man who is absolutely dependent on it. He is unable to experience the world excluding that and his vision is always low in angle, and he has to look at everybody from below. You can feel a person from that angle too. Physical approach to a character's delineation is very important. And if I can do that correctly, then only I embark upon a trip to his mental world. That way it's possible to build up these sorts of physical activities. And, I feel, as a professional actor, it is my responsibility to keep my body physically malleable, strong, flexible and fit. The body is very much important for an actor. To keep it fit, you have to exercise, you have to swim or play games...

**Anasua :** Do you do all these even now ?

**Soumitra :** Right now I cannot do much. I had to stop playing, and I had to leave swimming too, due to a problem in my ear. Everyday I go for a morning walk only, and do a few exercises, mainly orthopaedic I try to keep myself fit as much as possible.

**Anasua :** And what about the voice?

**Soumitra :** Well, you have to train it slowly. Some are gifted by nature, some are gifted genetically. By nature their voice boxes are excellent. As for example, Robin Majumdar and his sister Gouri Ghosh - I often pull her leg, your voice is so rich only because you're Robinda's sister. This gift may be there. But a total actor can



not live only with it. He has to train his voice to deliver a wide range of emotions and expressions. In our stage theatre... what can I say... we have few vocabularies, one of which is that a voice gets its height by three octaves. Sisirbabu often told "My voice can play within three octaves". After that I tried to do the same, like, from one 'Sa' to another 'Sa' then again another 'Sa'. That means, I consider my normal voice as the middle octave and then try to acquire the other two. This I had to teach myself gradually.

**Anasua :** How?

**Soumitra :** It's a very indigenous method, mostly self-made. I used to do that with a harmonium - even till 5-6 years back I did it. I practised the sargam not according to the tune, but in a straight voice. That means, I took up a stanza from a poem or anything, and, keeping the voice steady, recited it on that particular scale, say 'Sa'. I repeated the process with 're', and then 'ga', and so on till I ended with three octaves. But it was not earlier than that when I realised it. I was able to control my voice at times, but there were occasions when I failed too. I did not realise that it was the power of the breathing which controlled the voice, I did not know how to raise the full voice, It choked when on a higher scale. Now a days, my voice goes up wherever I take it. The sense develops at some point of time. I spent a few days with my friends and acquaintances in the mid 60s in Germany. A few of them took lessons in Opera singing from there. I grew the idea to project the full voice from them... that this was the way to project the full voice without suppressing it. That was the control and use of the breathing power. I can do it since.

**Anasua :** Can you sing?

**Soumitra :** Well, I never learnt it.

**Anasua :** I'm not talking of that...formal training.

**Soumitra :** To some extent each and every Bengali can sing. Those bathroom songs and...

**Anasua :** About you, is it with proper tune?

**Soumitra :** May be not to the perfect tune -I don't know - may be I don't know the exact tune for all the songs. But I can tell you, earlier I practised song for acting only so that the voice didn't get older with age.

**Anasua :** And do you think it's essential to have music sense to lip with the background songs?

**Soumitra :** Obviously it matters. That's why Uttamkumar was so perfect in it - frankly, I never found anybody else better. Well, I may be accused for my special inclination towards him. But... wait...yes, two other actors were there but they were primarily singers. They had the formidable training of a singer. One is, we know, Robin Majumdar and the other person is Nitish Mukhopadhyay -all of us have forgot that he was a singer and he joined the industry as a playback singer. That's why he used to lip so well. Another guy was there- Samit Bhanja- he too had a talent of singing. As usual, like everywhere, he wasted himself. But, Uttamkumar, he was quite capable of singing and he sang quite well. Originally, you know, he was the music teacher of his wife. From there only, they fell in love and finally got married.

**Anasua :** How important is it for an actor to be acquainted with film technology - especially camera?

**Soumitra :** At least he should know essentially what a camera is - otherwise it's a big trouble. And moreover, he must have the sense of what the camera does in cinema. It's a recorder through which your acting is being communicated to the audience - he has to keep this in mind. Acting is basically nothing but a mode of communication. And the camera establishes the actor in different perspectives - sometime within a room, sometime on mountains or near a sea. So...I will be careful about the position of the camera - like how far it is from me, how much of my body is within the frame - and I will act accordingly. If it's a close-up shot, then I have to be careful to be in-frame and this sort of things. You have to restrain your expression in acting. See, now a camera is capable to come even closer. So, in a romantic scene if I try to give a broad smile then it will look as if a demon is grinning in the screen. And naturally I have to control my smile and prefer under acting... That understanding should be there in an actor. One more thing he

should keep in mind that all the shots, taken by a camera, create the film through editing. Editing is the basic of cinema and it follows, that I have to understand editing to some extent.

**Anasua :** Did you learn all these through experience?

**Soumitra :** Yes. And I think I told you about Ray....

**Anasua :** About that single night?

**Soumitra :** O yes! I learnt a lot in a single night.

**Anasua :** It's a real drawback of today's actors - isn't it?

**Soumitra :** No, not really. They learn from their work. What happens, they work for 5-10 years, they act in more than hundred films, so... it's at least something. Finally when they come in film direction, somehow they manage these things. You will never find any perfection of story, any philosophy of life or vision or any artistic flavour in their film but they do not make silly mistakes. They have some idea about when they can go for a close shot or when they will track. But nothing more. They lack the idea of meaningful use of shots. A shot in a film is similar to a word in literature. You have to use that meaningfully, with creativity and that is the sign of an artist or a film-maker. We judge him through his work. These people, they cannot reach there, but they at least know something about a shot.

**Anasua :** From silent era to Talkies and then Satyajit Ray - there is an evolution of Bengali cinema. Do you feel that it's possible to make a graph of this?

**Soumitra :** It's tough, it's really tough. I think I told you earlier also, that some patterns were there in the acting of .. say, Jogesh Choudhury or Manoranjan Bhattacharya which had some resemblance with today's style of acting. Sort of collective control, dedicated towards stylistic method. These have been started from Ray's films. But it's not being followed properly. And that is the problem.

**Anasua :** Is it not true that your acting in Ray's films has generated a new trend in acting in Bengali cinema like those films did as a whole..?

**Soumitra :** I'm not in a position to say that, isn't it? Those people who are closely watching Bengali cinema for few decades, they can tell you.

**Anasua :** I mean to say, your acting has followed a definite tradition...

**Soumitra :** Yes, true - but, I must say, I have only extended that trend and carried it to such an extent that.... well.... may be no one else did it in Bengali cinema. That I can tell you without being too modest.

**Anasua :** I wanted to know that only.

**Soumitra :** Still, I really don't know how many people have benefited from that - I have great doubts. But when Nasiruddin opined that I'm his inspiration in Indian cinema, then it's something to me. It's not only a personal item of satisfaction, it's an assessment too. I can understand that my effort has achieved something.

**Anasua :** This is a question out of curiosity. As you went to Sisir Bhaduri to learn something, does anybody, any actor or actress of today, come to you with the same intention?

**Soumitra :** Why not? But it's totally inconsequential. Suppose, I'm sitting somewhere or I've gone to some place, suddenly one guy comes and tells me - I'm a great admirer of yours. Oh! If I could learn something from you! Does it make any sense? This is absolutely inconsequential.

**Anasua :** Those people who are already in acting - what about them?

**Soumitra :** Some people are there who watch my shot. But mostly they are so professional that they don't bother. During my shots, they go outside for either a chat or a smoke. Or may be to talk through a cell-phone!

**Anasua :** No, I'm not talking about that. Does no one come as a student?

**Soumitra :** No. Still, when I work on stage I take initiative to teach one or two people. If I feel they have that potential, I always have taken an initiative to teach them. My co-actor, may be he is a novice, I try to point out his faults, obviously if he is willing to listen. I tell him listen, don't do it this way - better do this - correct yourself - add proper emotion to the dialogue- hand movement will be like this etc. See, these are the things you have to absorb continuously.

There is a book called 'Jungle Lore' by Jim Corbett, in which he said that the jungle-craft, which involves knowing the forest, its dangers, its labyrinth...cannot

be just put into a capsule and fed to someone. This he said when he was taken to train the commandos of the allied forces in the 2nd world war, who were supposed to traverse the jungles of Burma and the eastern front in the course of the war. It has to be learned and absorbed in little doses throughout life. If suppose I hear a bird singing everyday, and suddenly I ponder over the question that why does it sing at that very part of the day, it is only then that I shall come to know that that bird has a life, and there are factors like mating, nesting and laying eggs that are part of it. It is only then that my knowledge will extend to ornithology. This does not come through reading of books. The same is in the case of acting. It has to be absorbed. I am stressing on this all the more because of all the performing arts, acting is an independent one. In case of the other performing arts like singing, for example, you have a notation or a guidance to follow and learn. It is there in a systematic manner. The same with dancing - there too you follow certain postures, and certain stepping through which you can depict the expression. But there is nothing like this in the case of acting. In that sense, acting is like a fresh page among the performing arts. Of course there are certain basics - raising and lowering of the voice, modulation of the voice, putting emphasis on the words and letters, and control over the volume etc. But there are myriad of other things too. Those have to be absorbed slowly through experience. No director can tell you how to use which part of the craft and where. That responsibility is on the actor. That is his creation, and he is the master of it.

**Anasua :** (Alfred) Hitchcock once said that the shots in a silent movie are much more meaningful than those in talkies. Almost the same thing was said by Ray later. Hitchcock said that the same thing, which he termed as 'pure', becomes somewhat less meaningful, in the case of talkies. In this respect, what is your impression about acting?

**Soumitra :** Well, yes. To me, silent movie is almost a different art medium. It's different from Talkies in the same way like a miniature and a big oil painting. It is a separate genre. In a silent movie, I can not get the help of words and dialogues. I have to communicate through expressions and gestures - which creates different sort of idiom - Mudra - like dance....

**Anasua :** A bit abstract?

**Soumitra :** Yes, you can say so.

**Anasua :** But can it be said that the acting in Talkies is less meaningful?

**Soumitra :** You mean, Talkies have become less meaningful?

**Anasua :** I think they meant to say that.

**Soumitra :** No, I don't think so. After the emergence of sound movies, the concept of film has been changed. A new film language has been developed. Say for example, I can use a wonderful voice only in a sound movie and this reflection is not possible in a silent film. So, every art medium has its own limitations. And the challenge is, to overcome it.

**Anasua :** Acting is the illusion of Reality....

**Soumitra :** But then almost all arts are like that.

**Anasua :** So., will you please explain where Naturalism and Realism can juxtapose in acting and where can not ?

**Soumitra :** Reality is an important factor in acting. Primarily in acting, we imitate the human behaviour pattern. When I act as an insane, definitely I don't become crazy! I'm creating an illusion of a reality of someone else, a semblance of a reality. When I work in a romantic scene, I don't fall in love with the actress - at least not always! It's possible to be created an emotional bridge between the actor and the actress, but that is a mere accident. It's not an essential necessity of that particular scene and the acting is a representation only. I'm representing a lover. I'm not loving myself in order to represent. I have to understand that lover - that I'm understanding like any other art worker from own experiences, from my imaginations, from whatever I've seen in my life of lovers. So this is the thing - illusion, that an actor is creating. Why am I creating an illusion of Reality? Just to capture the Reality through illusion. If Reality of an art - I'm not talking about Naturalism - does not contain the reality of human existence, it never can achieve a superior grade. Thakumar Jhooli - it's totally an imagination - fantasy. But still, why it's an art? It conveys some basic reality of human existence through fantasy.

And good, bad, evils are being treated within the stories. It's so simple! A prince is going to travel the whole world. Crossing Seven Seas and numerous rivers, he is reaching the land of demons. Apparently it's very simple but if you think about it, you'll find that the stories are revealing the basic human inclination towards travelling and adventure. You can understand the reality.

**Anasua :** So, if anybody can perform this representation normally, can we call it Naturalistic acting?

**Soumitra :** Yes, this is nothing but a difference of external style. We can rather compare this with painting. Impressionists - they are not painting with realistic lines like Rubens or Holderlin. But their paintings express the essential reality of various realistic things, like - a river, a port, a boat is waiting, a man is fishing and all these. And in cubism, you see, the style has been totally changed. Say for example, the famous Run of Picasso. He is capturing the joy of run, the rhythm and speed of run - may be in a different style but expressing the same reality. Acting is also like that - you can do a thing in several different styles. In Jatra if I speak naturalistically, it will not be fair enough to the audience. So, I have to add some dramatic tone and emphasis to create a particular ambience. Only through this, I can convey those larger-than-life characters of Jatra to the common human being. So that they can feel the love and passion, good and bad, grief and joy of life.

**Anasua :** You told earlier that from the very beginning you had an inclination towards naturalism. And you had to rather learn about stylisation.

**Soumitra :** That's true, but I cannot tell you off-hand what I learned in which movie. Suppose Jhinder Bandi - basically the style is same and in spite of that I had to think about it with imagination. A bit larger-than-life -- a fantasy— reflected on gestures of the character. These things you have to learn. I have learnt these gradually. May be I can do that better now. My age will not permit me now but I would be happy if I could act in the role of Mayurbahan. Now I could do that stylisation more successfully.

**Anasua :** Exactly where lies the importance of stylisation in acting?

**Soumitra :** It's difficult to say. That depends on the script. You have seen Wheel Chair? There I wanted to apply something different which I've experienced in my life. How a person consoles somebody, what he does, how he tries to boost the moral of the other man - all I've seen in my life and that I tried to put on the character. But that level of acting cannot be reached with that particular character if the acting was overtly naturalistic. There has to be a bit of stylisation... it almost reaches to a level of recitation.

**Anasua :** You wanted to create the situation a bit unreal?

**Soumitra :** Unreal....yes.. you can say...that it does not belong to the reality of day to day life...

**Anasua :** Like your character in Babu Moshai?

**Soumitra :** Yes, exactly.

**Anasua :** In which aspect you will describe Mayurbahan as unreal?

**Soumitra :** See, those sort of hero or villain or their stories are beyond my experience. I do not think these characters and their time still exist in India. If you go back to search in History, you may find them in Mughal period or at the early British rule. Maybe then they fought duels or were habituated in fencing. All these, I had to create out of my imagination and I had to go beyond reality.

**Anasua :** Often we find mannerism in acting . Do you think it follows from the exaggeration of stylisation or it can happen in a naturalistic acting also?

**Soumitra :** Yes, it's highly possible to find mannerism in naturalistic acting also. When an actor stops experimenting with his craft, he gets infected by mannerism. He starts repeating the same thing doing which he once got good response.

**Anasua :** Do you think Shambhu Mitra is mannered in the same way?

**Soumitra :** Of course. His wonderful diction and the throwing of his voice, that particular way of talking, his amazing clarity - all he used and got such a result that he was not able to quit it. He desperately tried to cling to that - never improvised himself. So his nasalisation, his tendency to put emphasis on particular



words or expressions became his life-long companion. Finally it turned to mannerism.

**Anasua :** And that downgrades the acting?

**Soumitra :** Obviously. I don't know whether I've told you or not, that, to my assessment, Shambhu Mitra is the nearest approximation of a great actor in our time, particularly in theatre, not in cinema. And that is their end - he is the nearest approximation but not a great actor. On stage I had seen so many great actors like Sisir Kumar Bhaduri, Manoranjan Bhattacharya, Jogesh Choudhury, Tulsi Lahiri, Tulsi Chakraborty etc. You can never visualise their craft. I often compare Shambhu Mitra to them with a particular example. Shambhu Mitra is like an aeroplane - you'll be charmed by its beauty - you'll wonder about its mechanical perfection and the knowledge behind it. And these actors are like birds. Watching them you can only say 'Wow!' But actually a bird has more sophisticated machines in its body. It's a result of several thousands of years' evolution from reptile to bird. Every limb of it is full of machines. But we cannot see those, we only watch it flying. This example is not mine. In his "Bageshwari Shilpa Prabandhaabali", Abanindranath wrote this in a different perspective when he was explaining the definition of 'beauty'.

**Anasua :** From 1959 to 99 - how will you narrate the evolution of your acting in these 40 years?

**Soumitra :** How it's possible for me to estimate that?

**Anasua :** At least some kind of understanding you have.

**Soumitra :** No, I cannot do that always. I think, mostly it happened spontaneously. To tell you the truth, initially I tried to make my acting more life-like so that it does not seem like acting and the viewers can feel that the character is a slice of life. In fact, I succeeded to do it long ago. For the rest of my life, may be I have tried to explain the human essence more and more through my acting. And considering the acting - or this body - as a canvas of painting, I have intended to enrich it with more detail. During acting, I always think to be active and vibrant within a shot. It does not mean that I roll my eyes or curl my eyebrows in a shot in

which I suppose to not to do that. But my eyes should be always expressive and lively, not blank like dead. In this aspect I've transformed my acting. Even now I try to do something new. I want to break a sentence and want to twist it generally it happens in normal life - to make it more natural. Initially when an actor does not have much experience, he feels some kind of physical tension and it comes out through his acting. Now I try to do acting with less physical movement. Say for example, you are listening to me for such a long time but without much physical movement. May be once or twice you're shaking your head or asking me something. I observe all these and assimilate within me. I want to twist those words meaningfully; I try to use various body movements significantly in my acting just to reach closer to life.

**Anasua :** Once you wrote “ I search the inner truth of acting..”. What do you mean by that?

**Soumitra :** That is the truth of life. I search the truth of life within acting. It's not easy enough. One classic allegory of this, is 'Roshomon'. A single truth but perceptions are different to different people. For example, in human relationship - me and my lover are strongly attracted to each other - the chemistry of love is operating between ourselves. But can we reach to an arrived truth? It happens that I start thinking 'why she told me that? Is she trying to avoid me?' On the other hand she is thinking “I never meant to say that. Why cannot I make it clear?” This is the truth. You will find this contradiction in almost all the aspects of life. From that point of view, finally contradiction is the truth.

When Rabindranath was seriously ill, he told someone - most probably to Rani Chanda, I cannot recall properly - that “I have such a burden of fame which really troubles me. I often think that I could have an anonymous life so that nobody knew me. I don't have to present myself as per other's expectation” - something like that. And immediately after that he told “But if somebody comes this afternoon and tells me, Well, I will shake off all your fame and will make you as you desire” , can I be able to accept it? That I'm not the same Rabindranath I used to be?” That is the search for truth - to question the core of your personality, to

understand yourself. Both are true and this is the contradiction of life. Life moves on through this. And it's true for acting also.

**Anasua :** Do you think if a person can handle this contradiction in a better way, he becomes a...

**Soumitra :** Good actor, you mean?

**Anasua :** No. Does he achieve an upliftment as a human being?

**Soumitra :** No. One thing I can tell you that a person who is a failure as a person, can be a good actor. It's possible. But a conscious, successful artist can elate himself through his work. He can sharpen his intelligence, his sensuality and knowledge. Even he can be more sensitive and warm as a human being. If not, then what's the use of so many days' performance? Bradman concluded his first book technically it's a wonderful one - by saying that 'If I have not become a better human being after playing cricket for so many years, then it is no use of playing it'.

**Anasua :** I will ask you one question outside my questionnaire. We often find a lot of people who are not good as individuals, but I cannot deny their competence as artists. How will you explain it?

**Soumitra :** Basically it depends on his personality. If he is your husband or father or son - I'm talking about three essential relations - you will understand him thoroughly as his wife or daughter or mother. And you may find his numerous faults and dark shades of character as a human being. You may not be able to live together and even may hate him. You are absolutely correct in your assessment, but, as an artist he has a totally different world. There he uses his inner good self and fully utilises his sensitivity.

**Anasua :** This good self - can it have any reflection on his personal...

**Soumitra :** He is not capable to control his life as an individual. Artists of superior grade can do that.

**Anasua :** It's a simplified solution.

**Soumitra :** No, this is not a solution. This is his failure. A person like Rabindranath can control his anger, lust or failure and that's why we call him the artist of life -

he can also guide his life that way. But this man, may be, cannot do that. He is not an artist of life, but still, at least he performs. There he puts his best and that much ability he has.

**Anasua :** But does he ever try?

**Soumitra :** May not be.

**Anasua :** How do you feel about it?

**Soumitra :** No, no. I'm not supporting it. I mean to say, maybe he does not try.

**Anasua :** You mean, he may not be able to do it?

**Soumitra :** Well.. yes.... may be he is unable to do. Perhaps he has some mental block. An individual's psychology often becomes very rigid in several things. Personally, one cannot do a few things in spite of one's positive intentions. One may not tolerate a person, physically very close to him in a bus or tram. From my experience and learning of life, I know that it's a better act to offer a seat to a person who is standing. But, frankly, suppose this person cannot... for those mental block, feels irritated if anybody sits beside him and wonders 'why the hell is he sitting beside me only!' - in spite of all learning one may feel like that. It happens, you know, for on one hand, while the training in my life and by my family and schooling gave me a particular grooming on the nicer side, on the other hand there might have been a lesson or two for my subconscious mind too, which has made me stubborn and self-centred. Now it is in the core of my personality. It might have happened long back, but, may be, it is reflecting now at the age of 40.

**Anasua :** Often it's very painful.

**Soumitra :** Certainly. We expect much more from an artist.

**Anasua :** As an artist - what is your idea about the root of an artist? Do you consider the tradition of your acting as your only root?

**Soumitra :** Absolutely not. That is one part of me - only the tip of an iceberg. The other part is my entire life. The place where I was born, the family, that town or village, this country - these are not only heritage of art, these are human traditions too. My language - my mother tongue - it's not a tradition of art, it's an essential

weapon in my struggle for existence - except which I would not be the same person what I am. If somebody can make me forget my language by the touch of a magic-stick, then I will not have my father or mother or a family. For the language only I got those relationships. After birth, my mother has planted the language not only on my lip but also on my conscience. This vast tradition is my root. I have gathered all my experiences of life and my understanding of joy and sorrow through my language. I can remember, in my childhood, I was very much attached to a family next door. On that particular night I was suffering from blood dysentery and my parents were worried about me. Suddenly we heard the sound of moaning from our neighbour's house. My parents exchanged few words between them. That was one of the earliest experience of shock and death in my life and that was communicated to me through language. This language - my mother tongue - is of great worth to me. My root. I belong to this country, this period of time through which I have lived. I've seen those days when they brought a boy on the road and ordered everybody to close their shutters and finally put a bullet into his head. I have seen those days. I have survived those times when a middle-class family like ours had to cope up with rationing system. I used to stand in a queue in front of a grocer's shop with a tiny slip in my hand. And I have seen those people who were pouring into the town from the villages and begging from door to door for a bowl of rice-water. These are my roots. Each and every day of my life I have gone through numerous human relationships - achieved experiences about everything. One day all these roots will dry out - may be, that is at my death. So, tradition of art is not the sole factor to an artist, it mingles with life. And, probably, my inclination to my root is so strong that it has framed my attitude towards art. May be that's why I never tried to work in the film world of Bombay. Language is important to me and I felt that I would not be able to express myself. It's not my language. I know English better than Hindi. I can understand it more - not that I know everything- I feel more comfortable. When an Englishman speaks, I may not understand all but whenever I go to Europe I never feel any trouble to converse with others. And if I have to speak in Hindi for more than a couple of minutes, well, I'm really at a loss. I don't know the language and that was the primary cause. The time when I came in this profession, then no good movies were being made in

Bombay. Later after 10-15 years one movement was there and they started making good films. Initially, that was the reason I did not feel any attraction. 'It's no use of learning the language, they are not making good films' - I thought. I could do the mainstream films - what I'm doing here - and yes, I would be well-paid. I'm telling you, earlier I was a fool about money and I thought money is nothing. From my life I have learnt that how much it matters.

**Anasua :** What is your opinion about the social commitment of an artist?

**Soumitra :** One basic thing should be there that..for whom he is acting. Obviously for the human beings and he is able to do it for hem only. They are appreciating his work and the art has been created from the experiences of human existence, from the observation of humans and human life. In that regard, he can not overlook the society- not in a conventional term, but all artists are social beings, they belong to this society. And particularly a society like ours, which is going through severe crisis in every aspect for last few decades, expects more from an artist that people will understand themselves by his work. Social commitment of an artist emerges from there. He must be aware -I feel - that he cannot do anything which may hamper the social advancement. Because lastly you have to consider some moral codes and value judgements. I think, even if he hurts the society by his activities as an individual, he can not do the same as an artist - he should not encourage those social evils like superstition, racism etc.

**Anasua :** In a mainstream cinema, a character which you are performing, may not preach something harmful but in totality, those films....

**Soumitra :** Yes, true. Unfortunately, in mainstream cinema, we have to face that dichotomy. And it hurts me since long back. I don't mind acting in a villain's character - they are there as a part of life. But our films do not lead to the truth. So in all those fabricated and peculiar stories, they narrate exploitation and suppression prevailing in our society. In most of the films, they demand to protest against these but indirectly propagate to accept it. The concept of peaceful co-existence with a ruthless, superstitious oppressor finally emerges at the end of the film. This is really difficult to accept. But.... this is my profession - I cannot to anything else - even if I can, I've chosen this and I don't know the escape-route.

**Anasua :** Do you face lot of contradictions with yours ideas ?

**Soumitra :** Obviously. And it pains me. Earlier I could recover from it, Because I had an opportunity to work in a number of good films - not only in Ray's films but some of others also. Those films were truly progressive. Now that kind of films are numbered and psychologically, I feel tired - it troubles me. I have survived through this as I can work in my own way in stage. In last couple of year's, I've faced another crisis due to the closure of public theatre.

**Anasua :** About self-assimilation of an actor with a role and self-detachment from it. Will you please explain this?

**Soumitra :** Again this has two aspects. When I think of a character, in my mind I consciously create it with my experience, judgement and analysis. But when I actually execute it in acting, I can not do it consciously. I have to detach myself from it. Then the character, which I built in my mind, is being executed through my body and my voice. I have to establish that concept of it. And I've developed a spontaneous expression. If I become self conscious, the acting can not be convincing enough. Especially in the case of a character which is not apparently homogeneous to me. But it definitely has some fundamental human emotions which are similar. Suppose in "Agradani"- my social background or education or social identity is unlike to that character. But his fundamental emotion of fatherhood is common to all. Then I have to give preference to those emotions and inner feelings rather than my analysis and judgement. This is self-detachment.

**Anasua :** Regarding cerebral acting, Ray once told that you act cerebrally and Uttamkumar is spontaneous. Do you think it's possible to differentiate in this way?

**Soumitra :** I don't think that it's possible. No successful actor can do it either way. Chaplin once told about acting that if cerebration and the richness of emotion do not co-exist in an actor than it's not possible to be a good actor. I think you need both of these two. Cerebration or cerebral acting - I'm telling you frankly -I don't know what it exactly means. Does is mean to approach acting with intelligence? Then all actors do that. An actor may not have so called education or formal training, but while acting he, definitely applies his brain. Otherwise, it's not

possible. Of course, an artist can develop his craft further if he has the potential of cultural consciousness. When Sisir Kumar performed in a historical drama “Digbijoe” his consciousness and understanding of history helped to create the character more complete. If someone can not do that, then it’s a difference of competence. But, in general, it’s not possible to differentiate acting in these two categories - cerebral and spontaneous. At least I’m not a spontaneous actor and..yes.. I’m not a cerebral actor also. I’m a combination of these two.

**Anasua :** What about Uttamkumar?

**Soumitra :** I think it’s the same to him also...

**Anasua :** In Uttamkumar, we find a typical Bengali image which is very dominant. In your style of acting, that Bengali image is there but with this, some thing more, some thing smart I mean, a bit urban...bit international....Does this follow from your cultural background?

**Soumitra :** If it s there may be it comes from the way I made it....but... I’m not the best judge of it. If you talk about Bengali image, my language is one factor. It’s typically Bengali. I tried to acquire the truly sophisticated Bengali dialect which has come through Rabindranath, Sisir Kumar etc. So, may be that sophistication has been reflected in me. Another thing. An actor’s cultural environment, his education, life style, his background - all can be reflected in his life-long performance. If an actor keeps himself far away from education and books, he can never perform in a role of a teacher properly irrespective of his capability as an actor. But if I’m interested in books, I can feel the mental world of those people who keep themselves busy with reading and learning. I may not be that academic but I’ll understand them. So, if an actor can increase his level of experience, that helps him a lot. If you know the intellectual life of our country, that gives you a different kind of advantage. When I act in a role of a painter or a violinist, I have to learn the fingering of a violinist or how to make a stroke of a brush. You can learn it, but if I don't have an artist’s mind, I will fail to understand the inner world of a violinist or a painter. So you have to be open to everything, you have to expand yourself and that is a must for an actor.



**Anasua :** You were talking about pronunciation. Have you practised it or it comes naturally to you?

**Soumitra :** Some practice was definitely there. I noticed it later that when I used to speak in my childhood to my family, some words were overlapped - or tail dropped - and, you know, that was a particular style of our family. So everybody could notice - 'O, you're from that Chattopadhyay family!' It happens. But as a conscious professional actor, I had to make a specific style of speaking, a particular diction. It's very much flexible. It can be of a villager or of an educated, rich urban individual or of a factory worker or a farmer. I can learn this only from the original mode of pronunciation of Bengali. Like acting, I also went on with my recitation and there you need perfect pronunciation - without a single personal or regional touch. Fortunately, we learnt standard Bengali pronunciation from theatre. In Britain they learn from BBC but we don't have that opportunity. In my time it was possible to learn from theatre - their pronunciation was really good. In my family also - my grandparents and my father - they were also good in it.

**Anasua :** When you talk spontaneously, I have noticed that you speak with an accent which is typical of the 'Ghotis' (West Bengal).

**Soumitra :** Yes, and I did not omit it purposely from my common conversation. If I wish, I can change it. When I recite, I definitely don't do that! And, it helps me to keep my feet firmly on my own land. Otherwise, if I always speak that clearly, I feel that somehow, I'm being detached from the majority of the people.

**Anasua :** Another thing I've noticed. You often use classical Bengali words. Is it from the very beginning?

**Soumitra :** Not from my early age. When I was young....

**Anasua :** Consciously?

**Soumitra :** Yes, you can say that.

**Anasua :** Why?

**Soumitra :** When I was 16 years old, having just joined college, I had a friend circle - a particular environment. We had a leader- 3 years senior to us - Gourmohan

Mukhopadhyay- he inspired us in various things. He was a friend, philosopher and guide - you can say. He was really conscious about oratory - every person should be a good talker. As because our language is Bengali, we sincerely learnt the language and literature. Inclination towards the usage of classical words and language emerged at that time. Apart from that. I've studied Bengali folk culture out of my own interest and for the sake of my profession. Especially the colloquial vocabulary. I've travelled a lot in Bengal as a part of my profession and noticed that those village based people who work in fields have a wider range of vocabulary than ours - representing the middle class Bengali. They use lots of classical words- and their application is so nice, often lyrical. Even when they abuse you will find an imagery in it, which is absent in our anaemic middle-class vocabulary. Actually, it's quite natural that the urban Bengali people have a limited vocabulary. What do they do in a whole day? After getting up in the morning they say 'Give me a cup of tea and biscuit.... wait, let me go to the market' - in the market they bargain about everything - come back and say 'I'm late - going for bath....give my meal'. They get into bus or tram - 'Why don't you move a bit and stand on your own feet, and not mine?' In office- 'Hey, has the Head clerk come?' .... They don't use much words in a day. But the person who is doing cultivation in village - he has do know about different seasons, names of the crops and their details - about weather and its impact on crops - so many things. In that regard, he is more knowledgeable than a middle-class Bengali. So ... it's better to turn our face to them - then our language will also be better.

**Anasua :** Do you, as an actor, think that film is a director's medium ?

**Soumitra :** Ultimately... finally, yes. But it does not mean that the actor has no contribution, rather he has a substantial contribution in it. Many films people still remember or watch only for acting, not for the direction. You will find a lot of such films in Hollywood. Even in the films of Eisenstein - he had such a potential that he dominated all the branches of film-making- the acting of Cherkashov in 'Ivan The Terrible' or 'Alexander Nevsky' has culminated in a supreme height. Ideally, the relation between the director and the actor should be collaborative. But in this system of film making, the director is the captain of the ship. He has to guide

everything. Ultimately, he is responsible to visualise the entire film. In that sense it's director's medium. But what about his components? Those are plastic materials - human being - bodies with movements and expressions. The director is not chiselling a stone to create it. He is dealing with a human of flesh and blood and brain. So it's vital for him to have a good rapport with his actor. Otherwise it's not possible to understand what he can get from the actor. The concept of the director is being reflected through his actor.

**Anasua :** Do you think that the stage is the original place of an actor?

**Soumitra :** No. Why. .. why not film? I sincerely believe that both are important. So many times I had to face the question - 'Where do you like to act, on stage or in film?' I like both. Both are of different kind.

**Anasua :** It's okay - you love both. But where can an actor develop his total potential?

**Soumitra :** It's possible in both. Where did Chaplin develop to his fullest? What about Ray Milland? Not that it's not possible in film. For instance Tulsi Chakraborty. He was superb both on stage and in film. Rather, many of us did not watch him on stage. We found him more in films. Another example is Uttamkumar. He achieved his fullest development in film, not in theatre- he got his primary training in stage theatre. They are not that too far from each other what we make them. I can again give that example of miniature and oil painting I can portray the same thing on both. If the subject is human being - it can be reflected on both and the difference is in size and style.

**Anasua :** But you told me that you, as an actor, like long speech?

**Soumitra :** There is no such well-formed demarcation line between film acting and stage acting. Often they overlap with each other. They even merge....

**Anasua :** Will please explain it in detail?

**Soumitra :** Yes, lot of common factors are there in film acting and stage acting. In both, you have to conceive a character. In that process you have to adjust your technique - that is common to both. The portrayal should be convincing enough in both cases - as if it's a slice of life. But an actor has to adjust as per the

requirement of the medium, and that is the difference of style. Otherwise there is not much basic differences. You may find a long speech in a film also. May be film has inherited it from the tradition of theatre. I can handle a long speech because I've the training of stage and where I often do that. But it happens in films too, I have to do that. I'm really comfortable in it. In fact I like continuous acting. Then I can enrich it with various shades, more detail and improvisation. This process of creation becomes more interesting, which I like.

**Anasua :** In 1963, first you staged 'Tapashr and then 'Naamjiban' in 78. Will you please tell us in a nutshell the history of your theatre direction ?

**Soumitra :** I never thought consciously to be a director when we staged dramas in school life. But I had a tendency of bossing - instructing something or showing something to others. If I glorify it in its maximum then you can tell it the role of an instructor of acting. Later, after coming to Calcutta I started to go to theatre and learnt about Sisirkumar and his theatre. I became interested about world theatre and started reading books. Then only I came to know that there is such a thing as the director, the concept which emerged in 19th century. That concept of director was already there in the collective planning of theatre but in India, it came much afterwards. Here it came with Sisirkumar. In stead of narrating him as a director, Rabindranath described him as...

**Anasua :** Application.....

**Soumitra :** Yes, one who applies...one who controls the whole process of theatre., the person who will take the responsibility of the total theatre and create it. After learning about that concept, the interest in me about direction increased naturally. Another factor is there. I have such a strong desire of acting that I cannot be satisfied only doing my own role. When I direct it I can do all the roles to show others and from that.... well... I can satisfy my desire. This motivation also guided me to be a director. Again, direction is not only to instruct others, it s much more than that - it's a collection of components from different perspectives which creates a harmony. But I definitely have an advantage as a theatre director in the fact that I'm an actor myself. I often do not instruct others all the things, but from my very first reading to the last performance, I try to create a complete unified

acting style in my production. It's easy to me because I'm an actor. This is how I came to direction. In the later part of my college life - after watching Sisirkumar and others- I formed the group and tried to do something seriously as a director. But before it bloomed, I became a professional in cinema. After almost 10 years, I felt a strong desire for theatre but couldn't do anything for my busy schedule and situation. I started to do stage acting for 'Abhinetri Sangha' to keep myself mobile. To prevent them from decaying, I kept on using my faculties as a stage actor. But after sometime, I felt dissatisfaction of not doing anything of a total theatre. So I planned accordingly and invited eminent theatre directors like Ajilesh Bandopadhyay, Utpal Dutta etc. to 'Abhinetri Sangha'. In spite of that, finally I had to take the role of a director. My friends like Anupkumar and others, who were working with me, were very much persuasive about that, but mainly Ajitesh almost forced me to do it. For him only that was from late '60s to early '70s. Then again the same vacuum, same frustration. At last, being desperate, I permanently came to stage 'Naamjibari in 1978. That was the beginning. After that, you know the story. Off and on I remained out of theatre - more or less I performed also. That is my first love - how I can forget it!

**Anasua :** From '78 to today's 'Prantapasya' can you....

**Soumitra :** Brief history? 'Naamjiban' was my production. Initially it was written by my wife for their group....

**Anasua :** Then the name was also different I think?

**Soumitra :** Yes, it was 'Ramdhanu Ronger Chador' - a direct adaptation from a West Indian play 'Moon On A Rainbow Shawl' . The name was beautiful, lyrical. Once I tried to stage it public theatre - I asked her to give it in which I would do some brush-ups for public stage. That time it finally couldn't be performed. Later it was staged in 'Kashi Biswanath Mancha' - after some changes, including the name.

**Anasua :** This name was, most probably, Shakti Chattopadhyay ..

**Soumitra :** It's a poem of Shakti.

**Anasua :** Then?

**Soumitra :** 'Naamjiban' was a great success and immediately .after this I directed 'Rajkumar' on the same stage. This I performed earlier on behalf of 'Abhinetri Sangha', Before that I did Ibsen's 'Ghost', 'Andhayug' and many more. 'Rajkumar' was not that much commercially successful like 'Naamjiban'. *For almost the first 100 nights it was housefull. Me and Sabitri were in the lead roles. The initial success was, may be, for 'Naamjibari but after 200 nights, we had to take it off from the stage. Mostly all of my theatres ran for not less than 350 nights. In 'Rajkumar', I think , people could not accept its protagonist character or , may be, could not identify themselves with it.. After that, it was 'Fera'. 'Fera' was also on the stage for 350 nights.* Madhabi was there in its cast. Some other good actors like Premangshu Basu, Nirmal Ghosh were also there. The cast was huge and as a theatrical experiment it was really good. Then 'Nilkantha'. I started to compose the music myself from 'Fera' - the only reason behind it was that, I could not make it clear to other music directors what I actually needed. I failed to communicate them that the background music of a film or a theatre is not pure music. 'Nilkantha' was based on a story of Turgenev- but it was almost changed in totality. Originally there was a straight story- here I applied some different methods. I created a character of a compere who interacted directly with the audience. That was a good teamwork but the role of the central character was really 'heavy' - as per theatre's vocabulary - like Shakespeare's 'Othelo'. The character was there on the stage all the time and his activities were more dominant. So people put more concentration on him rather than the teamwork. It was a good production. Satyajit Ray appreciated it and when the producer went to him to get his remark in writings for advertisement; he wrote a line which is one of the finest tributes I ever had in my life. He wrote "This is the best theatre of Soumitra Chattopadhyay I've ever seen and his acting performance is unforgettable". He also told me personally " This is your best acting". After 'Nilkantha' , I directed a series of tragic and serious plays. Then I felt to do a different kind of play. I made an adaptation from a comedy of Thornton Wilder - 'Matchmakers'. That was a superhit here. It was running for 500 nights in Star and when it was eaught fire, we had to shift to another stage.

**Anasua :** Is this 'Ghatak Biday'?

**Soumitra :** Yes. Then we did a play, written by Manoj Mitra - 'Darpaney Sharatsashi'. I had to pester him for a long time - but it was good. We staged it in Tapan Theatre . It could not make a long run for some external causes and finally it was stopped. Still it ran for nearly 300 nights. After that.....

**Anasua :** 'Chandanpurer Chor' ?

**Soumitra :** Right. Later I acted in a play 'Pratiksha' for public theatre, not under my direction. The director was Kaushik Sen. In the meantime we made 'Tiktiki' under the banner of Swapna Sandhani group. But, regarding this, I never thought of a Group Theatre. I still believe that 'Tiktiki ' is a production for public theatre - commercial theatre - entertainment at a very high level. When we did it under a Group Theatre's banner, different kinds of people were entertained - it's proved. People saw it either intellectually or to get the fun of the story, but both enjoyed it. I couldn't do it on public stage only because of absence of star actor. Only with two characters, I was not sufficient to pull the crowd in public stage. To do that I would require another star. Suppose, me and Uttamkumar could do that. Or with Utpal Dutta. Then it was possible. In fact, I tried to do that with Uttamkumar and Utpal Dutta. Initially I thought about Utpal Dutta when I did the adaptation. After a long time, in 90s, when I was doing 'Chandanpurer Chor', Koushik came - they were supposed to make a play at that time but it didn't mature. So., suddenly I said ' Let's do one thing - we can rehearse this casually'. And we did it.

My next production in public theatre was 'Nyayamurti'. The casting was huge - more than 60 characters were there and in my assessment, it was quite good. But then public theatre was on its way to its extinction - the whole institution was spoiling - audience was not there. Labour trouble, lack of management and all sort of problems. The play was stopped and not only that, the theatre house was also closed. It was no longer possible to work there. But I can not keep quite without theatre. Now I'm doing Pran Tapashya ' in some other group.

— This is the history in brief.

**Anasua :** Acting in theatre, jatra and film - how do they enrich or help each other ?

**Soumitra :** It's possible in different ways - there is no such fixed route. These are always overlapping. Cinema may have a very theatrical scene - even a whole film can be very theatrical yet can be very pleasing. And a theatre can also be very cinematic. That I found repeatedly in my work. I always thought to recreate the ideas of my work or life in a cinematic level. May be that is because of my strong involvement with cinema and Satyajit Ray. That was reflected in Naamjiban also. It does not mean that it was a recreation of cinema - it was out and out a theatre- but it reminds you of cinema. That's all.

**Anasua :** You have also directed for television.

**Soumitra :** Yes. I directed one TV play - ' Mahasindhur O Par Theke' and a TV film of one hour. It's a short film In fact, I didn't shoot it on TV camera. It was in film format - later I transferred it to U-matic.

**Anasua :** It's 'Stri ka Patra'. Tell me why did you come in direction? You had an interest?

**Soumitra :** I had interest in direction. Not exactly interest. I wished to direct a film. I could not do it for practical reasons. First of all, the kind of film I want to make, I can not do it with private financier. This NFDC and others - finance from government - I am not able to run for all these. Basically I'm a loner and I don't have an unit. These are practical problems. Another big problem is, I had to give whole time effort to make a film for 6-8 months. That was also not possible for me. In this 6-8 months I could have acted in 2-3 films and earn some money- I could not afford to stop that. And, still now, Bengah film industry is not ready to spare me for such a long time.

**Anasua :** What kind of film you want to direct?

**Soumitra :** It's difficult to say. I thought about many stories in many times.

**Anasua :** You told that it's not possible to get private financier.

**Soumitra :** Private financiers are almost synonymous to dull, formula films. You can get some impression about my idea of films from my plays like 'Naamjiban' and 'Nyayamurti'. Those are for people's entertainment but those are made sincerely.



**Anasua :** We were discussing about today's condition of Bengali cinema. Do you think any potential director is coming up?

**Soumitra :** Not that nobody is there. One or two are there. Like Ritupamo Ghosh. He is careful in his work. You will find a kind of artistic sense and taste. It's not the proper time to judge his depth. Only Ray can create a revolution by his first film! And seniors like Gautam or Apama - we can still expect from them. Another thing - is time changes. Now the situation of Bengali cinema is pathetic - upsetting. But a time will definitely come when it will turn round. This the only hope - a subjective one. May be, it does not have any objective basis, but it happens.

**Anasua :** In this generation of Bengali actors and actresses whom do you think as promising?

**Soumitra :** I don't want to talk about it in detail. I like the work of one or two - actually talent is not enough - it's nothing - just a diving board. You have to go a long way after diving from it.

**Anasua :** And in national arena?

**Soumitra :** To tell you the truth, I don't watch today's....

**Anasua :** You may have seen in TV.

**Soumitra :** I watch it for such a short time that it's difficult to assess. Kajol is not bad - that only I can tell you. In earlier generation, several very formidable actors and actresses are there like -1 told you- Nasir, Om, Shabana, Smita - and - Girish Kamad and many more.

**Anasua :** In last few years, you are not satisfied about those films you acted. Can you tell me about a film in which, you think, your acting is remarkable?

**Soumitra :** I don't know.

**Anasua :** Which is the last film you consider as a good one?

**Soumitra :** 'Wheel Chair'.

**Anasua:** Any other film after that?

**Soumitra :** 'Ashukh' and 'Atmiya Swajan' were a bit different. 'Atmiya Swajan' has already been released.

**Anasua :** I've heard your acting in 'Ashukh' is excellent.

**Soumitra :** In 'Atmiya Swajan' also. My performance is not bad. As a film also, it's slightly better than others. It could have been concise and made more subtle - it's a bit like teleplay which follows from the habit of serial making. But at least it's a serious effort, unlike of today's Bengali cinema. They tried to deal with a serious subject.

**Anasua :** Tell me your assessment about your heroines. You've acted more with Aparna Sen than others. Isn't it?

**Soumitra :** I...I don't know exactly.

**Anasua :** Yes. With Aparna Sen.

**Soumitra :** Even more than Sandhya Roy?

**Anasua :** Yes. In 18 films.

**Soumitra :** What..?!

**Anasua :** You were cast with Aparna in 18 films.

**Soumitra :** 18 ...films?

**Anasua :** And in 11 with Sandhya Roy. Then Sumitra Mukhopadhyay. Anyway, tell me about

**Soumitra :** Among all my heroines, Sabitri Chattopadhyay as an actress impressed me most by her skill and talent. She is senior to me in this profession.

**Anasua :** You have performed with her only in 5 films.

**Soumitra :** You mean, her as an heroine ?

**Anasua :** Yes.

**Soumitra :** Later I performed in many films with her as a character- artist.

**Anasua :** Yes.

**Soumitra :** She performed in my drama also. I directed her - in ' Rajkumar. She has such a natural skill and command on acting - I never found anyone else like her... obviously among those I worked with. I can tell you several names of true film actresses with whom I did not work - like Manju Dey, Anubha Gupta and Smita and Shabana - all are exceptionally good. But Sabitri had a complete skill in both film and theatre. And she didn't get much opportunity to assert her huge potential. Suchitra Sen was also there as my heroine - very much photogenic and glamorous on screen - I cannot say more. Supriya (Devi) also could act to an extent - that we found in 'Ayananta' and 'Meghe Dhaka Tara' . Madhabi's acting is bound within certain limits.

**Anasua :** What about Sharmila?

**Soumitra :** Sharmila. Yes, Sharmila had a tremendous presence - intelligent, glamorous - everything. But something was there in her pronunciation for which it was not possible to think of her as a Bengali girl of next door. Aparna is talented - really talented - but not consistent in that level. And I can tell specifically about Sandhya Roy that she is the most consistent among them.

**Anasua :** But she does not fit in all kind of roles.....

**Soumitra :** True, but she does extremely well where she fits. Moreover, even if she doesn't fit in a role, she maintains a perfect standard of acting. She neither does better nor worse. She is almost never brilliant in except one or two roles like 'Ganga'. Here she is almost brilliant because it suits her so fine. But, in other roles also which don't suit her, you can not just reject her. There is a standard always. Say for example 'Baghini' it does not fit her - that does not at all suit her. Her physical attributes were not befitting the character. It should have been somebody else with more physicality, like Supriya in her earlier days.

**Anasua :** You have done a number of films with Tanuja.

**Soumitra :** Tanuja was also very talented with variety. And she was one of those very rare few who had comedy in them. Sabitri was good in both tragedy and comedy.

**Anasua:** But I think Tanuja did not fit much in typical Bengali character.

**Soumitra :** May be. Yet she was good as a comedy in universal film language. Apart from that, she had a particular appearance for which she seemed to be very glamorous if required and also could be the neighbour next door.

**Anasua :** Now I want to ask you this question - about your overall contribution to Indian cinema - self-assessment.

**Soumitra :** Very frankly speaking, I am not able to answer this. How can I assess myself? To assess my contribution to Indian cinema - this is others' job, their responsibility. If you ask me, I will tell, yes, I've done this, I've done that... One thing I can tell you, very few actors in India got the opportunity to work in so many serious and memorable films like me. I worked continuously with Ray for such a long time and with other good directors like Mrinal Sen, Tapan Sinha and Tarun Majumdar. I did acting in Majumdar's 'Sansar Simante' and 'Ganadevata' - those are exceptions as a film. Then in 'Koni'. This is really something to get all these roles. Not that they offered me these out of charity. I always wanted to do different kind of roles like these. No other hero would do it by coming out from his star image. Many of them, in fact, did not do. I wanted to do it and I did it. I don't know.. .may be.in future someone will judge my contribution. That is not my cup of tea.

**Anasua:** Once you were in the jury board of International Film Festival of India. Tell me about your experience.

**Soumitra :** Yes. That was all the same like what happens in an International Festival. In other festivals here and abroad, I attended as a delegate and I didn't have much responsibility - just to watch films, interact with others and occasionally to attend a press conference if it's in some other country. But in this case it was a big responsibility. I had to watch all the films whether I liked it or not. I had to assess those as per the fixed parameter and put marks for those like a school test. Often I felt like crazy - it's painstaking. I watched 3-4 films in a day. That is nothing, I often do that in a festival but there it was compulsory. Even if I did not like to watch, still...I had to, lest I should miss something, some particular performance.

**Anasua :** What about the selection ? Is it fair?

**Soumitra :** At least, at that time it was more or less fair. In International Festivals, it's almost like that - more or less fair, but not completely so. Suppose Cannes Festival - if it wants to maintain its glamour, it is bound to declare several awards to American films, just because they depend on American fund. In Venice festival once it happened that for several successive years, all the awards went to the films from other countries. There was such a reaction that the jury board was almost compelled to give some awards to Italian films. These sort of things happen. But you'll not find sheer fraud or nepotism or lobbying from commercialism there which are very much rampant in our national festivals. At least it was not there that time. We didn't compromise with any pressure - in fact nobody put that kind of pressure - well...yes...may be, tried to promote a particular film but that's all. That was an impartial selection.

**Anasua :** You went to the Festival with Charulata. Isn't it?

**Soumitra :** Yes, to the Berlin Festival.

**Anasua :** You went there twice?

**Soumitra:** Second time it was with Ashani Sanket .

**Anasua :** How was the experience?

**Soumitra :** It was a film of Ray- so naturally I was eager to know the public reaction and the reaction of the jury board - whether it would get an award or not. Another thing was the opportunity to see numerous films. Not only in the festival but in outside halls also. They often screen good films from World cinema - even retrospectives- in those halls. So it was nice to stick to those auditoriums. I fully exploit this kind of opportunity when I go abroad. Mainly I concentrate on film and theatre - I also go to museum and art gallery. And if I go to England, only then I buy books, since there is no need or qualification for me to read books of other languages.

**Anasua :** Recently Catherine Berge has made a documentary on you. Will you please tell me about it?

**Soumitra :** In fact she intended to make a documentary on Satyajit Ray. But in the mean time Ray died and she planned to make it on me as a collaborator of Ray. She

likes my work in Ray's film - and she made a call to me from Paris and asked if I wanted to do it. I said 'Why not?' Then she came here for several weeks and took an extensive interview - in audio cassettes. We talked about various things for many hours. Then she went back and made a script, based on that interview. She came again for shooting. Meanwhile she got the Marchant-Ivory Production as her producer. In fact, some Naeem Hafiz Khan was the producer who is a nephew of one of them (Ismail Merchant and James Ivory). Those people who watched the film, felt a bit dissatisfied as I don't have any other identity apart from my involvement with Ray and his films. It's their opinion.

**Anasua :** Not only with acting, you are also attached with other art mediums like writing, recitation and we know you as an editor also. Please tell something about these.

**Soumitra :** If you ask me I can answer.

**Anasua :** When did you start writing poems? From childhood?

**Soumitra :** From my school days, when I was in 10 standard. No great motivation was there behind my writing poems which I started at the age of 15 or 16. In fact from the early childhood, I had an attraction and admiration towards literature. Both of my parents and my grandfather had a huge collection of books. I liked to read books and that might be the root. At the age of 15-16, I was induced to write poems by romantic enthusiasm like many other Bengali of that age group. But after joining the college I took it more seriously because of the influence of Gourmohan Mukhopadhyay - I told you earlier about him. My course of education had also been changed - after I.Sc. I took up B.A (Hons.) in Bengali. All these created a backdrop of writing. I published and edited the magazine 'Ekshari' out of love for literature. Still now I am writing poems like earlier. My inclination towards literature and habit of writing definitely help me as an actor.

**Anasua :** Do you write regularly?

**Soumitra :** Not regularly. It's....you can say... seasonal, depending on the mood. I can write two poems in a day for successive 2-3 days and may be not a single one in next 15 days. It's like that.

**Anasua :** Did you start reciting from your childhood?

**Soumitra :** Yes, I started both acting and recitation from my early childhood. That was very casual, like, in a rainy day my father or grandfather would call me and say 'Come, recite this poem...', something like that. And I did. I used to recite in all school functions and I liked it.

**Anasua :** You told me that now you are doing acting just as a livelihood. So, like others, do you think about retirement from your profession ?

**Soumitra :** Our profession is not like others.... and its future is extremely uncertain. And an actor can not quit his job by his own, he can be thrown out. When he is not required any more in this profession, this profession will treat him as discarded. But he can not retire like a government employee or a big officer. It's impossible. After retirement, they can get pension, Gratuity, Provident Fund etc. which we don't.

**Anasua :** Have you ever thought to do something like Suchitra Sen who keeps herself and her image totally hidden from others?

**Soumitra :** Never. Then I would not be what I am. Acting is everything to me - it's my life. I stop breathing if I stop working.

**Anasua :** You refused "Padmashree". Why? Do you think awards are unimportant ?

**Soumitra :** First of all, in some occasions, those awards are awarded to competent persons but often a lot of people receive them who do not deserve them. So they do not have any credibility to me. Secondly, I do not feel comfortable to receive these government awards because of my social and political ideas. That they are doing all sorts of dishonesty, hypocrisy, suppression and injustice to the social and national life and they are spreading some trickles like these awards and titles for the cultural world - these are not very acceptable to me.

**Anasua :** Have you not received a single award?

**Soumitra :** Well, yes. May be once or twice. At the very beginning I received the award for best debutante from BFJA. Frankly I didn't think about these that time - even, later I got some other prizes from BFJA. Now I don't attend these. And.... in

one or two case, I had to receive some award out of obligation. Another one I received from South Indian Filmfare Award - for Life Time Achievement - that I accepted as I felt touched. As a consequence again I had to receive another award out of obligation from Anadalok - that was also for Life Time Achievement. I could not deny that as I had received an award in same category from another state. To tell you the truth I don't believe in these awards at all. Forget about partiality or impartiality, you will not get proper judgement here. I can tell you about some film festivals - International Film Festivals - where the board of jury has made it a point - almost a rule - that a single film will not be given more than one award. This is a political rule. Just to satisfy more countries. As for example, in that particular Moscow festival where Suchitra Sen received an award for best actress in the film 'Sat Paakey Bandha, a Japanese film was attributed as the best film. In that film the heroine was one of the contenders for best actress. But she was not considered as the jury did not intend to give two awards to a single film. It's true that after her, Suchitra Sen had a standard performance and she was given the prize. But this can not be a process of fair judgement in a film festival. So what's the use of all these? The true award is people's appreciation and admiration. People of my country have loved me for past 40 years - they still tolerate me. Even now they want to watch my performance - what do I need more?

**Anasua :** What do you feel about film censor in our country ? Is the method correct? Or is the censorship at all necessary?

**Soumitra :** No, I don't think it's necessary...or, may be, in a country like ours it is required. I am not very much sure about it. Say - sex and violence - if there is no sensor, can you imagine to what obscenities these Bombaywallahs will take them to?

**Anasua :** Are not they doing too much already?

**Soumitra :** It can be worse. The censor board is corrupt. The censor is not applying proper censoring measures. They are capable of making it worse.

**Anasua :** It's still better to be more open rather than what they are showing....



**Soumitra :** No. They will not make it more open. And I'm afraid of that. They will create semi porno - something more spicy. In our country with low literacy rate and paucity of other entertainment - this lineage of entertainment is the easiest and cheapest - so people will definitely go for that - and considering this, I think, may be it's better to have a censor. It doesn't make sense to offer a stengun to a monkey!

**Anasua :** In our country, the way they censor a film is simply illogical...

**Soumitra :** True.

**Anasua :** Earlier Stardom was beyond the reach of common people. Film would create a dream-image in dark auditorium. But today television is presenting the Stars to every house and people are watching them repeatedly in interviews. Do you think this is affecting the so-called stardom?

**Soumitra :** To some extent, I think.

**Anasua :** Or a new kind of....

**Soumitra :** Television stars are emerging, but have you seen any craze for them ? Never.

**Anasua :** I'm not talking about TV stars. These film stars...

**Soumitra :** Yes. Television is exploiting their stardom and vice versa. Actually stars are earning from it, they are using it as publicity media. They appear mainly in ad-films but their stardom is unchanged. And, yes, if television overexposes them, then the stardom may be hampered. But television does not have that much of scope. Where can it happen? If they expose themselves too much publicly...

**Anasua :** But they are appearing in front of a camera for interview in a shooting zone. What about these?

**Soumitra :** These are happening. But still when it's appearing through a camera and a screen, it's not losing its charm. It remains constant.

**Anasua :** Earlier you were talking about literature-based film. Do you have a special liking for it ? Is a film based on a quality literature is necessarily a good one?

**Soumitra :** I can not tell you that particularly. If a film is based on literature, it's better for the industry. It's difficult to get a script-writer who can write good original story and who can understand the film medium as well as who can be considered as a potential writer.

**Anasua :** But if a film is only being made depending on literature, there will not be much scope for experimentation.

**Soumitra :** True. But the fact is, till now nothing has been made here as an experiment. How many experiments are there in last 100 years? In Indian cinema?

**Anasua :** 'Nayak', 'Kanchanjangha' - those are not literature-based....

**Soumitra :** 'Nayak', 'Kanchanjangha', 'Shakha Proshakha ' - those are excellent films. But how many? Very few. Those are not enough for experiment. May be at that time Ray did not find appropriate stories. .. and at the last stage he was using his own stories regularly. Many of us often told him 'How long you will search for other's story? You can write yourself. After 'Shakha Proshakha' he made 'Agantuk' from his own script. But you cannot always consider Ray as a parameter in our industry.

**Anasua :** He was a writer also. But those films by Kumar Sahni or Mani Kaul - those which are called 'pure cinema' - what is your impression about them?

**Soumitra :** I can not consider them from a different angle considering the fact that they are not basically writers. When I go for a film, I watch it essentially as a film. In that particular point of time, its background or its script, whether it's based on literature or not - to me, these are not a point of enquiry at all.

**Anasua :** Suppose there is no well composed narrative? What if it's broken up?

**Soumitra :** I don't mind if the narrative is broken up provided there are likeable elements even in that non-narrative structure.

**Anasua:** Common people may feel the problem of identification with it.

**Soumitra :** Yes. May be.

**Anasua :** So, what do you think about it ? You repeatedly tell about communication with the common people. That's why you are performing on public

stage - to communicate with more people. But these kind of experimental films cannot reach out to a larger audience.

**Soumitra :** Tell me how many films of this kind we have got in last 10 years ? How many of them? Have there been many experimental films in our country?

**Anasua :** True - not much.

**Soumitra :** So,... those are exceptions. There is scope for speculation.

**Anasua :** No, I'm asking about your opinion. Do you think narrative is an essential component of cinema?

**Soumitra :** Well., yes., you see, I think, narrative is finally the backbone of all art medium, not only of cinema. Like painting.

**Anasua:** What happens in the case of a painting - where abstraction is in its extreme?

**Soumitra :** Yes, I cannot think of it to that extent. But I feel even in Picasso's work, there is a narrative. I'm leaving aside the Clown series of Picasso or the Blue Period. Like Kamalkumar (Majumdar), who breaks the narrative as well as maintains it - that's an experiment too- and not excluding the narrative. I can tell you, when I listen 4th season or 6th Symphony of Beethoven, I can feel a narrative. Story is one of the primitive hungers of human beings. Each and every human child asks his mother to tell stories in whatever language it might be. It's almost like a filial affection as is the attraction between man and woman. An universal truth .

**Anasua :** In the beginning you had a complex as you were not sure whether your features are photogenic or not. Could you get rid of that as a human being ?

**Soumitra :** Partially yes.

**Anasua :** Why only partially?

**Soumitra :** In fact, I have overcome most of it. It has happened for various reasons. One is success -I do not mean the chaos of success. It is that what I've done, has been accepted and if that is accepted in the film medium, therefore I must not think that badly about myself.

And for this particular medium, I got the advantage to examine myself. I could eliminate my bad components from my repertoire. I could understand that I should not grin like this and so on. May be I m not that much photogenic or I've some other problems, but definitely I don't look that bad! Otherwise why the people of my country are accepting me for so many days? But still I don't like everything of mine ... I tend to think - if I had this feature like him or if my nose had that curve like him - all these. Everybody has this kind of inhibition, rather personal disliking. I've succeeded to rationalize this. I've learnt from my life and experience that these are not important things in life. You are what you are and you have to think what best you can do with what you have. I could make myself understand that and it was spontaneous.

As for my command over my craft - I'm proud of it. But that is not a superiority complex. It's not complex at all - it is based on facts. This is my self-confidence. I know that I know my work that well. And it's true. I often questioned myself - am I thinking wrong? This sense has grown gradually. Earlier I thought, I had such a power of acting that I could easily win over my audience - I'm telling you frankly. Yes, I used to think like that. But what happened finally? Am I capable to act like Sisir Bhaduri? Is it possible for me? - My idols, my target never became blurred in front of me. I never could bring myself to think that I have done something great which is unparalleled. But I know it for certain that for last 40 years I've trained myself to such a degree and I achieved such a command on the craft which very few people in India have. May be you will find three or four people all over India. This is not a pride or superiority complex - I suppose this is fact.

And, yes, this is the pride of an artist. I must have this as a human being. If I cannot refuse a prize from a government which I don't like or a political party whose thoughts and activities I cannot support, then it s meaningless to be an artist. I expect this pride from every artist. But - that I stay in a bigger house than you or that I have more bank balance or that girls swoon over me for my good looks - these can not be anyone's pride.

**Anasua :** During this interview you reiterated that the earlier days were better. Does this create a cynicism in you?

**Soumitra** : Occasionally, yes. At least it brings depression - though I strongly believe in future - even now. I told you that it will turn round. But I feel depressed as my time is getting closer. That may not happen to Bengali cinema before my death. I may not experience it. Even if it happens before my death, I may not be able to work any more. This results in a depression.

**Anasua** : Do you have any repentance as an actor?

**Soumitra** : There are certain dissatisfactions, that I can tell you. Though I know I have got more opportunity to act in significant, meaningful roles than the others, yet I'm not satisfied. To tell you the truth, I still intend to do that kind of significant role. Another thing is, the geography of Bengali cinema is so narrow that they cannot cover the whole spectrum of society. Our middle-class society is there, but only in its social and family life, and not its struggle for existence. And also our rural society - where eighty percent of the population belong and which is very different - has not been depicted. Some references are there but that's also a depiction of middle class Bengalis. It is nothing different from the urban middle class.

**Anasua** : And that too is not authentic.

**Soumitra** : Yes. And how much is the difference between a rural middle class family and a urban one? Yes, there is a difference of complex - and of complexion! But nothing else. If Bengali cinema could treat other things also we might have got a scope of acting in more versatile roles. We could represent majority of the population and as an actor I repent - that how much have I done for my people of this country through my work?

**Anasua** : Do you believe in any political thought ? Or are you related with any political activities?

**Soumitra** : No. I'm not involved in any political activities for the last several decades. But I have a particular political idea which is not very wide - and basically that is Marxist. Specifically the explanation of history and society which I've read in my early ages, is still true to me. The first line of Communist Manifesto - "History of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle."- it's very much

relevant to me. I believe that the progress of a society and history is dependent upon the existence of classes, and the resulting conflicts between them.

**Anasua :** But this is philosophy, and philosophy and organisation are not synonymous.

**Soumitra :** No, they are not, and that is why I do not believe in political parties.

**Anasua :** Do you not at all believe in organisation ?

**Soumitra :** Not that. It's only that I do not believe the existing parties themselves.

**Anasua :** But you have to believe in some sort of an organisation.

**Soumitra :** Yes, you have to believe in an organisation. You just cannot do without it. But if I do not get a ready-made organisation to my liking, why should I believe in one? It's not possible for me. And moreover, I feel, that in the process of forming an association like that, I shall not be able to compromise my ideas in the first place, and in the second place, this kind of activity will lead to a compromise in my work . Then I shall not even be able to do the few works I am doing now, and may be I ll lose interest in them .

**Anasua :** Please tell us about your family life in a nutshell...we have already learned about your childhood... after that... ?

**Soumitra :** After that...do you mean the family which I myself formed? I was married in 1960, to Deepa Chattopadhyay. Her surname was the same even before marriage. She also belonged to a middle class family, and we share a similar background. Her father used to work in a commercial firm. We had two children after our marriage. My son is the elder one. His name is Sougata Chattopadhyay. He plays the violin, and writes. My daughter, Poulomi Chattapadhyay, now Poulomi Bose, used to practice the dance of Bharatnatyam, and she dances till now. She loves to act too. She is married now. My daughter has a son and a daughter...our grand-children. One is 6 years old, and the other is 8. A great deal of our time passes with them.

This is more or less about my family life. What else do you want to know about it ?

**Anasua** : Nothing else. So this brings an end to our conversation. Thank you very much.

*Soumitra Chatterjee was very cooperative to me all through the interview, in spite of his tight schedule and myriad engagements. I am grateful to him for the time he brought out for me, which spanned three days and culminated into ten hours of recorded time.*