



Director Suman Ghosh accompanies Sen to the locations where she shot films like 36 Chowringhee Lane, Paroma and Paromitar Ek Din to jog Sen's memories of working on these projects; (below) Shabana Azmi who has worked with Sen on films like Sati, 15 Park Avenue and Sonata speaks in the documentary of a teasing friendship that they have shared over the years



# 36 Memory Lane

**Suman Ghosh takes Aparna Sen back to the locations of some of her early films in a new documentary on her life and work. mid-day gets together with the two filmmakers to discuss cherished characters, influences and changes in Bengali film viewership**

**SUGHETA CHAKRABORTY**

I STILL think that 36 Chowringhee Lane was like a love affair. It's my first film. I lived and breathed [that film]. As my daughter said, I was consumed by it. But you go past that, you move on. You don't remain in 36 Chowringhee Lane forever," filmmaker, screenwriter and actress Aparna Sen tells us on a video call from her home in Shantiniketan. Espousing the lessons learnt from a book like Eugen Herzigel's Zen in the Art of Archery, she speaks of how she finds little value in dwelling on past achievements.

"It's more like every time I see one of my older films, all that jumps out at me are the flaws."

Sen's past accomplishments are however, the focus of Paroma: A Journey With Aparna Sen, a documentary by director Suman Ghosh which saw its world premiere at the International Film Festival Rotterdam. It was screened alongside Sen's own film Paroma, a radical portrait of female self-discovery, which ironically, as Sen tells us, was not invited to any international fest at the time of its release. "It was perceived that the issue it discussed was kind of passé as far

as the international audience was concerned. Today, it's come back [because] they think it's relevant, but at that time they didn't."

"That film still affects me so much," Ghosh tells us when we ask him of his decision to name his film after Sen's 1985 National Award winner for best Bengali feature. "Paroma" also refers to the female version of the ultimate," he points out. "In the film I capture different aspects of Rinadi [Sen] and how she has, to my understanding, excelled in each of those faculties."

Ghosh calls Sen a Renaissance woman, someone who belongs with figures like Amartya Sen and Soumitra Chatterjee, both of whom he has been creatively involved with. "All three individuals have been deeply influenced by Tagore's philosophy which encapsulates a liberal tradition and a modernist view of life which I

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Suman Ghosh

think is sadly fading away," he says. "[Moreover], if you look at history, there are so many women who have contributed in this way, but I haven't heard the terminology [Renaissance] used for women. So, I'm insisting on using it [for her]". As a director, he finds in her the perfect welding of the emotional with the intellectual. "She is a

wonderful combination of, what Nietzsche called, Apollonian and Dionysian qualities—an amalgam of the head and the heart. That is reflected in her films."

Sen's directorial debut looms large in Ghosh's docu, its scenes framing the conversations and literal and metaphorical journeys. Ghosh accompanies Sen to the locations where she shot films like 36 Chowringhee Lane, Paroma and Paromitar Ek Din to jog Sen's memories of working on the projects, intercutting between scenes from the films and those of her walking through these spaces in the present day. "It was a mixture of two emotions," Sen tells us of the feelings the revisiting evoked. "There was this surge of nostalgia. But, on the other hand, I was feeling desolate because that entire location had been stripped of the effects that were there, which had helped create the character and the character's background. These were just bare rooms [now]". In a moving moment in Ghosh's film, she speaks of how at the end of the shoot when a film's sets would be dismantled, she would often be driven to tears at the thought that her characters were dying, that their worlds were disappearing. "They are killing Violet!" she had said of Jennifer Kendal's Anglo-Indian English teacher in 36 Chowringhee Lane. Always intensely involved with production design, her attention to detail is a trait, she believes, she picked up from Satyajit Ray, a director she worked with early in her career and was deeply influenced by. "I remember that when we were doing the weathering of sets in 36 Chowringhee Lane, I said Violet's home should be shabby but clean. It's not full of dust. She would clean the dust; there are little details in there, like pens arranged in a row. She had all the time in the world."

Like places, characters would produce attachments too. Sen recalls how during the shoot of 1995's Yugant about an estranged couple, when Roopa Ganguly changed out of her Kanjivaram saree and stripped the bindi off her forehead at the end of the day's filming, Sen would wonder where her character Anasuya had disappeared. "I wanted to trap them forever in those characters, but I couldn't. Obviously, you can't; it's not fair. They were so badly affected themselves that Anjan Dutt who had a light beard in the film, shaved. He said he had to get out of the role. It had gripped us all. After Violet Stoneham, I felt closest to the characters of Yugant."

"She was imbibing... at the feet of some of the finest masters," author, actor and Sen's husband Kalyan Ray notes at one point in Ghosh's documentary. Sen began her career as an actress, and Ghosh's film touches on her work with directors like Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen, Tapan Sinha, in Merchant-Ivory productions like Bombay Talkie as well as in more commercial fare in the '70s and '80s.

As the daughter of critic, filmmaker and translator Chidanandan

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# 'Anil sir would say: Tu bol ke dikha'

Fighter was so authentic that its screening got a standing ovation from the real heroes. Its co-producer, second unit director and writer, a former fauji, made it happen

## MITALI PAREKH

WHAT the audience may not see, but any personnel from the Indian Air Force would be how the left shoulder of the uniform is the fun shoulder: "You can wear any badge you like there, with the permission of your Commanding Officer," Ramon Chibb tells us over a video call from Goa where he is holidaying. "The right shoulder is for patches of the crafts you fly and the India patch." Minni [Squadron Leader Minal Rathore played by Deepika Padukone] wears a fun 'Don't Bug Me' one as opposed to Patty's [Hrithik Roshan as Squadron Leader Shamsheer Pathania] and Bash's [Basheer Khan, Akshay Oberoi] 'Fighter Forever'.

The lay audience may not register these details of authenticity, "but the Air Force did," says Chibb gleefully, and you can tell that validation is enough. The screening of the movie for the armed forces ended with a standing applause. Chibb co-produced the movie, wrote the screenplay and served as second unit director for Fighter. He also makes an appearance as Air Commodore Abhinder Bali, Chief Instructor at the Dundigal Air Force Academy in Hyderabad where Patty is transferred. Chibb served in the Infantry for five years, after being unable to follow his father into the IAF due to compromised eyesight. But he was, incidentally, at the commando training facility in Belgaum around the time Nana Patekar was preparing for his role in 1991 film Prahaar: The Final Attack. That movie, and 1982's Vijeta are the two movies he credits



People would land up at any time and say, 'Ma'am khana khila do'. There is always the fear that one of them might not come back; so they party harder. We wanted to build all this into the film, and not just go, thak-thak-thak from one action scene to another

with diving deep into research and firm marriage to authenticity. "It's what Hollywood gets right," he says, "When I see Gregory Peck in The Guns of Navarone, I can see that they got the weapons he used right."

Chibb, who later became a commercial pilot and has a home next to the flight school in Hadapsar, Pune, wrote the story in 2015 and took it to director Siddharth Anand in 2016. "He said it wasn't mass-y enough, 'but let's work on it together to make it into a film that could be understood by the audience'. Siddharth is a true cinema guy, he has a large vision."

Pulwama and Balakot were added later, as was Minni, because women were allowed to serve as fighter pilots only in 2015. Chibb drew up a career sheet for each character: The posts they held, the medals they would have won, the crafts they would have flown and the wars they would have fought in to become the best air fighters in the country to be included into the Air Dragon team. It couldn't be just because they were box office superstars.

So, Minni would be an all-weather pilot, a member of Sarang Aerobatic Display team, and be decorated with the Vayu



Sena medal for an act of courage to be included into Group Captain Rakesh Jaisingh's (Anil Kapoor's Rocky) dream team. She would have been commissioned in 2010, have 1,500 hours of flying under her belt and served in Bikaner, Leh, Siachen, Ambala, and Hakimpet. Similarly, "Fighters are split into two categories," explains Chibb, fuelled evidently by enthusiasm, "into those who fly Russian and non-Russian aircrafts since we have a huge inventory of the former. Patty would have flown the Kiran, Pilatus PC 7, Mig 21 and 29, before coming to the Sukhoi 30—the first with a two-crew cockpit. "It's telling of his personality as a lone ranger and only child," say Chibb, and it is also integral to the plot to have both protagonists—Roshan and Kapoor—in the climax.

"We had the blessing of the IAF from the beginning and shot at Tezpur, Dundigal and Pune air bases. Kudos to

Siddharth that he let me run away with the details. 'This is your world,' he said, 'Keep it real'. So even the walls of the houses are typically fauji—decorated with every photograph of the characters' journey from being cadets to officers, with medals, emblems, swords of honour" of which we catch a glimpse in Bash and Patty's homes.

Then there was the internalisation of fauji codes: That there is a hierarchy that you obey without questioning; and manner of speech. Patty obeys his father's orders to get tea for his friends more easily than he does his superiors. He asks for permission to speak from his superiors. "Hrithik bought into these nuances impeccably. He wanted to know all these things; he'll make a great filmmaker," says Chibb. They also drop in easily into a peer's place, as they do at Patty's Jammu home, when a training gets cancelled. There are impromptu picnics and gatherings. "This is what I saw when growing up. People would land up at any time and say, 'Ma'am khana khila do'. There is always the fear that one of them might not come



back; so they party harder. We wanted to build all this into the film, and not just go, thak-thak-thak from one action scene to another."

So, if you pay close attention to when we first hear Group Captain Jaisingh speak to his team, it's in staccato. "That's how officers brief. Anil sir would say to me, 'Tu bol ke dikha' and then repeat the dialogue, 'Ab main bolta hoon'. He shadowed the Squadron Leader at Tezpur to get the mannerisms right," he says. Squadron Leader Rathore's character was based on all the women at flight school who were better than Chibb and "never let us hear the end of it. I always thought they made good pilots. They were more focussed, learned faster and of course, were not bogged down by us clowns."

Chibb may not have realised his childhood dream, but it's evident when we speak to him that he has been happy to do the next best thing: "I flew in those planes, shot them, and even rigged the camera on to them for some shots."

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Fighter scriptwriter Ramon Chibb co-wrote the story, served as Second Unit Assistant Director and played Air Commodore Abhinder Bali, the Chief Instructor at the Dundigal Air Force Academy

The IAF control room built to be closely authentic

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da Das Gupta who was one of the founders of the Calcutta Film Society, Sen was "a film society kid" and filmmakers like Kurosawa, Antonioni, Bergman and Truffaut impacted her profoundly. But it was Ray, who was part of her DNA, like Tagore. "I've inherited him like you inherit your parents' or your grandparents' blood sugar or blood pressure. There's nothing I can do about it. It's there in my bloodstream. But I have made a conscious effort to not be imitative or derivative." Her use of leitmotifs, she says—such as in Paromitar Ek Din with songs coming back, fans whirring, top shots, characters sitting and

eating alone—is a product of that unconscious influence, a feature she notices in the work of Rituparno Ghosh too. "Ray often used a particular character, situation or dialogue once and then it comes back in the film later with a different, more layered meaning. But all this happens at a very subterranean level," she notes. "I think that's the magic of creativity. You don't really know [where it emerges from]." From Tapan Sinha she says she learnt of the need for actors to be prepared. "Actors shouldn't meet each other as characters for the first time on my set. It's most important to do acting workshops because they have to be used to each other's bodies."

Ghosh's documentary draws at-

**In a moving moment in Ghosh's film, she speaks of how at the end of the shoot when a film's sets would be dismantled, she would often be driven to tears at the thought that her characters were dying, that their worlds were disappearing. 'They are killing Violet!' she had said of Jennifer Kendal's Anglo-Indian English teacher in 36 Chowringhee Lane.**

tention to other aspects of her life and work such as her editorship of Bengali women's magazine Sananda which tackled divorce, family planning and abortion, and her activism and outspokenness on issues like the Nandigram movement or poll-related violence in Bengal.

For Sen, whose latest film The Rapist released in 2021, what has changed between her generation

and Ghosh's is the nature of subjects. "Because of globalisation, audiences have had access to a lot of world cinema, and that has educated some in the language of film," she observes. At the same time, the tastes of television audiences have been corrupted with regressive material. "There's also the urban-rural divide, which was not there so much when Tapan Sinha made a film like Haate Bajare for

instance, which was seen both in the rural and urban sectors."

Bengali audiences have long complained about a creative trough in the industry after its glorious yesteryears. Ghosh cites names like Aditya Vikram Sengupta, Kaushik Ganguly and Atanu Ghosh and commercial directors Srijit Mukherji "who have made a fundamental change to Bengali cinema by bringing audiences back in a big way." "I am vehemently opposed to the idea that nothing has happened after Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen, Rituparno Ghosh and Aparna Sen. I'm keeping them at their place. But a lot of interesting work is also being done."

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