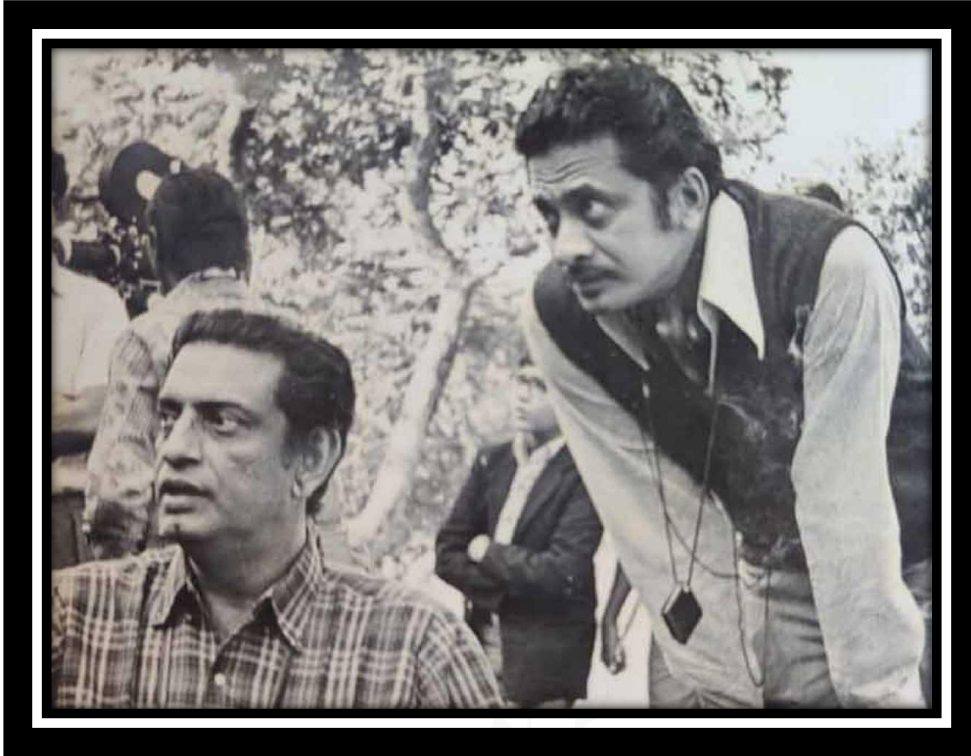


Tribute

**Premendra Mazumder**

**Remembering Soumendu Roy**



*Soumendu Roy (7 Feb 1932 – 27 Sep 2023)*

Soumendu Roy was born on 7<sup>th</sup> February 1932 in North Calcutta. He was the sixth child of his father Kanak Kumar Roy and mother Gargi Roy. He spent his childhood in the princely state of Dharamjaigarh which was then in Madhya Pradesh (now in Chhattisgarh). His father was the state's legal manager for Rajmata Gopinath Kumari. In his authorised biography, 'Through the Eyes of a Cinematographer' by Devapriya Sanyal, Soumendu Roy described his childhood days – 'I used to often wander on the river bank – give free rein to my voice either by singing or imitating bird calls. I would also often think of climbing the distant hills. There was a Shiv mandir on the riverbank and a Ram mandir in front of a nearby pond. I can still see these things very clearly in my mind's eye,'\*

The durbar hall of the Dharamjaigarh Palace had a great impact on his life. He described – 'Since it was a durbar hall belonging to a real king, and not a set created for a film, it really seemed majestic. The walls were covered with oil paintings of the Raja's

ancestors. A huge chandelier of cut glass hung from the ceiling, and the floor was covered with a carpet so soft that one's feet would sink while walking on it. The rest of the furniture in that room was of mahogany, but the most beautiful thing in that room was the throne. After the Raja's death, no one ever sat on the throne, not even the Rajmata. But I would sit on it without any qualms,'\*

At the age of ten, Soumendu was shifted to Calcutta with his parents and siblings and was settled in a family house in South Calcutta where he was brought up in a big family with 17 children including his cousins. In his own words – 'I arrived in Kolkata when the Second World War was on. I had been to Kolkata before but somehow had never been able to learn the ways of the city folk much. While I was at Dharamjaigarh, I had no idea of the ramifications of the war, since it hadn't reached the sleepy state.'\*

His relation with cinema started at a very young age. According to him – 'My first film in Kolkata was Chaplin's Gold Rush at Elite. That was

the first time I ate at a restaurant as well – Moghlai Parathas at Anadi Cabin – thanks to *mejda*. We would also get to watch Charlie Chaplin and Laurel & Hardy films at the Talkie Show House in north Kolkata...’\*

Anadi Cabin was close to Elite Cinema at Esplanade, at the centre of the city where several other cinema halls were there. Soumendu was a student of Tirthapati Institution in South Calcutta where he had a very good friend named Ashit Raha in his class. Raha’s elder brother owned a photo studio at Lake Market, also in South Calcutta, called ‘The Avenue Poly Photo Studio’. Both of them used to visit the studio regularly on Sundays and thus got the first lesson in photography from Ashit’s elder brother. After finishing school, both of them were admitted to Ashutosh College in South Calcutta.

Soumendu’s elder sister gifted him a Kodak Brownie camera. Roy himself described the experience of his first camera – ‘My elder sister must have noticed that I was fascinated by the camera and she promised to buy me a camera if I managed to pass my matriculation examination at the first go. I was never an outstanding student – I’d call myself average at best. I guess Didi thought that I’d never be able to pass my boards in the first attempt and therefore she had to entice me with the reward of a camera. The promise of having my very own camera worked wonders and I passed. It was my first-ever camera and I used to take a lot of photos with it.’\*

In his early 20s Soumendu started his career in the film industry as an assistant to the famous cameraman Ramananda Sengupta who agreed to take him on his director Hiranmoy Sen’s request. Sen was a relative of Roy. At his very first meeting at the Technicians’ Studio the veteran cinematographer warned him – ‘A career in the film industry can prove to be very unpredictable. You could well remain an assistant cameraman all your life; or even worse, you may not even achieve anything. It is not possible to predict anything. On the other hand, you may even develop into a full-fledged cinematographer in your own right.’\*

For a long time, Soumendu worked in Technicians’ Studio as a caretaker of a Mitchell camera, focusing or cutting off a light, as instructed by the cameraman or his assistant. Studio’s chief

electrician Prabhas Bhattacharya taught him the craft and techniques of lighting which helped him a lot in his future days. He learnt the nuances of cinematography by closely following the works of the stalwarts like Ramananda Sengupta, G.K. Mehta, Ajoy Kar, Anil Gupta, Bimal Mukherjee, Bishu Chakrabarty, Deoji Bhai, and others. His career took a big turn after he came in contact with Satyajit Ray.

After getting the fund from West Bengal Govt. when Satyajit Ray re-started the shooting of *Pather Panchali* (1955), he hired the Mitchell camera from the Technicians’ Studio. Soumendu Roy got the opportunity to join Ray’s unit as the caretaker of that camera on behalf of the studio and thus he met Satyajit Ray, Bansi Chandragupta, Subrata Mitra, and others. That was the first time he experienced a shooting outside the studio floor, in open air, using natural light, in a completely different atmosphere what he had never seen so far in the studio. In his own words – ‘Working with Satyajit Ray and *Pather Panchali* changed my entire life. It opened up a huge vista of opportunity for me.’

Subrata Mitra, the legendary cinematographer of Ray’s *Pather Panchali* (1955), *Aparajito* (1956), *Parash Pathar* (1957), *Jalsaghar* (1958), *Apur Sansar* (1959), *Devi* (1960), *Kanchenjunga* (1962), *Mahanagar* (1963), *Charulata* (1964), and *Nayak* (1966), who introduced the bounce light, was his guru. Soumendu Roy had the privilege to assist the master Subrata Mitra which undoubtedly enriched him to become a highly acclaimed cameraman. He sincerely followed the expertise of Mitra in realistic light arrangements and executed it in his own works.

Soumendu Roy also assisted another renowned cinematographer Dinan Gupta who was the assistant cameraman in Ray’s *Pather Panchali* under Subrata Mitra. And thus, Soumendu also got the opportunity to assist Dinan Gupta in Ritwik Ghatak’s *Ajantrik* (1958), and *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960). Even in Ghatak’s *Komal Gandhar* (1961) Soumendu Roy assisted its cameraman Dilip Ranjan Mukhopadhyay.

Soumendu Roy’s journey as a cinematographer in Satyajit Ray’s films began with Ray’s documentary *Rabindranath Tagore* (1961) which was commissioned by Film Division on

Tagore's Centenary (1861-1961). That time Subrata Mitra was suffering from retinal detachment. Roy's first feature *Teen Kanya* (1961) with Ray was highly challenging as it was an anthology of three short stories of Rabindranath Tagore – *The Postmaster*, *Monihara* and *Samapti*, completely with three different moods. And hence, he had to design light according to their own demands which was clearly visible in the final print of the films.

Roy's bonding with Ray lasted for a long time and he worked in fifteen out of twenty eight of Ray's feature films, four out of five documentary films, and three out of three television films, including *Abhijaan* (1962), *Two* (1964), *Mahapurush* (1965), *Kapurush* (1965), *Chiriyakhana* (1967), *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne* (1969), *Aranyer Din Ratri* (1970), *Pratidwandi* (1970), *Seemabaddha* (1971), *Sikkim* (1971), *The Inner Eye* (1972), *Ashani Sanket* (1973), *Sonar Kella* (1974), *Jana Aranya* (1976), *Shatranj Ke Khilari* (1977), *Joy Baba Felunath* (1979), *Heerak Rajar Deshe* (1980), *Sadgati* (1981), *Ghare Baire* (1985), and many others.

Soumendu Roy also worked as the cinematographer with other acclaimed directors like Tarun Majumdar in his films *Palatak* (1963), *Alor Pipasa* (1965), *Balika Badhu* (1967), and *Kuheli* (1971); Buddhadeb Dasgupta in *Charachar* (1993); and Tapan Sinha in his films *Ek Doctor ki Maut* (1991), *Wheel Chair* (1994), and *Ajab Gayer Ajab Katha* (1998). He also worked with MS Sathyu for his documentary *Islam in India* (1980-81). He also worked as the assistant cameraman to Dinen Gupta in Rajen Tarafdar's acclaimed film *Ganga* (1960).

Soumendu Roy used different other techniques of lighting beyond Subrata Mitra's realistic school in many films as the situation demanded. In Tarun Mazumdar's *Alor Pipasa* (1965) he followed the Hollywood school of lighting.

He had many admirers, followers and students, but Purnendu Bose was his most dear disciple. Bose was a renowned cameraman as well, but still assisted Roy throughout his life. Bose had a huge technical knowledge and always used to keep himself updated. They had a deep-rooted

understanding and used to solve each other's problems in any technical issues mutually.

Soumendu Roy was a master craftsman of the photochemical processing in celluloid era. He never went to any film school or had no formal education in cinematography. He learnt from the masters directly. He had a great dedication of learning. He was very serious about his works, highly disciplined, always used to do a huge homework for each and every project he was assigned for. There was now question of any casual approach in any of his works.

During his long career he won the National Awards three times for Best Cinematography in Ray's *Ashani Shanket*, *Sonar Kella*, and *Shatranj Ke Khiladi*. In 1993 he won his fourth National Award for the Best Cinematography in non-feature category for Raja Sen's film *Suchitra Mitra*. His filming was very descriptive, minutely depicting the visual narrative by well composed frames with perfect light. He was a master of storytelling through the camera.

Soumendu Roy was the advisor of cinematography department of Roopkala Kendro, an Institute of Film and Social Communication in the Information and Cultural Affairs Department, Govt. of West Bengal, formed out of an Indo-Italian technical cooperation in 1995. His huge experience helped Roopkala Kendro a lot to train up its students. Besides celluloid, he also had a huge experience working in early digital era. He was closely associated with the film society movement and used to take part in many of the programs of the film societies in the city.

He was a great teacher, always patient and gentle to his students. He was an epitome of Bengali *Vadralok*, sophisticated and well mannered. The nonagenarian bachelor breathed his last at his South Kolkata residence on 27<sup>th</sup> September 2023. His death is a great loss to the Indian Cinema.

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**\*Acknowledgement:**

Sanyal, Devapriya. Through the Eyes of a Cinematographer: A Biography of Soumendu Roy. HarperCollins.

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