



# National Film Archive of India

Ministry of Information and Broadcasting  
Government of India

## Interview of Veteran Film Actress Shobha Sen by Smt. Sunita Basu

This is an oral history project on Smt. Shobha Sen, a powerful actress, who has for over 50 years, portrayed the most challenging roles on both Bengali stage and film, and continues her work to this day.

**Interviewer** - Good morning, Shobha Di. We would like to know about your work. You have performed on stage as well as on screen for almost 50 years. Will you please tell us about the overall atmosphere of the film industry and your experience as a performing artist?

You were busy in some shooting day before yesterday. What is the name of that film?

**Shobha Sen** - '*Bhogini Nivedita*.'

**Interviewer** - What is your role in this film?

**Shobha Sen** - Nivedita's grandmother.

**Interviewer** - Do you take part in a lot of films nowadays?

**Shobha Sen** - No. I don't take on too many films nowadays. I have shifted my attention mostly to theatre. I like theatre more than cinema. It is easier to express your own thoughts and ideas in theatre which is not possible in cinema. When I started acting in films in the year 1939 [**Note:** Actually in 1949] this was my sole purpose.

Our friend, the late Nimai Ghosh offered me a role in his first movie '*Chhinnamul*'. He said, "This is my first venture and you have to take part in this film." Both of us had already performed in the play '*Nabanna*' under the banner of Gananatya Sangha. Everyone knows that '*Nabanna*' has become a landmark in the history of theatre. I had never thought of appearing on screen at that time. My career in acting started with this play. I've known Nimai Ghosh ever since. He was such a nice person - good hearted, polite and intelligent! Moreover, he had an interesting way of talking which made all of us his fans. So, when he said that, "You have to act for my film", I just couldn't refuse.

It was not a professional group because most of the artists were members of the Gananatya Sangha. So, I had no fear or hesitation. Nimai babu was a great cameraman. The film may not have been a box office success but it became very famous. It belonged to a new genre. Neo-realism was not known to us at that time. We had watched Italian neo-realist films in film festivals later. I think Nimai Ghosh is the first director to make a neo-realist film in India. He made this film before Satyajit Ray made '*Pather Panchali*'. In fact, he was a friend of Satyajit Ray. And it was the first movie in which I have ever taken part.

I had no fear or hesitation of working with Nimai Ghosh but after I started acting in '*Chhinnamul*', I got offers from six or seven other producers. One of them was great director and cameraman, Ajoy Kar. He offered me an important role in his movie '*Bamuner Meye*'. The producer of the film was Kanan Debi. I accepted the offer because the producer was a lady and Ajoy Kar was there.

After that, it was '*Tathapi*' by Bimal Roy, then '*Paribartan*' by Satyen Bose and so on. Finally, I ended up having performed in a hundred and fifty films altogether.

Sometimes I feel astonished thinking about it as it had never been my plan to become a film actor. My heart has always craved for theatre.

People's Little Theatre group had taken Minerva Theatre on lease in the year 1957-58. I was a member of that group. We produced plays commercially for eleven years in Minerva. Utpal Dutt had directed so many famous plays in that theatre. He was the leader of the PLT group. Many of our productions, such as '*Angar*', '*Kallol*', '*Manusher Adhikar*', '*Titas Ekti Nodir Nam*' and '*Ferari Fauj*' were very successful and they earned not only name and fame for the group but also financial stability. But later for political and other reasons we suffered great losses and left Minerva for good.

Well, let's talk about cinema now. I have enjoyed acting in films too. I was introduced to many famous professional film actors of that time while acting in '*Bamuner Meye*'. I thus got an opportunity to watch their styles of acting and started coming into their contacts. For '*Bamuner Meye*' - a good number of renowned and powerful artists performed. Prabha Debi was one of them who, I believe, was an artist of international stature. She was a disciple of Shishir Bhaduri. Pahari Sanyal, Tulsi Lahiri, Anubha Gupta - all these well-known artists performed in that film. I worked with these professional actors for the first time in this movie and received a lot of acclamation for my performance. I don't know whether the credit should go to Ajoy Kar or to Kanan Debi or to my own efforts but somehow it was a breakthrough for me. I took up acting as my career after my success in '*Bamuner Meye*'.

**Interviewer** - When and how did you start acting on stage?

**Shobha Sen** - I graduated in the year 1942. Next, I started thinking what

profession I should choose in my life. I then joined active politics based on the Marxist ideology of that time. Naturally, I was eager to find a new path which would help me spread my beliefs and ideas. I started discussing this with my friends and relatives who could help me in planning my future. My sister-in-law, Savitri Roy and her husband Prof. Shantimoy Roy told me that the Party [Note: The Communist Party of India] had opened a new cultural front named Gananatya Sangha and Bijan Bhattacharya had written the play '*Nabanna*' for it. They were searching for an actress for the lead female role and asked me whether I would be interested. I went with Shantimoy babu to the office of Gananatya Sangha to meet one of its officials. We got an appointment with Bijan Bhattacharya. Bijan Bhattacharya took a test of my ability and asked me to read out a part of that play. I passed the test and Bijan babu told me to come for rehearsal from next day.

It was a huge old building on Harrison Road. The second, third and fourth floors were taken on rent by the Party. Many comrades used to live there. Some of them were whole timers of the party working on the cultural front, some were engaged elsewhere. Rehearsal started with Tripti Mitra, Shambhu Mitra, Bijan Bhattacharya and me. Gangapada Bose and Charuprakash Ghosh joined a little later. All of them were renowned artists of Gananatya Sangha. We were working with sincerity and enthusiasm.

The play was staged in a well-known theatre hall in Kolkata in the month of October in 1944. It was a very successful production and it was on for ten consecutive days. In that short period of time it became so popular that all the tickets were being sold in advance and lots of people couldn't manage to get any.

We were also very happy to see the initial success of our first play. But this happiness didn't last long as the owners of commercial theatres and hall owners went against us. Our popularity became a threat for their business. The play was staged in Star Theatre where legendary artist Shishir Bhaduri came to watch our play. He was so astonished that he made enquiries about our whereabouts as he couldn't believe that we were artists living in Kolkata. He even suspected that we were inhabitants coming from rural Bengal and not actors at all! Our realistic acting, make up, costume - everything was novel to the audience of Kolkata theatre. All performing artists used to dress in beautiful clothes and use lots of makeup in those days even if that meant showing complete disregard to their roles in the play. So our torn clothes, little or no makeup and different style of acting established a new genre in Bengali theatre. Maybe you already know this about '*Nabanna*', but even the set of '*Nabanna*' was a different one. It was made of jute!

In those days, the success of a show depended mainly on the name and fame of individual actors such as Ahindra Chowdhury, Naresh Mitra, Shishir Bhaduri, Krishen Kumar, Chanakya Baulkalyan and others. Theatre-going people were interested mostly about the performance of these renowned actors and compared their individual ability in portraying the same character. For example - Ahindra Chowdhury was compared with Shishir Bhaduri in the role of Chanakya. This was the norm of the day. But we had started group theatre where every actor was considered equally important for a successful performance of a play. The concept of group theatre, hitherto unknown to the Bengali stage, is based on team work and solidarity. We were the first to prove

its efficacy on the Kolkata stage. Our teamwork focused on the actuality and perfection of every character. Thus '*Nabanna*' created history. It did not run for many days at that time but gained wide popularity. K.A. Abbas made his film '*Dharti ke Lal*' based on '*Nabanna*', where Tripti Mitra and Shambhu Mitra acted. Balraj Sahni and his first wife Damayanti also performed in '*Dharti ke Lal*'. I don't know whether the film was a financial success or not but it was definitely a well acclaimed one. It was completely different from popular commercial cinema. I have watched the film and I firmly believe it ushered a new era of Indian cinema.

**Interviewer** - Shobhadi, we know that you used to take part in play acting in your college. But where did you get your training for acting?

**Shobha Sen** - There was no school of performing arts in those days, so I had no scope to get trained, even if we desired to be trained. We were trained mainly by the directors. Bijan Bhattacharya taught us about acting during the rehearsals of '*Nabanna*'. He used regional dialects of Jessore in his play and made us speak that dialect exactly as the village people used it. Shambhu Mitra also trained us. It's my good fortune that after getting training from Bijan Bhattacharya and Shambhu Mitra, I came straight to Utpal Dutt. You all know what a great talent he was in the field of acting. He was also a great teacher.

I joined People's Little Theatre, a group led by Utpal Dutt. My first role there was of Lady Macbeth in Shakespeare's '*Macbeth*'. There is nothing as lucrative for an actor. Anyone, who knows even a little about theatre, is well aware of this fact. Great actresses of the world aspire to act as Lady Macbeth at least once in their life. In fact, I was scared to take that role. The character of Lady Macbeth is full

of contradiction and conflict. To portray this character was truly a challenge for me. But Utpal Dutt's training and guidance helped me to overcome all the difficulties. When I could perform in the role of Lady Macbeth successfully and he was happy with my performance, then I became sure of my worth. After that I have acted in many plays portraying many different characters.

**Interviewer** - Please tell us about this training of Utpal-da. How was he different from the others?

**Shobha Sen** - First and foremost, Utpal Dutt never told us to copy anyone. I have known several directors who did not follow this rule. Most of the actors in their groups used to copy the style of acting, the tone, and delivery of dialogue of their particular director and thus they made the whole production monotonous. Utpal Dutt was strongly against this.

Most of his productions were based on plays written by him. He had also translated and staged plays written by classical authors like Shakespeare and George Bernard Shaw. He used to explain the characters and their respective backgrounds in minute details but he never told us to copy his style. When he selected an actor for a particular role, Utpal tried to match the actor's character and personal appearance with that of the character in the play, as much as possible. It helped the actor too. He never dictated the actors. If he saw that the actor did not get his points somehow and was portraying the character from the wrong angle only then did he intervene and show the actor what was right.

First, he used to read the selected play aloud in front of the group. While reading it he also demonstrated some parts with acting which helped us to understand the play better. Then he selected actors for each role and distributed the scripts.

Everyone was not always happy with his or her respective parts. But Utpal Dutt always told us that each role and character in the drama is equally important. There is nothing called good role or bad role in a play. The responsibility of an actor is to perform his part perfectly and not to judge it. If one is a really good actor he can show his talent even in a very insignificant role. An example was Rabi Ghosh whose first appearance on stage was in the role of a hawker. We were staging the play '*Sangbadik*' and Rabi was just a hawker who entered the stage from one wing selling newspapers and went out of the stage through the other wing. But Utpal Dutt immediately realised his talent for acting and offered more important roles to him in his coming productions. This is how one's career in acting is built.

Utpal Dutt used to build a model space during rehearsal. Here, he placed all the actors and explained everyone's movements in each scene in minute details. It was so accurately done that we only had to mark our movements - be it from one wing to the other or from up stage to down stage. Utpal used to explain the plays in such a manner that everything used to get alive in our imagination. That's how we got our training.

The most difficult problem which we had to face for our performances was to get a stage. It was a real problem throughout. After getting Minerva this problem was solved for some time. Getting a permanent theatre hall is truly a great advantage for any director. He can make his experiments freely. So, we were very lucky to get Minerva Theatre.

Our hit play was '*Angar*'. It was a true-to-life play. Several miners had died and many more were injured in the infamous accident of the Chinakuri coal mines

[1958]. Many of our friends and comrades suggested that theme to us. Thus Utpal Dutt, Tapas Sen, Nirmal Guha Roy and some others went to the coal mine to know the actual facts. There, they talked with the local people and miners to learn about exactly what had happened and the amount of gross negligence on the part of the mine owners which was responsible for the accident. They also got the songs recorded which were sung by the local people in their grief and sorrow. After that we staged our play. Nirmal Guha Roy's realistic set of the coal mine and Tapas Sen's lighting were astonishing. '*Angar*' became a tremendous success.

**Interviewer** – So you had a lot of training for stage acting. But when you adopted the silver screen how did you manage it? Acting in film is certainly different from stage acting – isn't it?

**Shobha Sen** – I acquired the ideas of film acting gradually. One can't be too dramatic while acting in a film. In theatre, we use physical gestures and voice modulation to a large extent to reach the audience. But one must understand that we can't do that in film. Theatrical acting can perhaps work for a long shot, but for a close-up it is disastrous. Gradually I learnt all these things with experience. In fact, people used to say that in stage also I acted like I was acting in cinema. Maybe I have performed in so many films that the style of my acting had changed. And I never liked melodramatic acting at all. Whenever I felt that I was being over-dramatic, I immediately tried to restrain and rectify myself.

**Interviewer** – Could you use your stage experience in cinema? Was it of any help?

**Shobha Sen** – Of course it helped. The whole world knows that only stage actors

can improve the standard of acting in movies. They get first-hand experience of interacting with the audience, hence they understand the pulse. They know how to satisfy popular demand. This is why most of the stage actors become successful on the screen too. Moreover, as I have already mentioned that there was no training institute at that time like that of Pune (for film) and Delhi (for drama) today, so for us it was the only way to learn acting.

Our standard was never low. We learnt by experience and also by our own mistakes. After a film was made, we used to watch it and find out where we may have slipped up, and tried our best never to repeat it. I have visited lots of foreign countries. Mostly we went to watch plays. I have noticed that in most of those places, be it London or Berlin or Moscow, stage actors were the ones who acted in the movies. If you do not perform in the citizens' theatre, you are not allowed to act for a film. It's a rule there [USSR?]. An actor has to get his or her training and perform in the theatre for a stipulated period of time. After that he can act for a few movies and again he has to go back to theatre. First-hand interaction with the audience is considered the most important point of learning there.

**Interviewer** -When you started acting in films, many other stage actors also joined the industry at that time. Who were these artists?

**Shobha Sen** - Most of the well-known artists of Gananatya Sangha joined the film industry at that time, such as Tripti Mitra, Shambhu Mitra, Bijan Bhattacharya, Gangapada Bose, Charuprakash Ghosh, Sita Debi and many others.

**Interviewer** - Was it a trend of the past or did it start at that time?

**Shobha Sen** – No, it had been a trend throughout. Prabha Debi and many other great artists of that era came from professional theatre. Almost all the character actors came from stage. Film directors were eager to take them as they knew that these artists were already trained. Satyajit Ray had taken so many stage artists for his productions and he reaped the benefits also.

**Interviewer** – Please tell us something about the film actors of the olden days.

**Shobha Sen** – I got to know them first when I was acting in '*Bamuner Meye*'. This is the first movie in which I got an opportunity to work with professional artists. Prabha Debi and Pahari Sanyal performed in it and I had scenes with Tulsi Lahiri too. The story was a tragic one. I played the part of a helpless, innocent woman named Gnyanoda who was a child widow. When her married sister became ill, she came to nurse her but her sister died and her brother-in-law seduced her. When she became pregnant, her brother-in-law told her to abort the child but she refused. Then the brother-in-law threw her out of his house and told her to go to Kashi.

I learnt a lot while acting in this movie. Prabha Debi taught me so many important things. She pointed out my mistakes and helped me to correct them. Let me give you an example: I used to move my eyebrows too much and also frowned many times. In theatre, the audience might not notice this but in film it was bound to have a very bad effect, especially in close ups. Prabha Debi showed me how to eliminate these gestures.

Let me tell you about another day: It was an important but difficult shot in which Gnyanoda was leaving home forever. She was waiting in the station without knowing where to go or how. Deserted by all, she had only a little money

for buying a ticket. She was completely alone and helpless. I had no clue how to portray this tragedy in her life. I went to Prabha Debi and asked for her help. She told me how to act in that shot, how to bring that lost and helpless look on my face. I took her suggestion and acted accordingly. When I watched the film - it was such a nice shot! I am truly grateful to Prabha Debi. She explained everything in a simple way so that it was easy for me to follow her instructions. She used to sit and watch each and every shot. I asked for her opinion after each shot. She guided me excellently. Always praised me when I was right and also pointed out when I was wrong.

Prabha Debi helped me many times. Once, both of us were acting in Ritwik Ghatak's '*Nagarik*'. Ritwik somehow was not satisfied and was continuously finding faults with me. Prabha Debi then talked to him. She told Ritwik that she had full faith in me and she was sure that I could perform according to his expectations if he could make them clear to me. Ritwik listened to her and his behaviour changed remarkably. I performed well in '*Nagarik*'.

**Interviewer** - When you were acting along with these renowned artists, what was your relation with them? Did you ever get scared and stay away from them?

**Shobha Sen** - It's true that I was scared for a few times but I had the advantage of coming from Ganantya Sangha. Everyone knew that I had a political background. They also knew that I had a university education. In those days most of the female artists did not get education at all. So they always had respect for me. Even male actors never dared to show any disrespect in their behaviour. I had a good relationship with many of them and saw their nice and bright sides. They were modest, helpful, good natured and truly well mannered. I learnt a

great many things from them.

**Interviewer** - You have a unique voice which we have noticed in all your plays and films. Where did you get your voice training?

**Shobha Sen** - I have a natural good voice. And I knew that when I was acting in '*Nabanna*'. But at that time I had no experience or training. But immediately after '*Nabanna*' I got an offer from All India Radio to work there as staff artist mainly for play acting. The director named Somnath (Surname is not clearly heard) took my interview. His first question was - "Is this your real voice?" When I replied "Yes", he said that it was a golden voice and offered the job to me. But I said "No". I told him that, theatre was my first love and first preference. If I took a regular job in the All India Radio office then I'd have to abide by their schedule which might clash with my rehearsal or show. He also admitted that it would be so. Thus I refused to take a job as staff artist. And I think that I took the right decision. But then he offered me the job of temporary staff artist for which a fifteen days contract was made each time, and I used to go there for acting in radio plays.

I had my voice training while I was working for AIR. Biren Bhadra, Bani Kumar and other renowned radio artists trained me at that time. They used to write plays, act in them and trained us to act in radio dramas. As I came from East Bengal, I had a problem regarding the correct pronunciation of "R". These trainers helped me to rectify all of my problems. I got my first and most important voice training from these masters. They taught me never to be melodramatic and never to speak in an artificial style. Use of natural voice and normal delivery of dialogue are much more impressive than melodramatic

ones. All these teachings were really helpful. I act for radio till this day. After that I acted in several plays and films and trained myself with my own experience.

**Interviewer** - How did this voice training help you in film acting?

**Shobha Sen** - I can't say that it helped specifically in film acting. In theatre I learnt about voice modulation. Melodrama, an artificial style of speaking or talking in a particular pitch - all these were a trend of the past. Utpal Dutt taught us how to modulate our voice, how to throw dialogue and how to create an impact on the audience by speaking very fast and then immediately lowering and toning down the voice. Then there were my yoga trainers who taught me how to take care of my vocal cord through exercise. They also advised me not to eat or drink anything cold, not to talk too much or do anything which can strain my voice on the days of shows and shootings. I still follow their advice. I never take ice cream or cold water. I love ice cream so whenever I go to foreign countries I eat them to my heart's content as I don't have to appear for any show there.

**Interviewer** - Did they use dubbing in films when you were doing '*Chhinnamul*'?

**Shobha Sen** - No, there was no dubbing in those days. If there was any mistake in a shot then the actor had to say that dialogue again immediately. After that it was the responsibility of the editor to match it.

**Interviewer** - But now that dubbing has become a regular practice, you also must have done it?

**Shobha Sen** - Oh, yes.

**Interviewer** - But I suppose you have not done it at the beginning of your career - say for '*Nagarik*'?

**Shobha Sen** - No. But when we started our own productions we used dubbing in them. We produced four or five movies. One has to go for dubbing in outdoor shots as there is too much outside noise during shooting. But dubbing is more difficult than the actual shooting. Sometimes the artists have to spend fifteen or more days after the shooting just to finish dubbing. For this they don't get any extra pay which often creates discontent and dismay. They have to give their time and effort without getting any benefit. But the producers and financiers are totally against paying any extra money to the artists for dubbing.

**Interviewer** - Shobhadi, while portraying a character in a play it's possible for you to concentrate on the character completely and you can be engrossed in it. But in cinema you may have to play different roles for different films at the same time or there can be long intervals between shots. How do you manage to act in films? Don't you face difficulty?

**Shobha Sen** - If the director is good then there is no problem because he helps the actors to get the links. But unfortunately most of the present day directors do not care for it at all. One should read out the script to each and every actor at the very beginning of the shooting so that they can become familiar with the story line and its chronological order. Then acting becomes easier and there is no problem even if the shooting starts with the last scene. But as I said already, very few directors care to do this today. Some of them praise the actors unduly and some insult them when anything goes wrong. They just try to cover up their own idleness and inability by these acts. This has become a trend in this line now.

They even refuse to hand over dialogues to most of the performers before they start to shoot. Only some actors, who are to perform important roles in the movie, manage to get their dialogues before shooting and this too happens rarely. But this should not be the trend. Directors should help the actors to keep a connection with the story line and the chronology. Otherwise lots of problems arise.

**Interviewer** -Please tell us about your first movie '*Chhinnamul*' in which you played the role of Batasi. How was the role? How did you work for the film?

**Shobha Sen** - '*Chhinnamul*' tells you the story of a village of East Bengal during partition. Batasi and her husband lived in the village. They were perfectly happy. But then her husband joined the peasant movement and was arrested. Batasi, who was with child at that time thus became alone and vulnerable. Some of her kind neighbours tried to console her but to add to her misery the great exodus due to partition started at that time and most of the people from her village were involved. Batasi had no other way but to join them on their journey towards Kolkata.

I worked with Gangapada Bose in this film. He was my co- actor in '*Nabanna*' and also in many other plays. He was a great friend of mine whom I can never forget. In '*Chhinnamul*' he acted as a character who helped Batasi in every way and she finally reached Kolkata. Charuprakash Ghosh was also there in '*Chhinnamul*'. I knew him too from my '*Nabanna*' days. He was a good actor and played an important part in the film. He was also a good friend and helped me in every possible way throughout my life. Ritwik Ghatak played a minor role in this movie but even in that he showed his talent and uniqueness. We were close

friends and used to spend our days in talks and discussions on various subjects. I remember that Pudovkin and Cherkasov came to Kolkata. '*Chhinnamul*' was finished by that time. They came to visit the studio. We welcomed them with a good cultural show. They watched many films and also shootings. I was acting in the film '*Bedeni*' at that time for which Ritwik Ghatak was the assistant director. Nimai babu showed '*Chhinnamul*' to them. They were really impressed. They never expected to watch a movie like that in India and immediately decided to buy the film. '*Chhinnamul*' was not at all a box office success but since the Soviet Cultural Committee bought the film, the producer did not suffer any loss. As it is, it was a low budget movie and the artists also took very nominal payment as all of them were supporting Nimai babu's new venture.

I didn't know anything about acting in a movie at the time but Nimai babu always helped me. He explained each and every scene to the artists. Suppose, the shot started when I was sitting in a particular position - he used to tell me how to turn my face, how to move from one point to the other so that I don't go out of the frame and other such things in minute detail - truly I never felt any difficulty during shooting. When I first watched the movie, I was surprised by my own acting skills. But then I realised that it was not my skill but that of Nimai babu's. I could act so well in my first film only because the director was a great one. All the credit belongs to Nimai babu and of course, the faults were mine. I remain grateful to him forever.

**Interviewer** - Did Bijan Bhattacharya take part in '*Chhinnamul*'?

**Shobha Sen** - Yes, he did.

**Interviewer** - And Shanti Mitra too?

**Shobha Sen** - Yes.

**Interviewer** - What was the atmosphere of the studio?

**Shobha Sen** - It was a very happy and comfortable one. We had talks and discussions on various subjects. We also had lots of fun during shooting. Nimai babu himself was such a jovial and entertaining person that we really didn't know how the time passed. We were like one family.

**Interviewer** - Did you get any offers for other films before the release of '*Chhinnamul*'?

**Shobha Sen** - Yes. '*Chhinnamul*' was being shot in Radha Studio. From there the word spread gradually. I was also known for '*Nabanna*'. In those days, producers were always in search of good artists. That's how I went on to act in Satyen Bose's film '*Paribartan*' straight from the sets of '*Chhinnamul*'.

Satyen Bose resided in the same locality as us and I knew him because he was also connected with the progressive theatre movement. When he heard that I was working in cinema, he offered me a role in his film '*Paribartan*'. It was a story which centred round a school. I was offered the part of a handicapped boy's mother. The character was an interesting one and I was praised for portraying it as such.

Ajoy Kar was the cameraman for '*Paribartan*'. He was so impressed with my work that he offered me the role of Gnyanoda in his film '*Bamuner Meye*'. As it is, it was an important character but Ajoy babu's direction and cinematography made it the most prominent one in the movie.

I became really famous after this film. I think, the whole credit goes to Ajoy babu.

He was really an excellent cameraperson. I never knew before that I could look so beautiful! He also knew how to get the best of every performer. Let me tell you about one shot: In this shot, Gnyanoda was cutting vegetables sitting in an open courtyard when her brother-in-law entered and told her to leave his house for good as she had refused to abort their illegitimate child. She lifted her face and just looked at him. Ajoy babu placed the camera on a high stool for taking this shot and explained to me how to look with silent reproach. The camera angle was superb and I was highly praised for that scene. Ajoy babu's shot taking and his skills in using the camera were truly incomparable. I don't think any present day, director has that level of expertise.

I know another director whose skills were unique and inimitable: Ritwik Ghatak. His ideas and imagination were of a different level. He was the younger brother of Sudhish Ghatak and therefore had a connection with film world from a young age. He learnt the language of film in his college days and he could think in that language. When he first came to Kolkata from Rajshahi, I was very busy with Ganantya Sangha's productions. He used to come to our house almost every day. We were close friends. He discussed all the pros and cons about his future film with me. We had planned everything but had no money to produce a movie. Ritwik always said that he would make his films on some unusual subjects and not something mundane. His shot divisions were unparalleled. In fact, there was nothing commonplace or conventional about Ritwik. He also had many different ideas regarding acting which he used in many of his films. He taught us how to move the eyes and then slowly turn the body. Like most famous directors, he was very fastidious about his work.

Ajoy Kar also worked meticulously. I remember one incident during the shooting of his movie '*Madhuban*': We went to Hazaribagh for the outdoor shooting of that movie. There was a dance sequence in a burning forest. After the whole unit reached the location, it was found that the arrangement for the fire brigade to put off the forest fire was not made. He cancelled the shooting. It was a West Bengal Government production and he had to finish the movie within a stipulated period. So, we tried to convince him to take that sequence in any other way. But he refused to do so though time and money both were falling short. The shooting got cancelled and the whole unit came back to Kolkata but Ajoy Kar did not budge from his decision. Later he shot that scene exactly according to his plan. He never compromised where his work was concerned and that is what made him so great a director.

I remember another very good production team - Agradoot. There were two such groups - Agradoot and Agragami. I worked for both of them. Agradoot used to work in M. P. Studio. They took it on lease. My first movie with them was '*Vidyasagar*'. I played the role of Surabala (a girl whom Vidyasagar loved like his sister) in the movie. Vidyasagar championed the cause of women throughout his life and Hindu Widow Remarriage Act was passed through his initiative. In the movie the tragedy of the life of a young Hindu widow was shown using the character of Surabala. There was a shot in which a happy and radiant Surabala was going to take blessings from Vidyasagar just after her marriage. She was dressed in a lavish manner in a Benarasi saree and gold jewellery. Just after a few shots the same Surabala was shown coming back as a widow, clad in white and without any ornament. Widowhood had taken away all colours and all

happiness from the poor girl's life forever. These two shots portrayed the stark contrast between the two halves of Surabala's life so vividly that no one could forget them. Kaliprasad Ghosh was the director of the film and it was his idea. After this I was getting too many offers for the roles of widow. Everyone said that, it suits me so well. And sometimes I used to think that as I played the role of a widow in so many films, I might not face it in real life!

'*Vidyasagar*' was my first film at M.P. After that I became a permanent artist for them. My next film was '*Babla*', which became a famous movie. I played the part of Babla's mother. Babla's father had a job in Kolkata. He used to visit his son and wife every weekend. Then he planned to move his family to Kolkata. Babla and his mother came to Kolkata but his father did not come to meet them at the station. They reached their rented place in Kolkata to find out that, on his way to station Babla's father had an accident and had passed away in the hospital. A mother's struggle for survival thus started. Luckily, she had some good neighbours. Jahar Ganguly and Prabha Debi played the roles of the neighbours. With their help she was raising her son but the burden became too much for her and in the end, she died of tuberculosis. '*Babla*' became a box office hit and my fame spread everywhere. In this movie too I played the role of a widow. After that I performed in so many films - almost a hundred and fifty in number. I am acting for movies till today.

We also produced five films which Utpal Dutt directed. Our first film was '*Megh*'. I appeared in a minor part in that movie while Utpal played the main role.

Next, we produced '*Ghum bhangar Gan*'. This film was based on the working

class movement in India. In this movie Utpal Dutt truly portrayed the conflicts and struggles of the lives of labourers. But the Censor Board did not like that. First, they refused to pass the movie saying that this conflict between the working class and the capitalist owners, which was shown in the movie, was completely unreal and fictitious. Then after a long strife the Censor Board finally approved it but we had to discard a large part of the movie. It was released but did not achieve any success. The budget was exceeded and though the Film Finance Corporation (Now NFDC) helped us in the beginning but later they threatened to sue us. The West Bengal Government then came to help us out and we were saved but we had to handover the film to them. The West Bengal Government then produced it by the name of Vidushak as producer.

Our next film was '*Jhar*'. When the Left front Government came in power in West Bengal, we planned to make this film based on the life of Derozio. Buddhadeb Bhattacharya, who was the minister of information at that time, talked to us about the movie. At first, we thought to make a movie named '*Kshama Korbo Na*'. But it was not possible due to some political reasons. So, we decided on this film on Derozio's life. It was an educational film. Situated in the backdrop of nineteenth century it was a spectacular movie. We worked really hard for this production. The traditional Hindu society of nineteenth century Bengal, the new westernized educated class with progressive ideas, Derozio's influence on his pupils - all of this was assimilated in the story and it became truly a remarkable movie. Most of Derozio's followers, known as 'Young Bengal' are well-known figures in history. I played the role of the mother of Dakshinaranjan. It was a very good role no doubt.

In '*Ghum Bhangar Gan*' Anil Chattopadhyay played the role of the protagonist and I played the role of his mother. Jahar Ray played my husband. The story centred round a poor boy who wanted to become a musician. His parents, who were wage labourers, tried to support him as much as possible but poverty remained a constant barrier for them and finally, they lost their son in an accident. But Censor Board's uncompromising attitude ruined that movie.

Our next venture was '*Baishakhi Megh*'. The story of this film was based on the revolutionary terrorist movement against the British Raj in 1930s. Many people said that, if one considers all the films made on the anti-British freedom movement, it was one of the best. But again, the Censor Board did not approve this movie. Utpal showed that true communists suffered in jail or died in the struggle but the opportunists survived and became the political leaders or ministers of independent India. It was something unacceptable to the Censor Board and again we had to discard parts of the movie for getting their permission. All these cuts and the long delay ruined this movie too. It was not released in time and was financially unsuccessful.

Our last film was '*Maa*' based on the novel Mother by Maxim Gorky. Since the story was situated in the backdrop of tea gardens, we shot the movie in Darjeeling. This time it was the distributor who betrayed us. We suffered a terrible financial loss. Moreover, as we took bank loan for the production, we had to face a court case. In fact, we could never make any profit from any of our own productions. With financial support, Utpal Dutt would have made some really good movies. The script of '*Kshama Korbo Na*' was a very good one based on the persecution and torture of the young people done at the time of the

Emergency era. Utpal Dutt would have received great recognition had he had the chance to make that movie.

**Interviewer** – Did you perform in ‘*Mejdidi*’?

**Shobha Sen** – Yes. I had a minor role in ‘*Mejdidi*’. I also worked for Madhu Bose – in his ‘*Shesher Kabita*’ and ‘*Shubholagna*’.

**Interviewer** – Did you work with Ritwik?

**Shobha Sen** – I have already told you that I performed in ‘*Nagarik*’.

**Interviewer** – Please tell us something more specifically about ‘*Nagarik*’.

**Shobha Sen** – I played the role of the protagonist’s sister in the movie. The story of ‘*Nagarik*’ did not centre around one single character. All the characters had their own importance. This was the lesson they taught in Gananatya Sangha and Ritwik followed that guideline in the story. He introduced many novel ideas in this film. His techniques were unique. The film attracted public interest but at a much later period. After making this film Ritwik literally went from door to door but no distributor or exhibitor agreed to show it. We also tried a lot for the release of the movie but remained unsuccessful. It was released much later. By that time most of the prints were destroyed. Finally, one print was restored but its quality was very poor. Now people have realised the significance of the movie and there are many discussions and debates on it. But Ritwik’s talent did not get its recognition during that time. He had lofty dreams about ‘*Nagarik*’, his first movie. He thought it would usher in a new era in the history of film like ‘*Pather Panchali*’ did. I believe that, ‘*Nagarik*’ would have captured the mind of the audience in the same way, if it had been released in time.

I played the role of the sister in that movie. It was the story of the struggle of a lower middle-class family. The young girl lived with her parents and her siblings. A paying guest came to live with the family. A sweet relation was built up between him and this girl. But her dreams never materialised.

**Interviewer** - Did you work with Mrinal Sen?

**Shobha Sen** - Yes. I worked in '*Bhor Hoye Elo*' by Mrinal Sen. I played the role of the mother in that movie.

[**Note** : '*Bhor Hoye Elo*' is a film by Satyen Bose, released in 1953. '*Raat Bhor*' is directed by Mrinal Sen, which was released in 1955. Shobha Sen performed in both the films.]

I also worked in his '*Tchhapuran*' and '*Ek Adhuri Kahani*'. '*Ek Adhuri Kahani*' is a Hindi movie. I played the role of an old village woman who had a tea stall. She used to smoke hookah and tell stories of her life to her clients. It's a minor role but I enjoyed playing it. The shooting was done mostly outdoors. I took this opportunity to go and meet the local village women and studied the way they talk and work. I even studied the style in which they smoke their hookah. It helped me immensely to portray the character accurately.

'*Dakharkara*' was another remarkable film in which I performed. Kali Banerjee played the role of *Dak harkara* and I played as his wife. Kali Banerjee's performance was superb and he received lots of praise. I also performed my part well. It was a very successful movie. The outdoor shooting was done in Shantiniketan. There too I managed to go to the Santal villages and study their way of talking and their everyday life which I used during acting in '*Dakharkara*'. It was a movie by 'Aragami'. Saroj Dey and his two friends

founded this film unit.

Another film which I must mention is '*Prafulla*'. It was based on Girish Chandra Ghosh's eponymous play. The director of this film was Chitta Bose and the cast consisted of many well-known artists of those days. Chhabi Biswas was one of them. I performed as his wife in the movie. Sandhyarani starred as Prafulla. Sandhyarani, as you know, is a renowned artist and the heroine of many films of that time. She is also a close friend of mine. Bikash Ray also acted in that movie.

The atmosphere of the studios was quite different in those days. As long as the shooting went on, the whole unit used to behave like one joint family. We had night shootings too. But work never became a load to us. We enjoyed our time immensely with fun and laughter. Almost every day someone arranged a feast. Chhabi Biswas was a connoisseur of food and knew precisely which food joint prepared good parathas and which one was famous for its kebabs. Thus, we had excellent food too. Those were the golden days of remembrance for me. But today's picture is completely different. Now the artists come for their work and leave after they finish it. There is no scope for any personal interaction.

In our time there was no concept of separate rooms for every artist. All female artists were to assemble in one large room for their costume and make up. Sometimes there was a smaller room for the extras. Similarly, all male artists used one large room in the studio. No one used to take any offence regarding this arrangement. No one felt humiliated for getting their makeup done in front of other artists. But then the days changed and I am a witness to this. I was acting in M.P. Production's '*Sabar Upare*' when this particular incident took place. '*Sabar*

*Upare'* was a movie by Agradoot. Bibhuti Laha was directing it. He had a great liking for me and used to offer me good roles in his films. Uttam Kumar was the hero of '*Sabar Upare'* and I played the role of his mother. Uttam performed brilliantly and it became a hit movie. Suchitra Sen also acted in this film.

One day I went to M.P. Studio for shooting. I always used the main make up room of the studio for my makeup and costume. That day a guard made me halt saying, no one was allowed to go to that room as Suchitra Sen was using it. Thus, I was directed to another room and found Bharati Debi sitting there. Bharati Debi was a leading actress of many films in her days but by that time she no longer held that position. It was the heydays of Suchitra who became a legendary actress of Bengali cinema. I have always had a good relation with her and she always gives me due respect. On that day as I was talking with Bharati Debi and getting ready for my shot, someone came in, carrying Suchitra's order that I must go and meet her immediately. I went to meet Suchitra in the main makeup room. She asked me, 'Why did you go to that other room for makeup?' I said that the guard had stopped me and told me not to disturb Suchitra and use the other makeup room. Suchitra then explained that the order was meant for Bharati Debi and not for me. I was surprised and asked her the meaning of her behaviour. She said that Bharati Debi was spreading some bad rumours about her and that's why she did not let her enter the main makeup room.

And in this way the atmosphere in the studios changed gradually. There remained no feeling of fun and friendship anymore. I think that, this individualistic attitude is also responsible for the degradation of the general quality of acting. No one gets a chance to learn from the others. They do not

share their experiences either. This is really unfortunate. And now as I have become old, I am often pushed to the room used by the extras whereas the leading actresses all have their own rooms. Sometimes I feel insulted but there is no point complaining. Now I think it's better to leave the film line once and for all.

Amongst the famous directors with whom I worked, I must mention Debaki Bose. I performed as Shailobala in his film, '*Chirakumar Sabha*'. I really enjoyed working in this movie. As Shailobala I disguised myself as a young boy and joined a group of youngsters who had taken the vow of celibacy for life. Shailobala made them to break their vow and marry her own sisters. It was a hilarious movie.

I acted in so many films that now I cannot remember all of them. I took leading roles in most of our own productions. I acted with both Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen in many films. Uttam used to respect and love me a lot.

**Interviewer** - How did you work with Mrinal Sen? What was his method of work?

**Shobha Sen** - His method was to remember everything and plan accordingly. He didn't give much importance to prepare his scripts or cared for pre-shooting homework. I personally believe that, '*Ek Adhuri Kahani*' could not achieve success because he didn't do his 'homework' properly before shooting. But when he concentrated properly, the film became super hit as happened in the case of '*Bhuvan Shome*'. It was a great movie. Later I watched many of his films. His ideas and techniques were excellent undoubtedly but sometimes I felt that his message to the audience did not become clear. When asked, he said that he

did not want to clarify each and every point and leave something to the imagination and understanding of the audience. Unfortunately, most of the movie-goers in our country are not really well-educated and most of his films could not get box office success. But his works earned him international fame and prestige.

**Interviewer** – We know that, '*Chhinnamul*' was a movie of a different genre. You performed in that film as it matched your ideology. But after that you have performed in so many commercial films. What is the reason behind this change of attitude?

**Shobha Sen** – I had to adjust and make some compromises. Otherwise I could not have survived in the film line. Everyone has to accept it here. At first many people think that, they will make good films, art films or follow a certain ideology but finally most of them give up. The infrastructure and organisations of our country do not support this kind of attitude.

**Interviewer** – But you got a lot of good roles to play at least in the beginning of your career.

**Shobha Sen** –Yes. That's true.

And let me tell you that one can distinguish herself even when playing a minor part if one has the ability to do so. This reminds me of the film, '*Banahangsi*', by Kartik Chattopadhyay. I had an interesting role to play in that movie. I played an intriguing character in '*Bakul*' too. '*Bakul*' was a double version movie by New Theatres. Bholanath Mishra, the director of the movie was a very nice man, a true gentleman to be honest. I was selected for playing the role of Manorama for the Bengali version and for the Hindi version Bharati Debi was selected. But I

went straight to B.N.Sarkar and told him that I wanted to act in the Hindi version too. By that time I already learnt enough Hindi to act in the Hindi version of '*Babla*'. Thus I requested him to give me a chance. He was also a very amiable person and a true gentleman. He agreed to give me a chance and I finally performed in both versions of '*Bakul*'.

Later too, we had a good relationship with B.N.Sarkar. When we approached him with the script of '*Jhar*', he listened to the whole script continuously for more than two hours and told Utpal that he was so engrossed in listening that he had lost track of time. He liked the script very much but was unable to make the film for financial reasons.

I met and worked with many great personalities throughout my life and I have enriched myself with every experience. When Utpal joined the Bombay film industry, I used to accompany him most of the time during outdoor shootings. There, I was often introduced with many well-known artists and directors.

I remember meeting Amitabh Bachchan in the set of '*Saat Hindustani*'. Utpal also worked in that movie. Jalal Agha became our intimate friend during the outdoor shoot of '*Saat Hindustani*'. We had so much fun! I was heartbroken when Jalal Agha passed away. Indrani Mukherjee was another artist from Bombay with whom we had a very friendly relation. She came to Kolkata to perform in our production '*Jhar*'. We had many more friends in the Bombay film industry. They often helped me with good advice as I used to look after the business part of Utpal's career.

As I was giving more attention to theatre, I gradually reduced my own engagements in films. I did not want my child and home to suffer for my lack of

time. We used to go for foreign trips pretty often which both of us enjoyed a lot. On the whole I think I have led a happy life and I have nothing to complain about.

I have great regards for one present day director: Gautam Ghosh. Now he has become really famous. We have known him for a long time. He likes theatre a lot and is a great fan of Utpal Dutt. Utpal worked in his films too. Gautam loved Utpal so much that he always tried to find a role suitable for Utpal in his movies. He was trying to get financial aid from the West Bengal government for '*Padma Nadir Majhi*' for a long time. When the deal was done he immediately came to our house and offered an important role to Utpal. He offered me a role too. I accepted happily because I knew that it would be a good experience to work in Gautam Ghosh's film. He worked really hard for the movie. Our love and respect for this young director increased to a great extent after we performed in '*Padma Nadir Majhi*'. Gautam Ghosh holds a very special position in our hearts.

Tell me now, what more do you want to know?

**Interviewer** - I was asking about the reviews.

**Shobha Sen** - Frankly speaking, we rarely got any good review. Utpal Dutt's works were hardly well-received by the critics. Most of them were opposed to his political ideas and beliefs. Therefore Utpal's talent was never fully appreciated. Instead of praising him they often deliberately tried to suppress his name. For example, one weekly magazine published the review of '*Bhuvan Shome*' without even mentioning the name of Utpal Dutt. Can one imagine it? The review highlighted names of Mrinal Sen, Suhasini Mule and many other artists

but deliberately skipped the name of the actor who played the title role. The same magazine published a review of our hit play '*Ferari Fauj*' and said that the production was nothing but utter rubbish. It happened many times in his life. So Utpal also became bitter about the critics. But he was such a good actor and producer that the common people really loved him. They showed their love and respect for Utpal Dutt whenever they got the opportunity to meet him.

Utpal was famous for his road shows. He used to write plays on the raging issues of the day and immediately start the road show with our group. His appeal reached the masses faster and with much greater ease than what the political leaders could manage with all their speeches. He could read and move the public mind. He received a hearty applause after each road show. People came in overwhelming numbers to congratulate him for his work. I am a witness to all this. So Utpal never cared much for the critics' columns. He always considered the love and respect of the common people of our country as the best reward for his work.

For such a long and successful career Utpal received very few awards. He had also refused some of them. Even after he passed away, the Central Government's attitude towards him did not change. We faced a lot of hindrance while working for the Utpal Dutt Foundation Trust. But all these adversities failed to change his attitude towards life and he remained true to his ideology unto the last. He never compromised and was hated in certain government departments for this attitude of his but no one could suppress his talent. He tackled all his hurdles successfully.

**Interviewer** - Did you work in any TV serial or documentary film?

**Shobha Sen** – Yes. But there came the same problem. Dooradarshan is controlled mainly by the Central Government and Utpal was always despised by the authorities. Thus he never got his right place there. We were invited by Bangladesh TV (in Dhaka) for preparing a programme on education. Utpal Dutt, Tapas Pal and I went there as a team. We took models and props with us and Utpal made a very good programme on Theatre education (Natyashiksha). But when TV was introduced in our country, Utpal was pushed aside.

Once we were offered to produce some selected portions from Shakespeare's '*Othello*' for Kolkata Doordarshan. Utpal agreed to do it. He played the role of Othello, Aparna Sen performed as Desdemona and Pratap Ray took the role of Iago. They did it with perfection but there was a problem with the sound track. Dubbing would have solved the problem but Kolkata Doordarshan refused to sanction money for that. Thus it was dumped and lost eventually. Kolkata Doordarshan is well-known for its callousness regarding preservation and many invaluable programmes of its earlier days faced destruction. No one can ever watch them anymore.

I acted in a few TV plays. Then we got a good chance for a TV production – '*In Search of Theatre*'. Bhaskar Ghosh helped us a lot. Utpal Dutt wrote a beautiful script and the programme really turned out well. It showed the history of the emergence of theatre in Bengal and its journey to the post - independent era through many changes. We started with Lebedev and came up to the modern period. It was in four parts. But Kolkata Doordarshan never showed the fourth part, saying that, there were a lot of objectionable features which they could not telecast. They told us to discard those parts. But Utpal refused to do so. He said

that, he had made the programme according to his own ideas and would not discard or change any part of it. He did not care whether Doordarshan would show it or not. Thus that last part was never telecasted. Now we have appealed for getting the copy of that programme. Apart from being a great creation by Utpal Dutt, it has its educational value too. I am trying hard and keep going to their office whenever I go to Delhi. They have agreed but there is so much red tape drama to overcome! Moreover orders from Delhi sometimes get suppressed in Kolkata.

We received a lot of applause for '*Kallol*' at the Centenary celebration in Delhi. Newspaper reviews were full of praise. People wanted to know why they remained ignorant about the existence of this excellent play for such a long time. The reply is simple: we never received any help from the government for our productions. '*Kallol*' was an expensive production with its huge set and forty five performers. We couldn't afford to take it outside Kolkata. When Girish Karnad became the Chairman of the Sangeet Natak Academy, he invited us to Delhi for the performance of '*Kallol*'. The audience in Delhi was bemused by the play. Then the Sangeet Natak Academy requested Kolkata Doordarshan for a telecast of '*Kallol*' but the whole thing was completely suppressed in Kolkata. When I went and asked them directly, they said that, some parts of the play were objectionable. I even agreed to discard those parts and made Utpal agree to it which was a very tough job for me. I did all this because I thought that '*Kallol*' was a landmark by itself and therefore it should be documented. But our Doordarshan authorities failed to do anything regarding this so far. I am still trying and hoping that they will do it someday.

The programme we did with the help of Bhaskar Ghosh on theatre was a big budget one as we had to make costumes, ornaments and above all stages of different periods of the past. I was worried and asked Bhaskar Ghosh about the budget. He was truly helpful and told me to go ahead and spend for the production as and when needed. He sanctioned the expenditure without question. It was a wonderful production but Doordarshan never showed the last part.

**Interviewer** – Did you like to perform in teleplays?

**Shobha Sen** – I have done very minor parts mostly and I generally do not like to perform for the small screen. Utpal did some good teleplays and serials. He used to get really interesting roles. He distinguished himself in Vijay babu's Hindi film '*Yaksha*' which was based on Tagore's short story 'Sampatti Samarpan'. He also worked in Basu Chatterjee's serials. I have gathered experiences from Utpal's works too.

**Interviewer** – You went to Bangladesh many times and especially for '*Padma Nadir Majhi*'. Will you tell us about your experience there?

**Shobha Sen** – In Bangladesh all films receive government support and supervision. Thus, each and every movie gets to be released. Usually they are exhibited in the urban areas for one week or so and then they are sent to be shown in rural areas. If it turns out to be a hit movie then it is shown again in the cities. This is the rule there. In this way every movie gets its own turn to be released and if it is a good one then the producer earns enough money for his next production. I liked this system a lot. The investment of the producer never goes astray. But they are lagging behind in technical aspects. Another unique

aspect in their shooting is that the actors do not learn their dialogues by heart, instead they are constantly prompted. I was really surprised to watch this. They told me that it was the editor's job to discard the sound of prompting. I don't know how they fill up the gap!

We were always welcomed in Bangladesh. And every time we were overwhelmed by their excellent hospitality. They adored Utpal and showed much respect to both of us. Many fans came to meet us there. Also the theatre people used to come for discussing their problems. We took interviews of some of them which were published in *Ganashakti*. We made friends with many well-known artists of Bangladesh. They were very sincere in their work but at the same time very polite and humble. Here, most of the film artists become too vain and often rather proud and impolite. It is true that no one has showed me any disregard yet but I have noticed their behaviour with others. In Bangladesh they were different. I remember Champa who acted in '*Padma Nadir Majhi*'. She was a gifted artist but so innocent, loving and caring as a person that it touched my heart. Of course there are good and bad in every place so one should not compare so easily. But on the whole my experience in Bangladesh is wonderful. I will always remember them with heartfelt gratitude.

**20<sup>th</sup> October, 1995. Cassette - 2**

**Interviewer** - Shobhadi, when you entered the film industry it was considered as a disreputable place, wasn't it? Later, I think it improved slowly.

**Shobha Sen** - When well-educated girls like us entered the arena of the film industry from Gananatya Sangha that was the time the stigma about the industry started reducing gradually. People realised that most of the rumours about the film line were untrue. I think one should thank Gananatya Sangha for this. In the earlier days, film artists were socially ostracised for no reason at all. I interacted with them intimately and discovered that most of them were genuinely nice, polite and kind-hearted people.

I have already told you about Prabha Debi. She was always ready to help others. She not only loved all her co-actors but also all human beings. There was no compulsion for her and yet she helped us as much as she could and we learnt so many things from her. We lived in the same area of the city and whenever I faced any problem I went to her to take her advice.

I learnt the minute details of acting from Prabha Debi. It usually takes time for us actors to bring tears in our eyes but it was so easy for her. At one moment she was talking and laughing with us and in the next moment she was on set with tears rolling down her eyes. I was quite surprised and asked her about her technique. She showed me how the trick was to give pressure on a certain nerve to make tears come immediately and told me that she learnt it from Atul Gupta. She was indeed very fortunate. I tried to take lessons from her. She always advised me not to talk too much. She said that one should listen and observe

everything but must not make any comment on them. It was a very helpful piece of advice for me as I used to be rather garrulous. As I came from Gananatya Sangha my ideas were a little different. I also had some pride for it. I thought that I would not tolerate any unjust act and never make any compromise but then I realised that one should not protest everywhere. That attitude was also wrong. I obeyed this rule later also and I survived in the industry for a long time.

I left the film industry mainly for theatre. I never got the same happiness in working for films which I got while acting in theatre. The characters I portrayed in films hardly had any statement to make. And I mostly played the roles of mothers, aunts, sisters and widows. I even played Bikash Ray's mother and in many films I was the mother of Uttam Kumar. In movies I had to take the roles which were offered to me and act according to the will of the director. There was very little independence left for me. If one wants to stay in the industry one has to accept this. If I made any kind of protest they criticised me of being proud and arrogant. They put the blame on my university education. So I had to compromise. The female actors of those days suffered from an inferiority complex. Though some of them like Sandhyarani were my close friends they still used to think that I would not give them respect because they were uneducated. But I always felt that their life experiences were really valuable and that we should take lessons from them.

**Interviewer** - What types of people are now entering the industry?

**Shobha Sen** - They seem to be more interested in the financial aspects than the creative ones.

**Interviewer** - What is your opinion about those who are coming with some

training?

**Shobha Sen** - Do they come to Kolkata in good numbers? I don't think so. Most of the young artists of today have got very lofty ideas about themselves. They do not understand their worth at all. Thus there is no improvement in the industry. First and foremost, I think, an artist should be polite and modest. I have seen Utpal throughout my life. He was a great actor but always followed the director's will when he was on the floor. He never protested even if he could understand that the director was wrong. He gave his suggestion only when he was asked for it. Only on rare occasions did he refuse to obey the director. Once he refused to work in a movie because the role he was supposed to play was below his dignity. He straightaway said that the role which was offered to him initially was not at all similar to the one in the actual movie so he would not work in the film. And he left the set once and for all. Otherwise he endured everything silently even if he was hurt by the actions of some directors.

Though you hear many rumours about the film industry such as the exploitation of women, misbehaviour of the men on set with female artists etc. - I faced none of them. The background of Gananatya Sangha might have helped me! I do not know. And now I am not really involved with the industry much so I do not want to give my opinion about today's artists.

**Interviewer** - You have told us how you take care of your voice. What process do you follow when you prepare yourself for portraying a character in a movie or in a play? Do you follow some particular method based on a theory?

**Shobha Sen** - I had that training in theatre. Utpal gave that training to me. He used to take classes on this. Moreover I watched many European plays. I

understood the Brechtian theory after watching German plays by Bertolt Brecht. In USSR I watched plays by Stanislavski. I read many books on this subject. Stanislavski advised one to find a similar character or similar situation in life which one has to portray in the play and follow that while acting. That is not really difficult. But Brecht did not say so and he advised one not to show too much emotion during acting. I learnt all these in theatre.

**Interviewer** - What method did you follow?

**Shobha Sen** - I am never one for emotional excess in acting. If I cry too much the audience will not shed tears. They will take it as melodrama. One has to maintain a balance while acting. This comes with experience and not by only reading theories. It comes naturally with practice.

**Interviewer** - How important are costumes and makeup for the portrayal of a character?

**Shobha Sen** - Certainly they are important. For portraying the character of Krishnabai in *'Kallol'*, I observed carefully an old washerwoman who lived next to my parental home. She was of a heavy built and used to limp while walking. I remembered all her characteristics while playing Krishnabai. Like this I portrayed many characters in theatre and in film by following people in real life. Costumes are also important. For making costumes for *'Kallol'* I went to the slums and chawls of Bombay where poor people live and observed the style of their dresses.

**Interviewer** - How do you like the plays, even Shakespearean plays which are now staged in normal every day wear? They don't care for special costumes. Have you watched them?

**Shobha Sen** -Yes. I think experiments are always good. We have also staged '*Julius Caesar*' in modern attire.

**Interviewer** - Was that difficult?

**Shobha Sen** -No. We watched '*Macbeth*' staged in that style.

**Interviewer** - How did you first meet Utpalda in theatre?

**Shobha Sen** - Most likely in the year 1951-52 Gananatya Sangha decided to stage the first act of '*Macbeth*' on Shakespear's birth anniversary. So they invited Utpal Dutt for direction. I was selected for the role of Lady Macbeth. Many other well-known artists acted in the play. That was the first time I acted in a Shakespearean drama and I met Utpal there. I was very nervous at first. Utpal was a renowned actor of Shakespearean drama and I came from a different school of acting - Gananatya Sangha. I was worried about maintaining the standard of acting. And so, I tried my best. Professor Niren babu translated the play which did not turn out to be good. Still I tried hard and Utpal was happy with my work. I was also very happy thanks to my successful portrayal of such a complex character. This was how we first met.

Then Utpal came and worked with us in Gananatya Sangha for quite some time. But there also he could not stay for long. They started spreading rumours against him, subjected him to political defamation and threw him out of the group. He thus left Gananatya Sangha. Then he decided to stage '*Macbeth*' as a regular show and invited me for acting. I joined People's Little Theatre. After that we never parted till his death. We never had any serious difference of opinion throughout our conjugal life. I consider myself as his worthy partner. I have always tried to make life and work easy and smooth for him and I think I was

successful in my task.

**Interviewer** - How did Utpal Dutt first join the film industry?

**Shobha Sen** - When Madhu Bose decided to make a biopic on Michael Madhusudan Dutt, he started to search for actors. Utpal was a college student at that time. In college he used to act in Shakespearean dramas. There was a group in St. Xavier's College known as the 'Shakespeareans' who regularly staged these plays. Usually the students of the college performed in the plays and in rare cases some outside actor joined.

Madhu Bose came to know about Utpal's proficiency in acting as well as in the English language. To play Michael's role one has to be very good in both Bengali and English. One day he came to watch a play in which Utpal took part. Madhu Bose liked his acting and invited Utpal to meet him at The Grand Hotel where Madhu Bose was living at the time. Rehearsal started there and continued for days. Utpal was not as good in Bengali as he was in English. Thus private tutors were engaged for him who gave him lessons in Sanskrit and Bengali. The poet Bimal Dutta taught him Bengali. Every day he had to go for rehearsal which lasted for three to four hours. In this way Utpal learnt Sanskrit and became proficient in Bengali. He learnt Sanskrit so well that he could read and recite from the works of Kalidas. And his Bengali improved to a great extent too. All his poems and plays in Bengali are proof of this.

**Interviewer** - Did you watch him working for films?

**Shobha Sen** - Yes. But I watched him at a much later period. Though '*Michael Madhusudan*' was a hit but he did not get many offers for film roles after that. This came as a surprise even to him. Maybe people thought that he would not be

able to perform in roles other than the anglicised ones. One or two offers came after long gaps.

He performed in Nitin Bose directed '*Jogajog*' based on Tagore's eponymous novel and did a good job. But after that he did not get any good offers for a long time. The only offers that came to him were for playing the character of Michael Madhusudan. He portrayed Michael's role in '*Vidyasagar*' and also in '*Mahakabi Girishchandra*'. But those were very minor parts. He also got offers for the roles of lawyers and doctors. If there was any dialogue in English, they offered the part to Utpal Dutt. But he was getting bored playing these typical roles one after another. The first time he got a different type of role was in '*Fariyad*'. He played the villain in that movie and played it well. Suchitra Sen was the heroine of '*Fariyad*'. After that lots of offers started coming to him.

We should not blame only the producers for not giving him good offers for films. There were other reasons too. We had to give a lot of time for theatre. At that time the film industry was not really a disciplined one. For example: he signed a contract for a film named '*Circus*' and went for outdoor shooting. But there he had to wait for the arrival of other artists for six or seven days. What wastage of time! He had his group and the show to think about. Utpal lost his patience and came back to Kolkata and did not work for the movie at all.

And after taking Minerva Theatre on lease we had very little time to spare for cinema. It was almost impossible to go for outdoor shootings. Every Thursday, Saturday and Sunday we had shows in the theatre and staying out for one whole week for outdoor shooting was out of question. That's why the producers no longer showed any interest.

Later Utpal performed in a number of good movies. One of them is '*Bhuvan Shome*'. Mrinal Sen made it clear that most of the shooting would be done outdoor. But the role was so interesting that Utpal agreed to go. His career in Hindi films started after '*Bhuvan Shome*'. Abbas Sahab offered him a part in '*Saat Hindustani*'. He was apprehensive at first but I encouraged him. I told him that for a person like him who could speak foreign languages so well, adopting an Indian language would not be difficult. Then he agreed to take the challenge. And now you all know how successful he was in Hindi film world!

Lots of offers then poured in for Hindi films. Shakti Samant offered Utpal the role of the villain in his film '*Amanush*' for both the Hindi and Bengali versions. It was a super hit movie and Utpal became immensely popular. Soon he was offered several roles as a villain. Utpal was also a great comedian. At that time most of the comedians in Bombay took to mimicry, pantomime and melodrama. They also had mannerisms. Utpal created a different genre of comedy which was much appreciated by the audience. Hrishikesh Mukherjee thus selected him for many of his films. He also performed as comedian in Basu Chatterjee's films. Mohan Sehgal offered him good roles. Soon, Utpal became one of the top stars. He was trained for fight sequences during his theatre days. He learnt and regularly practiced sword fights when he was acting for the 'Shakespearean' group. All these trainings came in handy during his film career. He was now well-established in the Hindi film industry as well.

Of course his theatre suffered to some extent due his involvement with cinema. But we never neglected the stage completely. Our motto was to give a preference to theatre first. Somehow we managed to adjust. After a prolonged period of film

shootings we always went back to theatre and often started new productions. But now Utpal refrained from taking the lead roles. By that time, the young actors of our group had been well trained and were quite dependable. For example: Utpal performed as the lead in our hit play '*Duswapner Nagari*' but at the same time he trained Kanak Moitra for the same part. If Utpal was not available then Kanak used to appear in the main role. The audience never complained. He trained Kanak so well that the audience could not make out the difference. The credit belongs to Utpal. In this way he acted for cinema and theatre side by side.

**Interviewer** - Was there also a substitute for you in the plays? When you went for film shootings who took your role?

**Shobha Sen** - Yes. But it happened rarely. Nilima Das acted as my substitute sometimes not only for my shooting but also when I went out of India with Utpal. My son was staying in Dehradun at that time. I used to visit him if he was unwell. Aparna Sen acted as my substitute at one time. She was in our group then.

**Interviewer** - Now please tell us something about the shooting of '*The Guru*'.

**Shobha Sen** - Well, we were really pleased when the offer came for '*The Guru*'. Utpal had the main role. It was a Merchant Ivory production. Ismail Merchant and James Ivory were the co-founders of the production company. Ismail Merchant was Indian and James Ivory was American by birth. Satyajit Ray suggested Utpal's name to them. Ismail came and talked to us. Everything was settled but Utpal got arrested at the early stage of shooting.

Ismail Merchant tried his best to free him and finally Utpal was released after Ismail requested Indira Gandhi. They had already started shooting with Utpal

in the main role. Thus his arrest posed a big problem to them and there could be a terrible financial loss. International production companies come to India for shooting only when the Indian Government promises its co-operation to them. Thus there was a commitment from the government's side too. When Ismail Merchant met Mrs. Gandhi and told her about their imminent financial crisis, she issued the order for his release. Utpal had to sign an agreement that he would not get involved in any political activity during shooting.

As it is no one can get involved in political activity during shooting. Especially most of the shooting for '*The Guru*' was done outdoor. But there was much publicity about it and the word spread that Utpal got his release by signing a bond restricting his political activities in future. But that was not the case. Utpal agreed not to get involved in politics during shooting and not to come to Kolkata because he wanted to complete his work with Merchant Ivory without any more disturbance and delay. And that's all. After the completion of the film he staged political satires so many times and criticised the government.

**Interviewer** - You mean that he wanted to carry out his responsibility as an artist towards the Merchant Ivory production and accepted that agreement?

**Shobha Sen** - Yes. He wanted to fulfil the terms of his contract.

**Interviewer** - Now tell us about your own productions. Why did you start producing films?

**Shobha Sen** - Utpal was really a talented individual. I thought he could make some good movies based on unusual subjects. I encouraged him to pursue film production. At that time representatives of the Film Finance Commission came to Kolkata. The Minister of Information introduced us to them. They said that,

they wanted new directors with new ideas. They were ready to give financial support. We then thought that we would give it a try. Thus we produced '*Ghum Bhangar Gan*'. I have already mentioned all the hazards we faced for that. Utpal always supported the cause of the people who live at the fringe of society. This film was an honest portrayal of the suffering of the working class and the class struggle. We put in a lot of hard work to make this movie but the Censor Board ruined the film completely. At first they rejected the whole film saying there was no oppression on the working class people and the film's portrayal of the same was false. But we wanted it to be released. Pandit Ravishankar had created excellent music for the movie. Ashok Sen, the Secretary for the Department of Information helped us a lot. Finally the film was released after much delay and discarding many scenes which naturally reduced its appeal to the audience. It was a financial loss. We were really unfortunate.

**Interviewer** - But don't you believe that film is a good media which can be used for a higher purpose?

**Shobha Sen** - I am telling you how difficult it is to do that in this country. We produced another film named '*Megh*' before this. '*Megh*' was originally a play written by Utpal. It was a crime thriller but the murder never happened. We managed to produce the movie taking money from the distributors. It was a low budget film but still we could not make any profit. The audience expected to watch a suspense movie but when they saw that the crime actually did not happen, they were disappointed. Only recently we realised that our advertisement was misleading. We have found a print of that movie. I think that it would get box office success today. After these failures we did not venture into

a new production for a long time. When the West Bengal Government offered financial support, we produced '*Jhar*'.

**Interviewer** - Utpal Dutt wrote, directed and acted for these productions. We know that you also performed in these films. Did you do anything more for your own productions?

**Shobha Sen** - I used to look after every detail of the production. I had to work very hard. Others helped me too. I worked day and night especially for '*Jhar*'. It was a period film set in the nineteenth century thus I had to arrange for costumes, ornaments, and even furniture from that period which was not at all easy. We had no financial difficulty as West Bengal Government was the producer. We even got permission for shooting in the Governor's house. Those huge old rooms with their decoration and grandeur made the film more attractive. Costumes were made with utmost care. Utpal was very particular about these details. All the ornaments and dresses were made as they were portrayed in the paintings of that period. Utpal used to give direction to our costume designer, Manu Dutta and also to our art director, Surya Chatterjee. They followed his instructions in every detail.

For one scene we had to arrange for horse drawn carriages which were used by wealthy people in the nineteenth century. Some of these carriages still exist and are usually rented out for marriage processions. We rented a few of them. When we were coming back after shooting, people in the street were looking at the carriages in awe. Some of them asked us if it was a big marriage procession. We laughed and said, "Yes it is."

'*Jhar*' was a great movie - so gorgeous and so colourful! Moreover being a biopic

of Derozio, it portrayed a chapter of history of Bengal. Basically it was an educational film and fit to be exhibited in schools and colleges.

**Interviewer** - Did you engage artists from your own group for your film productions?

**Shobha Sen** - Yes. We used to engage experienced artists for most of the important roles but we also gave chance to new ones. We took Sagarika Adhikari in '*Jhar*'. She was a new face. This was her first movie but she performed so well. She was the daughter of our friends.

**Interviewer** - Did she appear in any other film after '*Jhar*'?

**Shobha Sen** - She might have appeared in one or two movies later but not in any more than that. Utpal had a great power for selecting artists. He always offered the right roles to the right persons. Thus every one could perform to the best of their ability.

**Interviewer** - Please tell us something about the awards received by Utpal.

**Shobha Sen** - Utpal did not get many awards. He once received a National Film Award. He did not care much for awards. The Sangeet Natak Academy wanted to give award to him but he never showed any interest. He only accepted the fellowship from them. He received a few minor awards for some of his roles.

**Interviewer** - You also received an award from Sangeet Natak Academy.

**Shobha Sen** - Yes.

*'Baishakhi Megh'*, one of our productions won the 'Special Feature Film' award at the Kualalampur Film Festival.

**Interviewer** - When was that?

**Shobha Sen** - I don't remember now.

[**Note:** '*Baishakhi Megh*' received the Most Versatile Artist and the Best Supporting Actor Award, in Kuala Lumpur, 1981.]

### **Recording on the morning of 28<sup>th</sup> October, 1995**

**Interviewer** – Shobhadi, please tell us about the films in which you performed. We would like to know the names of the films, the directors and your co-actors. When were those films released and what roles did you play in them? Tell us as much as you can remember.

**Shobha Sen** – I have told you already about my first film '*Chhinnamul*'. Its director was Nimai Ghosh and producer was Shyamol Dutta. It was a movie about the refugees. I had no prior intention to act for films. I had performed in the play '*Nabanna*' at Gananatya Sangha and met Nimai babu there. He offered me the lead female role in his first movie. I felt a little apprehensive at first because I had heard many rumours about the film industry. I did not know whether I could work with the same dignity as I had in the stage and also, I was not sure about my standard of acting. So I was in a dilemma. But Nimai babu guided me like a friend. He assured me that no one could harm someone who chooses the right path. And he also said that most of the artists of '*Chhinnamul*' also came from Gananatya Sangha. Thus, I felt confident enough to act in the film. I took the right decision there. I learnt about film acting. Nimai babu taught me how to act in different types of shots. His training helped me a lot not only for this movie but also throughout my career.

This film depicted the plight of the refugees who had fled from East Bengal after

the partition. A young girl who was completely dependent on and attached to her husband had to leave her hearth and home forever. Her husband was arrested for joining the peasant movement and so she came alone to Kolkata, along with the people from her village after going through enormous hardship. She gave birth to her child in the overcrowded platform of Sealdah station and died just before her husband reached the spot.

I performed in '*Chhinnamul*', in 1949. It was a path breaking movie, produced even before '*Pather Panchali*'. But it was difficult to get distributors for this type of film. They wanted the usual tried-and-tested films on typical, mundane topics with song and dance and love and fights, none of which was present in this film and hence the film was not getting released. Fortunately Soviet Film Corporation came and bought the film and the producer did not face financial loss.

I got an offer for Satyen Bose's '*Paribartan*' while the shooting of '*Chhinnamul*' was going on. They produced '*Barjatri*' before '*Paribartan*'. It was a story set in a school which depicted various activities of adolescent boys in a boarding school including their pranks and mischief. One of the main characters was a boy named Shakti. Shakti was handicapped by his leg. I played the part of Shakti's mother. It was not a major role but I agreed to take it because I liked the character. Most of the artists were known to me as no professional actor performed in this movie. The story was a tragic one. Shakti was an intelligent boy but he was lame. Shakti's mother was poor but worked very hard to give him a proper education. She used to work as a maid. One day she went to visit Shakti and could not go for her work. Her employer became angry and threw some

utensil towards her, which caused her injury. She endured all this hardship for her son's well-being but unfortunately Shakti died while saving another boy from a road accident. His grief-stricken mother then lost her mental balance and started roaming around all those places where her son used to walk or play while calling out her lost child's name. This movie was a box office success.

Ajoy Kar was the cameraman for '*Paribartan*'. He was a renowned director, cameraman and a partner of Srimati Pictures, a production company which was founded by Kanan Debi and him. They produced many films but they liked to make movies based on Saratchandra Chattopadhyay's works. He offered me an important role in '*Bamuner Meye*' based on the novel by Sarat babu. The story tells the tale of the Bengali women who suffered immensely due to various social injustices such as *kuleen pratha*, child marriage and the custom of barring the remarriage of widows. I portrayed the character of Gynoda who was a child widow. Her brother-in-law seduced her and finally threw her out of his house when she refused to abort her unborn child.

I worked with renowned professional artists for the first time in this film. One of them was Prabha Debi, a world-class artist. Tulsi Lahiri played the role of the brother-in-law. Pahari Sanyal and Suprabha Debi also performed in the movie. Anubha Gupta played the lead female role and Sunil Dashgupta was the hero of the film. They offered me their wholehearted support. They showed me my mistakes and helped me to rectify them. I have already told you how grateful I am to Prabha Debi. It was after appearing in this movie that I gained my position amongst professional artists.

Next, I performed in '*Mejdidi*' by Srimati Pictures. *Mejdidi* was a famous story written by Saratchandra. I played Keshto's mother. She was trying to raise Keshto after his father died but unable to bear the hardship she also passed away. All these films are of the year 1949, only '*Mejdidi*' was shot in 1950.

Bimal Roy selected me for playing the lead role in '*Tathapi*'. It was the story of a girl who could not speak. But when he was informed that I had already performed in '*Chhinnamul*' and other movies, he changed my role. He was in search of a completely new face, who had never spoken in public, to play the role of the dumb girl because he thought that it would be more realistic to the audience. Nonetheless, despite playing a relatively minor role I gathered valuable experience while working in a Bimal Roy film.

At that time Bimal Roy was also the permanent director for New Theatres Studio and was working for their productions too. Most probably he was working for '*Anjangarh*', a movie on Netaji Subhas Bose.

[**Note:** The film '*Anjangarh*' was based on a short story by Subodh Ghosh and was released in 1948. '*Tathapi*' was released in 1950]

Early in the morning, he came in the studio to direct us and then went to New Theatres Studio for the whole day only to return in the evening. In the meantime his assistants finished most of the work following his guidelines. Bharatlakshmi studio became a hotspot for the artists of the day. Pranati Ghosh played the lead role in '*Tathapi*', and became famous in her first movie. I played the role of her sister. All the artists had to reach the studio before eight o'clock in the morning. The atmosphere of the studio was really nice. There was a beautiful garden and a little pond with steps to sit on. We used to spend the

whole day in a party spirit with good food, fun and laughter and evening was the time for work when our director Bimal Roy came back to the studio. Ritwik Ghatak was one of his assistants. He was very close with Bimal Roy as his elder brother Sudhish Ghatak was Bimal Roy's friend. Ritwik introduced me to him. Knowing my background they all held me in high regard. But I did not get another chance to work with Bimal Roy as he left for Bombay.

I was well-established in the film world after acting in '*Bamuner Meye*'. At that time there were two big studios in Kolkata - New Theatres and M.P. Studio. Muralidhar Chattopadhyay was the owner of M.P. Studio and B.N. Sarkar owned New Theatres. I worked for both of them.

First, I joined M.P. I went to a *maharat* in M.P. Studio on Bengali New Year's day in 1950. It was a film by the Agradoot team. Bibhuti Laha, the director at Agradoot [**Note:** Bibhuti Laha was the cameraman of the Agradoot team] said that he was very impressed while watching my performance in '*Bamuner Meye*' and asked me to join them. Jatin Dutta was sound recordist in the Agradoot team. I agreed. '*Vidyasagar*' was my first movie with them. Kaliprasad Ghosh directed the film. Pahari Sanyal played Vidyasagar and I played the role of Surabala, an unfortunate girl who became a widow immediately after her marriage. [Story of Surabala retold here]. The audience liked my performance as Surabala. But after that I was almost branded in the role of the widow in all the films offered thereafter.

**Interviewer** - Did Utpalda play the role of Michael Madhusudan in this movie?

**Shobha Sen** - Yes. But I didn't know him at that time. I just knew that Utpal Dutt was a great actor and could speak perfect English and that he had made a name

for himself in theatre. We came to know each other much later.

After '*Vidyasagar*' I performed in Ardhendu Mukhopadhyay's '*Rupantar*' in 1951. Ardhendu Mukhopadhyay directed many films in those days. '*Vidyasagar*', '*Tathapi*', '*Mejdidi*' - all of these are 1950 productions.

I had an interesting role in '*Rupantar*' where I played the role of a wife who fled from home to save herself from her husband. The husband was a debauch and a drunkard who regularly tortured his wife. She took shelter in a family that was engaged in the show business. They trained her in acting and she started performing in theatres. When she became quite famous her husband found her on the set of *Marjina and Abdallaha*. After that he started to threaten and blackmail her. He even joined the theatre group. Finally his wife murdered him with a knife in a dance scene. The police were baffled with the crime but a detective came and solved the mystery by staging a re-enactment of that very scene, which upset her. It was a challenging role but I enjoyed doing this. I then acted for Ardhendu babu in many films.

I received a call from New Theatres for performing a minor role in '*Sparshamoni*'. Hemchandra directed the movie. Now I can't remember anything about my role, but this was my first interaction with New Theatres.

[**Note:** '*Sparshamoni*' was directed by Sudhin Majumdar]

Next, I performed in the most successful movie of my entire career - '*Babla*'. It was an M.P. Studio production, directed by Agradoot. I had worked with them in Premendra Mitra's '*Kankantala Light Railway*'. I don't remember its story now but I remember everything about '*Babla*'. The film was released during the Durga puja festival and met with immediate success. [Story of '*Babla*' retold

here]. I received a lot of acclamation for '*Babla*' and was flooded with offers from producers. I shall tell you about the ones worth mentioning.

I took part in two more films by Ardhendu babu - '*Sampad*' and '*Kapalkundala*'. '*Sampad*' was a story of the mountains and their people. I played the role of the hero's mother.

Next, I performed for Madhu Bose in '*Shesher Kabita*'. Utpal also acted in that movie. Manilal Shribastab was the producer of the film. The whole film unit was like a joint family. We always liked Madhu Bose's method of work. He followed strict discipline. If he said that the shooting would start at 10 in the morning then it was mandatory for everyone to come to the studio exactly at ten o'clock. I never saw such discipline in the film industry in those days. Again, 1 P.M. was lunch time and that too never changed. He had truly adopted the tenets of western culture and that's why Utpal and Madhu Bose liked each other so much. Sadhana Bose was the heroine of the film and Nirmal Chakravarty, a newcomer at that time, played Amit Roy. We were thus introduced to all these people, via this film, and enjoyed working with them.

I joined New Theatres as their staff artist. They used to take artists by contract. I was paid a monthly salary and had to go to the studio for a maximum of fifteen days a month. Sometimes they called me for two days, sometimes for ten days and so on. The contract period was one year. I performed in '*Banahangsi*' by Kartik Chattopadhyay. Kartik Chattopadhyay was the renowned director of the hit movie '*Mahaprasthanar Pathe*'. Sandhyarani was the heroine of the film and I played her mother. I performed for quite a number of New Theatres' films. Chitta Bose was the director of '*Nad O Nadi*'. The shooting started with Bikash

Ray and me. The scene depicted a Muslim woman who was lighting a lamp in the evening and doing some religious rituals. I performed my role perfectly but Bikash Ray faltered a little. Everyone got upset as this was the auspicious first shot (*maharat* shot) of the movie. Later Bikash Ray told Chitta babu that he became nervous while acting with me. I don't know the reason, though. Sandhyarani and Chitta babu became my close friends during the shooting of this film.

My next film was '*Bakul*' by New Theatres. I portrayed the interesting character of Manorama in both the Bengali and Hindi versions of the film. There is a story behind this. In those days rehearsals were arranged in the studio before taking the final shot. One day during the rehearsal I came to know that Bharati Debi was selected for Manorama's role in the Hindi version of '*Bakul*'. I was very upset because I had already appeared in the Hindi Version of '*Babla*' and performed successfully. I used to take regular Hindi lessons from my private tutor.

A friend advised me to go and talk to B.N. Sarkar directly. B. N. Sarkar used to come to the studio everyday in the evening at about 5 to 5.30 P.M. and take his seat at the famous *Golghar* which had a thatched roof. The studio officials used to meet him there to talk and discuss the issues of the studio. At that time Chhotai babu was the in charge of productions. He took me to B.N. Sarkar and I appealed to him for my role in the Hindi version of the movie. I told him that since the audience liked the Hindi version of '*Babla*' I should at least get a chance to play the role in Hindi. The Hindi tutors appointed by the studio could watch my performance and give their verdict. B.N. Sarkar smiled and

said, “Okay”. I shall never ever forget this day. After this whenever I went to him with any demand he never refused. He liked me a lot. I have rarely seen such a broad minded and generous person in my life.

Muralidhar Chattopadhyay of M.P. Studio was another patron whose name I should mention. After ‘*Babla*’ became a super hit movie I almost had a claim on his generosity. When the shooting of the Hindi version of ‘*Babla*’ was going on, that time my house in Tollygunge was under construction and I was in immediate need of money. I wanted my full payment for the movie before its completion and he agreed to these terms. No producer pays the full amount to the artist in advance but he did that for me. The day I was coming back from the studio with so much money, I felt so happy and confident about myself! Now I remember those beautiful days of my life.

The budget for the Hindi version of ‘*Babla*’ was more than its Bengali version. Manju Dey and Asitbaran both performed in the Hindi movie. It was also a success. B.N. Sarkar was happy to watch my acting in ‘*Bakul*’. I always tried my best while acting and never failed to maintain my standard.

I acted for many other production companies too. Satish Dashgupta’s ‘*Maraner Pare*’ was one of them. Ajit Mukhopadhyay, a friend of my husband, was engaged in this production. I was introduced to Satish Dasgupta, by him. It was a movie on the transmigration of souls. Many renowned actors including Dhiraj Bhattacharya took part in this movie. I played the role of Dhiraj Bhattacharya’s wife. I also performed in Chitta Bose’s ‘*Prafulla*’ based on the famous play by Girish Chandra Ghosh. All these films mentioned above were made between the years 1951 to 1954.

My next important movie was Ritwik Ghatak's '*Nagarik*'. Along with some other friends, I joined hands with Ritwik in the making of this movie in 1954-55. We could not get any financial support and produced the movie by taking loans and mortgaging properties. We had some good friends amongst the technicians who helped us out a lot. During the shooting I had the opportunity to watch Ritwik's shot-taking which was completely different from that of the others. His idea of acting, which he taught us at that time, was also different. Prabha Debi and Ajit Bandyopadhyay acted in '*Nagarik*'. I helped Ritwik to select the artists for the film. It was the two of us that founded the film unit. We finished the movie against all odds but the film remained literally locked in the box as no distributor agreed to show it. No good print of the film is available today.

Another movie worth mentioning is '*Sabar Upare*' by Agradoot. The story was really nice. Uttam Kumar played the main role. The story revolved around an unfortunate family in which the father went to jail, leaving his young son and wife to fend for themselves, due to a false charge against him. The mother raised her son with the hope that someday he would prove his father's innocence and release him from prison. When the son came of age he fulfilled his mother's wish and had his father released.

Uttam played the role of the son and I was the mother. Chhabi Biswas acted as the father. The court scene in the movie was really engrossing - Uttam, as the son, was cross examining in the court, I was sitting on a bench and Chhabi Biswas was in the dock. Chhabi Biswas had very little dialogue but he acted with his expressions, with his eyes. It was superb. Uttam too had done a very good job in this movie. '*Sabar Upare*' was a box office success.

I have seen Uttam from very close quarters. I worked for many films by Agradoot. He was also trained by Agradoot in his early days. Both of us worked mainly in M.P. Studio at that time. A nice and friendly relation developed between us.

In those days all the film units were like families for artists and other professionals. As long as the shooting of a particular movie continued, this feeling of one family never left us. We used to dine together, and passed our free time too by chitchatting with each other. Studios provided common buses for coming and going and so there was lots of scope for interaction. Sadly, today's scenario has completely changed.

My next film was Sushil Majumdar's '*Aparadhi*'. Most of the artists of this movie such as Jahar Ray, Shyam Laha and Bhanu Bandyopadhyay were stage comedians. They had stage shows on every Thursday, Saturday and Sunday. But the studio was located outside Kolkata. Most likely the name was Eastern Talkies. We had to take B.T. Road and go out of Kolkata to reach there. The car or bus from the studio was sent to pick up the artists early in the morning so that they could reach the studio by 8 A.M. The shots with stage artists were taken in the first half and they were free by two o'clock in the afternoon. We used to wait and pass our time by chitchatting and eating roasted peanuts and I recall Jahar Ray used to make jokes about the fortune of the peanut seller. Our work used to start by 4-4.30 P.M. and continue till 8 P.M. Thus we could not reach home before 9 or 10 at night.

**Interviewer** - Was there no concept of shift shooting at that time? Did you all have to stay in the studio for the whole day?

**Shobha Sen** – No, there was no concept of shooting in shifts in those days. No one thought that the artists should be released after a certain period of time. Most of the big production houses had their own studios. That is the way people invested their money in the industry at that time.

Next, I appeared as Shailobala in '*Chirakumar Sabha*'. Debaki Kumar Bose was the director of the movie. [Story of '*Chirakumar Sabha*' retold]. I was very happy to play the role. My only problem was my long hair because as Shailobala I had to disguise myself as a young man. So, I rolled up and tied my hair and wore a wig atop it.

**Interviewer** – Which year was it?

**Shobha Sen** – In 1955. Deepchand Kankaria was its producer and he was a friend of Muralidhar Chattopadhyay. I was one of Murali babu's favourite artist so he suggested my name for the role of Shailobala. When the shooting was going on, Bulganin and Nikita Khrushchev came from Moscow. We were eager to go and see them but Debaki babu allowed no one from the studio to go there. There was huge gathering of people on the day of their arrival. The whole area between the airport and Rajbhaban was jam packed. There was mass excitement in Kolkata but Debaki babu did not let us go. Then there was a special meeting in the *Maidan* for which I got a pass. Finally my wish to see Bulganin and Khrushchev was fulfilled.

My next film was '*Shubholagna*' by Madhu Bose. It was based on a story set in rural Bengal. But Madhu Bose was a thoroughly anglicised person and had very little idea about the daily life and customs of the villages. Thus '*Shubholagna*' could not reach the height which was reached by the other films of Madhu Bose.

I have no idea why he selected such a story!

Then I worked in some films by Agradoot. I performed as Uttam Kumar's sister in '*Trijama*' in the year 1956.

I also worked with Agragami. Saroj Dey, Parvati and Nishith were the founders of this unit. They worked as assistants for Agradoot before they started their own unit. So I knew them for a long time and was on friendly terms with them. I performed in their movie '*Dakharkara*'. Kali Banerjee acted as the *dak harkara* and I played his wife. It was shot in the village of Goalpara in Shantiniketan. This film was a very honest effort by Agragami and was greatly acclaimed by the people. In the movie '*Shilpi*' I acted as an aunt.

In my next movie, '*Mahakabi Girishchandra*' I appeared as *Shri Shri Ma*. This was a film by Madhu Bose. I appeared in the role of *Shri Shri Ma* in another film prior to this, which depicted the life of Shri Ramakrishna. I became quite famous for that movie.

**Interviewer** - Did you not face any difficulty in acting for these religious films or portraying religious characters?

**Shobha Sen** - I do not believe in religion personally but I faced no difficulty at all in playing the roles. I read and researched a lot about *Shri Shri Ma* before the shooting, in order to portray the character successfully. Once I went to the Rahara Ramakrishna mission for some personal work. It was long after the release of the movie. There the *Maharajs* told me that, "We have watched many films on Shri Ramakrishna but no one could act like you in the role of *Shri Shri Ma*." I never thought that I would ever hear these words. I was awed in reverence. I am not a believer of religion so I always had doubt about

my ability to portray *Shri Shri Ma's* character. But after hearing this from the *Maharajs* I realised that I had truly been successful. Kanu Bandyopadhyay played the part of Shri Ramkrishna. This role was almost monopolized by Gurudas. In all the films and even in the plays, Gurudas used to take the part of Shri Ramkrishna. But I was bored with him. Manoranjan Bhattacharya was the best in the role of Shri Ramkrishna. He was a great actor and performed excellently. Gurudas, who had appeared as Shri Ramkrishna for so many times could never reach Manoranjan Bhattacharya's level. Kanu babu also performed better than Gurudas. And I accepted the offer because it was a different type of role and I wanted to try it.

**Interviewer** - Did you take it as a challenge?

**Shobha Sen** - Yes. So when they said that I played it well, I was satisfied.

I worked on another good film after this - '*Adarsha Hindu Hotel*' by Ardhendu Sen. He was a young director at that time. I got an interesting role and enjoyed acting in that film. It was a story of a rivalry between two hotels. I performed in many good movies. One of them was '*Abhayer Biye*'. Uttam was the hero and I played his mother. It was an important role. Most of the shooting was done outdoor. We had location shootings in Haridwar, Kashi, Lucknow and some other parts of U.P. Then I acted in '*Rastar Chhele*' by Chitta Bose. I don't remember the story now. In Shailajananda's '*Ami Boro Hobo*' I played the main role. The story was about how a mother brought up her son by always inspiring him positively. Another good movie was '*Lalu Bhulu*' - a film by Agradoot. It was a story of two orphan boys who were street singers.

**Interviewer** - In which year this movie was shot?

**Shobha Sen** - '*Lalu Bhulu*' was shot in the year 1958 and '*Ami Boro Hobo*' in 1957.

Lalu and Bhulu were orphans who did not have their own mother but there was a mother figure for them in the slum where they lived. They loved her and gave whatever little they earned to her for her daily expenses. I appeared in many more films by Agradoot such as '*Pathe Holo Deri*', the first colour film in Bengali. Then I performed in '*Suryatoran*'. It was the first movie on housing societies in multi-storeyed buildings. After that I acted for Chitta Bose's '*Bandhu*'. Agrabami offered me a good role in their movie '*Headmaster*'. Chhabi Biswas and Karuna Bandyopadhyay also appeared in that movie. The story centred round the life and struggle of an ideologist Headmaster.

Arabindo Mukhopadhyay made his movie '*Kichhukshan*' based on a different type of story. A long-distance train was halted at a small station for a few hours due to some unavoidable reasons. The film depicted the character of the passengers and their problems and reactions to this sudden delay of their journey. I played the role of the stationmaster's wife. It was not a major role but a significant one. In fact there was no 'main' role in this movie as it was based on all the passengers as a whole. I was praised for my acting in '*Kichhukshan*'.

In '*Khokababur Pratyabartan*' I played the role of Raicharan's sister. It was based on the famous short story by Tagore. You all know the story. Raicharan was a servant in a zamindari house. His duty was to look after the one and only son of the zamindar. One day Raicharan took the baby boy out for a stroll and accidentally the baby fell in the river. Raicharan was terribly upset and quite obviously, thrown out of his job. He went back to his native village and raised his own child as the son of a zamindar. Finally he returned to his previous master

and lied to him that he had stolen the zamindar's baby boy and raised him in his home but now he had realised his mistake and had come to return the boy to his master. After giving his son away, Raicharan left for good. It was a beautiful story but the audience did not like the movie. Uttam played the part of Raicharan and public was not ready to take Uttam Kumar in the role of a servant.

I acted as Shachi mata in '*Nader Nimai*', a film by Bimal Roy (Jr). It was a major and important character and posed a challenge for me but I enjoyed playing it. Next, I worked in a movie by Salil Dutta. I played the role of a mother in Asim Bandyopadhyay's '*Kono Ek Din*'. It was the story of a taxi driver and his passengers. My role was of a mother who got a divorce from her husband but she could not get the custody of her son. So she used to wait in front of his school to see him. I was going through my own divorce case while I portrayed this character.

'*Megh*', our first production was my next movie. I have already spoken about all the details of this film.

**Interviewer** - Please give some more details.

**Shobha Sen** - I have given all the details - how we made the film, how much we struggled. Now what more do you want? It is not possible to give any more details.

After *Megh*, I appeared as Nibedita's mother, an Irish lady, in Bijoy Bose's film '*Sister Nibedita*'.

[**Note:** The name of the movie is '*Bhagini Nibedita*'.]

Our second production, '*Ghum Bhangar Gan*', was a tragic story of a boy who

wanted to become a musician but his dream was never realised as his parents were too poor to afford his music training. The unfortunate boy had to join a factory and died in an accident there. I acted as his mother.

My next film was '*Shankhabela*' by Agrabami.

I worked for Mrinal Sen's movie, '*Bhor Hoye Elo*', a long time ago. That was my first movie with Mrinal Sen. Most likely it was in the year 1954-55.

[**Note:** '*Bhor Hoye Elo*' was directed by Satyen Bose and was released in 1953. Mrinal Sen was the director of '*Raat Bhor*' which was released in 1955. Shobha Sen performed in both the movies.]

I also performed in Mrinal Sen's film, '*Ichchhapuran*'. I worked in another movie by Mrinal Sen but I cannot remember its name now. Aparna Sen had acted in that movie too.

[**Note:** Shobha Sen appeared in '*Akashkusum*', a film by Mrinal Sen, starring Aparna Sen and Soumitra Chattopadhyay.]

I played the role of a village woman in Mrinal Sen's Hindi movie, '*Ek Adhuri Kahani*'. This was a very interesting character: an old village woman had a tea stall in front of a sugar factory. The factory labourers used to come to her stall and she used to repeat the same story of her life to them every single day.

Then we produced '*Jhar*', a colour film directed by Utpal Dutt in 1981. It was a biopic on Derozio. We worked very hard to recreate and bring to life the atmosphere of the nineteenth century. The movie was highly praised. In 1982, we produced '*Baishakhi Megh*', a film on the revolutionary terrorists of 1930.

[Repetition about '*Baishakhi Megh*']

Our next production, '*Maa*', was based on Maxim Gorky's novel 'Mother'. I played the main role. [Repetition of the facts about '*Maa*']

Utpal produced a documentary for Doordarshan - '*In Search of Theatre*'. I acted in that but Doordarshan did not telecast the last part because the Doordarshan authorities could not accept Utpal Dutt's political ideology.

I performed in many other films but I cannot remember them all.

**Interviewer** - You have performed in so many different roles. Was there any common factor among them?

**Shobha Sen** -No, I cannot say that. Sometimes I got good roles which suited my beliefs and ideas but sometimes they were completely different. There was very little choice if one had to survive in the industry. I tried to stick to only those which matched my ideas in the beginning but it was not possible later. One had to accept whatever role was offered in order to stay afloat. In the beginning, I played the roles of my choice with the people who were known to me for a long time; but it was not always so. The problem of our film industry is that it typecasts its actors in certain typical roles. So I never had a chance to play any evil or complex character in a movie and I was always offered roles of ideal women. But in theatre it was different. There, I performed the role of Lady Macbeth which was full of duality and complexity. Thus, when the choice came between film and theatre I chose theatre as my stage to perform. We had to face a lot of financial difficulties for taking this decision but I felt deeply satisfied with my career.

I cannot tell you much about the early days of Utpal Dutt's career because when I first met him he was already an established actor. His first film was '*Michael*

*Madhusudan*' by Madhu Bose. I heard about the movie and Utpal's experience in it from him. He used to appear regularly in Shakespeare's plays when he was a student at St. Xavier's College. The Fathers of the college encouraged their students to act in Shakespearean dramas. Some of them were proficient in acting too. In fact Utpal got his first training in acting from the Fathers of St. Xavier's College. [Repetition of the story of Utpal Dutt's first appearance in film as Michael Madhusudan]

After that he appeared as Michael Madhusudan in other movies too, such as '*Vidyasagar*', and Madhu Bose's '*Mahakabi Girishchandra*'. He did not get many offers for films in those days. Only in Nitin Bose's '*Jogajog*', based on Tagore's eponymous novel, did he play the main role of Madhusudan Ghosal. I have not watched the movie but I am sure that he did very well. Utpal directed the scene from '*Othello*' in Ajoy Kar's famous movie, '*Saptapadi*'. Uttam Kumar played the part of Othello in the film but the voice was that of Utpal's.

In 1961, Utpal directed his first film, '*Megh*', and played the role of Samaresh Sanyal, its protagonist. He performed very well.

Nirmal Mitra made his film, '*Rajdhani Theke*', based on the short story, Inspector General, by Nicolai Gogol. Utpal played the role of the magistrate in that movie. Next, he acted in '*Pankatilak*' by Mangal Chakraborty. He also appeared in '*Kancher Swarga*' by Yatrik. Yatrik was a group of young directors and Tarun Majumdar was one of them. Utpal mostly played the role of either a doctor or a lawyer in these movies. Whenever there were some dialogues in English, everyone demanded that Utpal should do it due to his proficiency in the language.

Utpal then acted in an Assamese movie called '*Maniram Dewan*'. It was a minor role but he was praised for his acting. Utpal lived in Shilong for a long time and later too he visited Assam frequently and so he could speak Assamese without any difficulty.

His next film was '*Shesh Anka*' by Haridas Bhattacharya. After that he worked for Mrinal Sen in his film '*Abasheshe*'. He also acted in Salil Dutta's '*Suryasikha*'.

His next movie was our own production '*Ghum Bhangar Gan*'. [Story of '*Ghum Bhangar Gan*' retold]

Utpal took part in Salil Dutta's '*Momer Alo*'.

Then, he got the offer from Merchant Ivory for their film '*Shakespeare Wallha*' where he played the role of the *Maharaja*.

**Interviewer** - How did you get in touch with James Ivory?

**Shobha Sen** - Satyajit Ray suggested his name. They were searching for a good Indian actor who could also speak English fluently. Naturally Utpal's name came to mind first. Moreover, Shashi Kapoor and Jennifer Kapoor, who had watched Utpal's acting before, were also there to vouch for him. Geoffrey Kendal acted in that film and he was very happy to get Utpal as his co-actor.

Pinaki Mukhopadhyay's '*Chowrangee*' is another movie worth mentioning in which Utpal took part. It was based on a famous novel.

**Interviewer** - Wasn't it a box office success?

**Shobha Sen** - Yes, it was.

**Interviewer** - What was his role in the movie?

**Shobha Sen** - He played the role of an Anglo-Indian sahib. I can't recall the name of the character.

He started getting good offers after '*Fariyad*'. He acted as a villain in that film and the audience liked his performance. In fact, he was flooded with offers coming from producers and directors after his success in '*Fariyad*'. Sadly, he did not get good offers for a long time after joining the film industry. But at the same time we took Minerva Theatre on lease. And that was a huge responsibility. Utpal used to write the scripts and give direction. I was in charge of the production and finance. There were other members in the group but the real responsibility was ours. That is why I left the film world at that time. Utpal was getting more and more involved in films as so many offers were coming to him. In the meantime Utpal was offered the main role in '*The Guru*', another Merchant Ivory production. But after they started shooting Utpal was arrested because he had produced a stage play on the Naxalite movement which had an anti-government touch. But he had popular support and the government finally released him. He finished '*The Guru*' successfully.

His next offer came from Mrinal Sen for the film '*Bhuvan Shome*'. It was a landmark in the world of film as well as in Utpal Dutt's career. Utpal played the titular role. You all know how successful the movie was. It also established him firmly in the Hindi film world.

K.A. Abbas engaged him for his movie '*Saat Hindustani*' in which Utpal acted as a Punjabi. He had an extraordinary ability to learn languages. His father was a jailor and he was used to hearing people speaking in Punjabi as most of the guards were from Punjab. Thus, he had no problem in playing this role in the movie. He was praised for his acting in '*Saat Hindustani*'.

After that he performed in many good movies. '*Aparichito*' was one of them. Most

of these were done at the end of the sixties or the beginning of the seventies. He acted in an English movie called '*Bombay Talkies*'. Aparna Sen was his co-actor. Utpal performed in Mrinal Sen's '*Interview*' and '*Ek Adhuri Kahani*'.

He was getting lots of offers for Hindi films during this period. He appeared in Raveekant Nagaich's '*Mere Jeevan Saathi*'. In Hrishikesh Mukherjee's '*Guddi*', Utpal played the role of Jaya Bhaduri's uncle (*mama*). Hrishikesh started calling him *mama* after that and I became *mami*. '*Guddi*' was a commercial film and was a huge box office success. This movie established Utpal properly in the Hindi movie world.

His next film was '*Calcutta- 71*' by Mrinal Sen. I am talking about only those films of Utpal's which are worth mentioning. He performed in more than three hundred and fifty films in his entire career. There is no point in talking about all of them. He played important roles in most of these movies.

He performed in Dinen Gupta's 'film, *Nishijapan*'.

[**Note:** Utpal Dutt performed in Dinen Gupta's film, '*Nishimrigaya*']

In 1972, he acted in a Hindi movie called '*Honeymoon*', by Hiren Nag. Utpal played the main character in Tarun Majumdar's '*Thagini*'. In Dinen Gupta's '*Marjina Abdulla*' he acted as the leader of the dacoits. He played the hero's father in Subodh Mukherjee's '*Mr. Romeo*'.

[**Note:** '*Mr. Romeo*' was directed by Subhash Mukherjee, the son of Subodh Mukherjee]

Then, he performed in Sultania's film '*Parivartan*'.

'*Sriman Prithwiraj*' was a super hit movie by Tarun Majumdar which was released in 1973. Utpal played the role of a Rai Sahib in that film. The Rai Sahib

had very little knowledge of English but he was determined to talk in that language. The audience found it hilarious. Utpal used this trick in theatre too. In our renowned play, '*Tiner Talwar*', he used it a lot.

Utpal performed in another super hit film next year, called '*Amanush*', by Shakti Samanta. It was a double version movie and he acted in both versions. Lots of offers were coming by that time. Asit Sen's movie, '*Anari*', was another box office success as well as Guljar's '*Bedona*'. Utpal performed in both these films. Then Utpal also acted in "*My friend*" of Poonam Pictures.

In Bengali, he worked in Pijush Bose's '*Bikele Bhorer Phul*'. He also performed in '*Rodanbhara Basanta*', '*Asati*', '*Sadhu Judhithirer Karcha*' and '*Phuleshwari*'.

**Interviewer** - Did he act as comedian in all these films?

**Shobha Sen** - Yes. Most of the roles were that of a comedian. But there were serious roles too. In the film '*Asati*' he played the villain. Aparna Sen was the heroine. It was a major role and Utpal acted so well that when the shooting was over Aparna jokingly said that, though Utpal was the villain, he was worthy of getting love from the heroine because of his wonderful acting. We all laughed listening to this.

I used to accompany Utpal during his outdoor shooting. I often noticed that his presence changed the whole atmosphere. During the shooting of '*Amanush*', Shakti Samanta used to call him to the set even if he had no work that day just to talk with him. He said that the atmosphere was not really lively enough if Utpal was not there. He was a great entertainer who made everyone laugh and at the same time he could talk on serious matters too. At one time a Punjabi teacher was appointed for Utpal's Hindi training. After a few days, Utpal started to mimic

him and speak Hindi in the Punjabi style. When asked about this behaviour he said that he was speaking as his trainer taught him. Then, the director said that Utpal better follow his own style of speaking instead! There were many such funny incidents which happened during shooting.

Then he acted in Mrinal Sen's "Chorus" and Tarun Majumad's "Sansar Seemantey". He also worked with South Indian directors. He took part In Sethumadhavan's super hit film, '*Julie*'. Then, he acted in Shakti Samanta's '*Charitraheen*'.

In the movie '*Immaan Dharam*' Utpal got an interesting role. He played the character of a soldier from Punjab who had lost one of his legs in the war but had suppressed this fact to his friends and family. He used an artificial limb and no one knew his tragedy. But one day during a community dance in the village his artificial limb came off in public and his secret was revealed. Utpal's acting was really superb in this role.

His next film was '*Palanka*' by Rajen Tarafdar. It was a well-acclaimed movie and Utpal played an intriguing role in it. A family from East Bengal had shifted and settled in West Bengal after the Partition but the head of the family, then an old man, had refused to leave his home and his village because he greatly loved the village where he belonged. But his sons had come to West Bengal and were struggling for survival. They wanted their furniture to be shifted too and wrote a letter to their father asking him to send most of the furniture along with the *palanka* [handcrafted ornamental wooden bed]. Their father was shocked and then became very angry because to him that *palanka* was a symbol of the memories of his happy days. Utpal's acting was brilliant in this role. There was

a scene in which the old man went running on a bridge amidst of thunder and rain; it is an unforgettable visual. But unfortunately this movie did not get its due recognition in this country. Now people want to watch the movie but no print is available. We are trying to get a print so that we can show the movie someday.

He performed in many good films. He had the main role in Salil Sen's '*Chhutir Phande*' which was released in 1975. In the same year he appeared in '*Swayamsiddha*' by Dinen Gupta. This movie was a remake.

[**Note:** Sushil Mukhopadhyay directed '*Swayamsiddha*' in 1975 and Naresh Mitra directed the earlier version in 1947.]

Next, he appeared in '*The Great Gambler*' by Shakti Samanta. He also took part in '*Daktarbabu*' and Mohan Sehgal's '*Santan*'.

Manu Sen made a comedy film, called '*Mohunbaganer Meye*', in which Utpal played the father of the hero. The father was an ardent supporter of the Mohunbagan Football Club and before selecting a wife for his son he used to ask the prospective bride about the football club she supported. If she was a supporter of any club other than Mohunbagan then he cancelled the proposal immediately. It was uproarious. Next he appeared in Salil Dutta's '*Sei Chokh*'. In Dulal Guha's '*Do Anjane*', he played the character of a Bengali. He mixed some Bengali words in his Hindi dialogue which the audience found really amusing.

Utpal first worked with Satyajit Ray in his 1976 film, '*Jana Aranya*'. It was not a major role but an important one. Satyajit Ray was very happy with Utpal's performance.

His next film was '*Anandamela*' by Mangal Chakraborty. He then appeared, in the role of Rashbihari, in '*Dutta*'. It was a famous novel by Saratchandra. Ajoy

Kar made the movie, in 1976, with Suchitra Sen in the lead female role. Utpal received lots of applause for his role in *'Dutta'*. Then, he acted in Rabi Ghosh's *'Nidhiram Sardar'*.

Utpal greatly enjoyed playing his role in Aruna Vikas's movie, *'Shaque'*. The story was an exceptional one.

**Interviewer** - What was his role in the movie?

**Shobha Sen** - The role was that of a murderer, who was a semi-invalid person, that no-one suspected to be the killer. But he was the one to plan the murder. The audience was shocked and surprised to discover the real criminal at the end of the movie.

Then, he performed in Pijush Bose's *'Sister'* and Kanak Mukhopadhyay's *'Lalkuthi'*. *'Lalkuthi'* was a double version movie (in Hindi and in Bengali) and both versions achieved box office success.

Next, he appeared in Alo Sarkar's *'Jhinder Bondi'*. Our Mehra sahab was the producer. That was also a success.

**Interviewer** - Wasn't that a movie in which Soumitra.....

**Shobha Sen** - No. He appeared in the Bengali version.

**Interviewer** - Oh, then who performed in the Hindi one?

**Shobha Sen** - I can't remember now.

[**Note:** *'Jhinder Bondi'* was directed by Tapan Sinha and was released in 1961. Soumitra Chattopadhyay performed in that movie. *'Bondi'*, directed by Alo Sarkar, was released in 1978. Utpal Dutt performed in *'Bondi'*.]

Utpal acted in another film by Sethumadhavan - *'Yehi Hai Zindagi'*. Then, he appeared in Amitabha Dasgupta's *'Aparajita'*.

In Ritwik's '*Jukti Takko Aar Gappo*' Utpal did a good job. But Ritwik was a slightly eccentric person so he got it dubbed by someone else. I have no idea why he did that.

Some of Utpal's remarkable films are '*Swami*' by Basu Chatterjee, '*Babumoshai*' by Salil Dutta, '*Mantramugdha*' by Arabinda Mukhopadhyay, '*Priyotama*' by Basu Chatterjee and '*Pratishruti*' by Pinaki Mukhopadhyay. '*Pratishruti*' was a remake. Utpal appeared in the role which was played by Chhabi Biswas in the original one. In Shakti Chattopadhyay's double version movie, '*Ananda Ashram*', Utpal played the role of the father. It was a very good movie and Utpal also performed well. Then, he acted in Tapan Sinha's '*Safed Hathi*' in 1977. He also performed in a movie by Sultania but I have forgotten the name of that movie.

[**Note:** Utpal Dutt performed in '*Kitne Pass Kitne Door*', a 1976 film, by D.S. Sultania.]

Utpal also acted in Amrit Nahata's film, '*Kissa Kursi Ka*'.

**Interviewer** - Wasn't it banned by the government?

**Shobha Sen** - Yes. But it was released again later.

**Interviewer** - It was a political movie. Wasn't it?

**Shobha Sen** - Yes. The film showed the selfishness of the so-called leaders who were more interested in gaining power and prestige for themselves instead of doing anything for the people.

In Arabinda Sen's Hindi movie, '*Atithee*', Utpal had a song sequence. It was a playback but he matched his lip movements and expression so beautifully that everyone was astonished. Arabinda babu knew that Utpal could sing but even

he did not expect such wonderful acting. Many people said that they liked the movie just because of that song sequence. Utpal could sing very well though he did not sing in public.

His next film was Asim Bandyopadhyay's '*Moyna*' which was a box office success. He worked with Ketan Anand too.

[**Note:** Utpal Dutt performed in Ketan Anand's '*Toote Khilone*'].

**Interviewer** - What was his experience in working with Ketan Anand?

**Shobha Sen** - Ketan Anand was a good director and Utpal had an interesting role in that movie. After that, he acted as a tea garden owner in Pijush Bose's '*Dhanraj Tamang*' which was a very successful movie. His other successful movie from this period was '*Striker*'.

Then, in 1978, Utpal got an offer from Satyajit Ray for the film '*Joi Baba Felunath*'. His role in the movie was that of a unique character and he played it exceedingly well. He showed us how to act only with one's eyes without any body movement.

His next film was Shakti Samanta's much-acclaimed movie, '*Anusandhan*'. After that, he acted as Raja Radhakanto Deb in our own production, '*Jhar*'. He was the director of the movie too. I think '*Jhar*' and '*Baishakhi Megh*' were our best productions that were directed by Utpal.

He then appeared in Hrishikesh Mukherjee's hit comedy film, '*Golmaal*'. People still go crazy for watching films like '*Guddi*' and '*Golmaal*'. He also acted in '*Kotwal Saab*' by Hrishikesh Mukherjee. He played an important role in Basu Chatterjee's '*Prem Vivah*'. Mohan Sehgal's '*Kartavya*' was another good movie in which he took part. In Ajoy Kar's '*Naukadubi*' Utpal played the role of a

gentleman from Brahma Samaj.

In Satyajit Ray's '*Hirak Rajar Deshe*' he played a major role. The dialogue of the movie was written in rhymes. Satyajit babu got this idea from our play, '*Duswapner Nagari*', for which Utpal wrote all the dialogues in rhymes. Satyajit Ray himself told us this. The movie was a superb one. Not only children but also audiences of all ages liked it. The movie and its songs became so popular that children used to sing them everywhere.

His next movie was '*Apne Paraye*' by Basu Chatterjee, based on Saratchandra's novel *Nishkriti*. It was a very good movie.

Some of Utpal's mentionable films from this period were - Anil Ganguly's '*Agreement*', Vijay Anand's '*Ram Balram*', Pijush Bose's hit movie, '*Pankhiraj*', Raghavendra Rao's '*Nishana*', Hrishikesh Mukherjee's '*Mem Didi*', Manu Sen's comedy movie '*Subarna Golak*' in 1981 based on Bankimchandra's story, Bijoy Bose's '*Saaheb*', Basu Chatterjee's '*Hamari Bahu Alka*', Hrishikesh Mukherjee's '*Naram Garam*', Subodh Mukherjee's '*Ulta Seedha*', Mrinal Sen's '*Chalchitra*' and Bijoy Bose's '*Matir Swarga*'. Anil Ganguly made the Hindi version of '*Saaheb*' and Utpal acted in that too. Both the versions were very successful.

**Interviewer** - What was his role in '*Chalchitra*'?

**Shobha Sen** - I don't remember exactly. Most likely he played the part of a politician. Next, he performed in '*Madhuban*' by Ajoy Kar. [Story of Hazaribagh outdoor shoot retold]

He appeared in Mohan Sehgal's '*Ek Hi Rasta*', Tarun Majumdar's '*Meghmukti*' and Bimal Roy (Jr.)'s '*Pratiksha*'.

In 1982, he performed in Basu Chatterjee's movie, '*Shaukeen*'. It achieved

tremendous success at the box office. It was the story of three friends who were senior citizens. They wanted to enjoy life and went to Goa in this pursuit. Ashok Kumar, Hangal Sahab and Utpal played the roles of these three friends. Everyone performed very well but some people said that Utpal was the best. In fact, Ashok Kumar himself told me this. I was lucky enough to watch the shooting as Basu Chatterjee invited me to join them in Goa. It was a remarkable film and everyone was full of praise for it.

Next, he acted in the film “*Agamikal*” directed by Tapan Saha.

Next was our own production – ‘*Maa*’ which was based on Gorky’s ‘Mother’. I have already told you about it.

Bharat Rangachary’s film, ‘*Madhuri*’ was released by the name of ‘*Bahurani*’. It was a well-acclaimed film and Utpal performed in it. Bharat Rangachary was a skilled director and Utpal liked him very much. He passed away about four or five months ago. I felt heartbroken. He was a talented person and we knew him personally.

[**Note:** Manik Chatterjee was the director of ‘*Bahurani*’ and Bharat Rangachary was the executive director.]

Hrishikesh Mukherjee made another comedy, ‘*Rang Birangi*’ and Utpal’s acting was splendid in it. The audience was greatly amused. He performed in ‘*Shubh Kaamna*’ by K. Viswanath, one of the great directors of South India.

At that time Utpal appeared in a number of films. The remarkable ones were – Bimal Roy (Jr.)’s ‘*Duti Pata*’, Dinen Gupta’s ‘*Indira*’ which was based on a novel by Bankimchandra, Bharat Rangachary’s ‘*Baat Ban Jaye*’, Basu Chatterjee’s ‘*Pasand Apni Apni*’, T. Ramarao’s ‘*Yeh Desh*’, Gautam Ghosh’s ‘*Paar*’, an award

winning film, Anil Ganguly's '*Saaheb*', Prabhat Ray's '*Bandhan Anjana*', Parthapratim Choudhury's '*Pujarini*', T. Ramarao's '*Inquilab*' and Hrishikesh Mukherjee's comedy, '*Kisise Na Kahna*'. Utpal played a major role in '*Kisise Na Kahna*' and he received lots of praise for his acting. In fact, with each film that Hrishikesh Mukherjee made with him, Utpal became more and more famous.

His next few films were Ardhendu Chattopadhyay's '*Harishchandra Shaibya*', Asit Sen's '*Pratigna*', Tarun Majumdar's '*Bhalobasa Bhalobasa*', Ashis Ray [Producer]'s '*Jyoti*' and a Hindi movie, '*Rimjhim*'.

Then, Utpal went to Bangladesh for the shooting of Shakti Samanta's film '*Anyay Abichar*'. The shot was to be taken at the confluence of a wide, gushing river but due to foul weather they had to pack up and return without finishing their outdoor shoot.

Utpal met with an accident during the outdoor shoot of Tapan Sinha's '*Aaj Ka Robin Hood*'. He was sitting on the back of an elephant when the elephant suddenly became highly aggressive. First, the elephant attacked Tapan Sinha. He threw Tapan Sinha with his trunk and tried to smash him to the ground with his leg. The mahout somehow managed to take the elephant away from Tapan Sinha. Then, the elephant started running madly and the mahout lost control. Utpal was still clinging onto the back of the elephant at this time. Suddenly, the elephant stopped for a moment by the side of a huge tree. Utpal climbed the tree immediately and thus, his life was saved.

Some notable movies of the '80-s in which Utpal performed are - Dulal Guha's '*Chharpatra*' in 1986 [?], Tapan Sinha's Hindi movie, '*Tetra*' [**Note:** Tapan Sinha's film, '*Aaj Ka Robin Hood*', in 1987, featured a character called Tetra], Anil

Ganguly's '*Pyar Ke Kabil*', Ravikant Nagaich's '*Shapath*', Mukul. S. Anand's '*Main Balwan Hun*', Ardhendu Chatterjee's '*Bhranto Pathik*', Bimal Roy (Jr) 's '*Samrat O Sundari*', Prabhat Roy's '*Pratikar*', Ajit Ganguly's '*Biday*' and Salil Dutta's '*Jar Je Priyo*'.

In 1988, Utpal acted in a teleplay in Delhi called '*Inspector General*' which was directed by Rakesh Srivastav. The shooting was done at the Soviet Cultural Centre in Delhi. Long ago, Utpal had performed in '*Inspector General*', here, in Bengali. Again, he played the same part for the same movie.

[**Note:** Bengali movie '*Rajdhani Theke*' was based on the story Inspector General by Nikolai Gogol. Utpal Dutt performed in the film which was released in 1958]

It was a wonderful production. I watched it on TV. That is when we first interacted with Rakesh Srivastav and have known him since then. He is a talented director.

Utpal then acted in some more films such as Srinibas Chakraborty's '*Angar*', Ishwar Chakraborty's '*Gili Gili Gay*', Sujit Guha's hit film, '*Asha O Bhalobasa*' and Bimal Roy (Jr)'s '*Judge Saheb*'. '*Gili Gili Gay*' told the story of a magician's life. Utpal performed very well in that movie.

Biresh Chatterjee made '*Kari Diye Kinlam*' based on Bimal Mitra's famous novel. Biresh came from Bombay to work here. He was a well-known director.

**Interviewer** - What was the synopsis?

**Shobha Sen** - Oh it's a vast novel with a complex plot and many characters. The lady of the house was too dominating and wanted to control everyone's life. The girl who came to the family as a daughter-in-law thus had a pathetic life. This was the main theme of the movie. It was a great film.

Utpal then acted in Arun Bhatt's '*Mera Pati Sirf Mera Hai*'.

[**Note:** '*Mera Pati Sirf Mera Hai*' was directed by Manobala. Arun Bhatt directed '*Jawani Zindabad*' in which Utpal Dutt performed.]

After that, he performed in Dilip Roy's '*Garmil*'. It was a good movie. He also performed in '*Jaan Pehchchan*' 'which was produced by Ravie Sonie but its release got delayed. I do not know whether it was ever released after all!

Utpal's next film, in Bombay, was '*Jawani Zindabad*'. There's a vexatious story about this movie. The last scene to be shot was a party scene. The producers were calling us continuously and insisting that Utpal must come for the shoot. But we had already planned for the performance of '*Kallo!*', here in Kolkata, to be held at the same time. Utpal was not keeping well either. We thus requested them to change the date because it was not possible for us to appear for the show on the same day just after returning from Delhi. But they did not listen and promised us that they would book our flight for an immediate return. However, they did nothing. Neither did they book our return flight nor did they make any other arrangements. We kept going to-and-fro from the airport in Bombay, as no one arrived with the flight tickets. They did not keep any of their promises. Utpal was really hurt as he had never faced this type of behaviour. All the directors and producers of Bombay had always treated us with love and respect. But this production company treated us horribly.

As long as our secretary, Parashar Ji, was there we did not face any problems. He loved and respected Utpal like his elder brother. He was the production manager for Mohan Sehgal but came to us on his own and offered us his service. He was not interested in getting more money but instead came to us just because

he loved Utpal. We were very happy to have his services because at that time Utpal was getting more and more offers for Hindi films so we needed a full-time secretary who could look after everything from financial matters to arranging dates for shoots. I could not manage so many things. Parashar Ji took care of everything. We had no worries anymore. He served us most faithfully as long as he lived. But we were in great trouble after he passed away. Utpal was also not keeping well. And then, we faced this kind of ill-treatment. Thus, we decided not to take anymore offers from Bombay. Utpal did not accept any Hindi movie offer or go to Bombay for them ever again. Only once did we go to Bombay for the outdoor shooting of a Bengali film and then he worked there for Hrishikesh Mukherjee.

However, Utpal got some really good offers here. One of them was '*Padma Nadir Majhi*'. The movie was based on the famous novel by Manik Bandyopadhyay. Gautam Ghosh was trying to make this film for a long time but Hiten babu had bought the rights. Finally Gautam made it possible with the support of the Government of West Bengal. The West Bengal Government financed the movie. Utpal played the role of Hosen Mia. Gautam read the script out to us. The movie depicted the life of the fishermen who made their living fishing on the river, Padma. This film had been produced in Bangladesh earlier and Tripti Mitra had acted in it but very few people had watched the movie.

Rupa Ganguly, and an actress from Bangladesh played the lead female roles in Gautam's film. Both of them did really well. Asad, from Bangladesh, who played the lead male role, was a great actor. All the actors who performed as fishermen had amazing acting prowess too. Their acting was both authentic and realistic.

Most of them came from the theatre groups in Bangladesh. There was a scene in which a hundred and fifty fishing boats were seen on the river. It was a fantastic scene. Gautam worked very hard for this film. Perhaps he had given too much attention to capturing nature's beauty which made the film a little boring sometimes. But on the whole it was an excellent film and received lots of awards. Utpal was not well when the shooting of this movie was going on but still he did his best and was praised by all. I remember a particular incident - we had just returned from the shoot after a long day and were informed almost immediately that there would be a retake the next day as the light during the sunset had been insufficient that day. It was such a difficult shot - taken in a remote island where one had to go by steamer which could be ferried only during high tide. But Utpal made no complaint and went for the shoot, the next day, though he was not well at all. He never failed in his duty.

And then came the greatest offer of Utpal's life. He was offered the main role in Satyajit Ray's '*Agantuk*'. During his last days Utpal's greatest satisfaction was that he had had the opportunity to play the lead role in '*Agantuk*'. It was an exceptional movie and Utpal's performance was unforgettable. The protagonist of the film came back to India after a long time and stayed with his niece. But the niece and her husband could not trust him so he left their home. When they realised their mistake they went to him and apologised. He came back but left again giving his niece his share of the family inheritance. Mamata Shankar played the role of the niece. It was an outstanding movie and received lots of awards. This was Utpal's last film. He was happy and content after performing in '*Agantuk*'.

I do not have anything more to say about Utpal's films.

Utpal had an extraordinary ability to learn languages. Thus, it was easy for him to prepare for his dialogues in Hindi. He could also adjust well to any situation. People sometimes wanted to know how he adjusted himself to the atmosphere of the Bombay film circle. He used to reply that the atmosphere never bothered him as he spent most of his time reading books or writing plays. Even in his last days, when he went to Bombay for treatment, he did not waste time. He asked for a table and a chair from our neighbour which they provided immediately. He used to refresh himself with a cup of tea after coming back from the hospital and start writing his book, Pratibiplab, in which he made some excellent political analyses. He finished the book but did not live to see its publication.

Utpal never used the same style for portraying different characters. He used to give time and thought to each and every character, analyse them and then act accordingly. He showed us a new path, brought a new wave to the Hindi film world and established himself as a renowned actor. His fame and glory, which spread all over India, was not due to his plays - as those were in Bengali, a language which the people of Maharashtra or any other province of India could not appreciate - but due to his acting style. I think that Utpal's plays should be translated so that they can reach all corners of our country. I believe that his plays are capable of enhancing his fame to a much higher level.

**Interviewer** - Utpal-da wrote dialogues for so many plays. Did he prepare his dialogue in his own style while acting in films?

**Shobha Sen** - Utpal never did anything overruling the director. Sometimes he

asked for the director's permission and made changes only if he got this permission.

**Interviewer** - Did this happen frequently?

**Shobha Sen** - Sometimes. Especially when the dialogue was in English, Utpal used to correct it.

**Interviewer** - Did he select his own costume and makeup in the film or just suggest it?

**Shobha Sen** - Yes. Sometimes the directors wanted his suggestions.

**Interviewer** - I think most of the time.....

**Shobha Sen** - That depended on the director and how much he relied on Utpal.

**Interviewer** - Is the sense of timing very important for a comedy?

**Shobha Sen** - Yes. All his pupils who made a good career as comedic actors, such as Rabi Ghosh and Shekhar Chatterjee, learnt this from Utpal.

**Interviewer** - Utpal-da used to add an element of comedy even when he was performing the role of a villain. How did he do that?

**Shobha Sen** - How am I supposed to know the trick? It was his individual acting talent. He read so many books and watched different types of plays.

**Interviewer** - How did he direct a movie?

**Shobha Sen** - He was an efficient director. But if he had a major role to play in the film then there were some difficulties. We all helped him to overcome them. But he could not make films according to his own ideas and beliefs because of the Film Censor Board. Failure of '*Ghum Bhangar Gan*' is an example. [Repetition of the problem with the Censor board regarding '*Ghum Bhangar Gan*']

'*Baishakhi Megh*' did not get the approval of the Censor Board as it showed the betrayal of the Congress party. We had to discard that part to get their permission. In '*Maa*' there was a part where the depiction of India's Emergency Rule was criticised. That part, too, had to be discarded due to the Censor Board's disapproval.

**Interviewer** -Did you have a clash with the Censor Board for all your productions?

**Shobha Sen** - Yes, all except our first movie '*Megh*'. There was no political statement in '*Megh*'. Even our documentary '*In Search of Theatre*' suffered due to this. [Repetition about the fate of '*In Search of Theatre*']

**Interviewer** - It's well known that Satyajit Ray used to sketch all the scenes before shot-taking. What was Utpal-da's method?

**Shobha Sen** - He planned each frame and each shot in minute detail. Let me give you an example: Sumitra Mukherjee had an important role in '*Jhar*'. She played the character of a widow, who was rescued by the Derozians on her way to a burning ghat where she was being taken, to be burnt as sati. Utpal did not like her acting for that scene as it was hysterical and melodramatic. He tried to help her rectify it but she just refused to do so. Utpal then gave up. Later, she realised her mistakes and was really sorry. She appealed to him for getting a chance to redeem herself in '*Baishakhi Megh*' and acted following Utpal's direction exactly. In fact, she did so well in '*Baishakhi Megh*' that she got an award for her role.

Utpal was a very good trainer. He never dictated anyone or told them to copy his style. He intervened only when the actor failed to understand the role and

explained it to him / her. He never liked melodrama.

**Interviewer** - Did you offer him any help while he wrote his plays?

**Shobha Sen** - Yes. After writing each scene he wanted my opinion about it.

**Interviewer** - That means you have full commitment in all his films.

**Shobha Sen** - Yes. I am not a scholar like him so I listened to them from an audience perspective. He could thus guess the reaction of the people.

**Interviewer** - What more did you do to help him?

**Shobha Sen** - We always discussed the subject matter of the film. We wanted to make a movie called, '*Kshama Korbo Na*'. The script was ready. It was the story of an ideologist professor. Her husband had left her and she was staying with her father-in-law and son. She taught economics at a college and her son was a brilliant student. But we could never make that film because there were some political statements in it. Instead, we produced the movie '*Jhar*'. [Repetition about '*Jhar*']

**Interviewer** - Was finance your main problem regarding making films?

**Shobha Sen** - Yes. Film production needs a lot of money. Otherwise, Utpal could have made some more good films. Moreover, the producer is not the sole decision maker in the world of films; distributors and exhibitors also have much influence. And the latter never like these new ideas or political movies. Ritwik suffered throughout his life for this as well. Utpal never received his due recognition as a director.

## Recording on Tuesday, 31st October, 1995

**Shobha Sen** - Now I am going to tell you about the serials in which Utpal performed.

In the beginning, Utpal had some apathy about small screens and did not want to appear in TV serials. Later, he did a few selective serials and all of them turned out to be very good except one. The viewers' comments told us so.

'*Yaksha*' was a telefilm by Bijoy Chatterjee based on Tagore's short story, *Sampatti Samarpan*. Utpal received an award for performing in '*Yaksha*'.

**Interviewer** - Was it a 1986 production?

**Shobha Sen** - Yes. And there was also '*Mujrim Hajir*' by Rakesh Chowdhury. Utpal played the role of a zamindar who was always scared that someone would rob him of his possessions. It was a mega serial and Utpal did amazingly well.

Next, he performed in Hrishikesh Mukherjee's serial, '*Insaan*'. It had a good storyline and Utpal had the main part. In fact, he was almost the solo actor of '*Insaan*' as the other actors had very minor roles.

**Interviewer** - What is the story of '*Insaan*'?

**Shobha Sen** - It was a comedy. The character Utpal played pretended to have died as he wanted to know the reactions of his relatives and friends. In fact, we had gone to Bombay for the shooting of a Bengali film. But when we reached the producer was not ready to shoot. So then, Hrishikesh offered this role to Utpal and he did very well.

Utpal played the main role in '*Mukherjee Moshai*', a Bengali serial by Raja Sen. I played the part of his wife.

**Interviewer** - Please tell us more.

**Shobha Sen** - Mukherjee Moshai worked as the *naib* for a zamindari estate, faithfully, for a long time. The old zamindar used to give him due respect but the zamindar's son did not care for him. He went with an appeal to the new zamindar only to get neglect and insult. He came back broken-hearted. Utpal portrayed the tragedy so well!

Next, Utpal produced his own serial - '*In Search of Theatre*' but Doordarshan did not telecast its last part. [Repetition about '*In Search of Theatre*']

There were offers for some more serials but he could not perform anymore.

**Interviewer** - Did he act for Sandip Ray?

**Shobha Sen** - Yes. He acted for Sandip Ray and also for Basu Chatterjee. Sandip Ray made '*Jato Kando Kathmandu te*', based on a detective story by Satyajit Ray. It was well-made. A funny incident occurred at that time: It had been shown in the movie that the character played by Utpal had died and his obituary was published in the newspaper. Somehow this gave birth to a rumour that the real Utpal Dutt had passed away. Crowds gathered in front of our house to mourn his loss and then they saw Utpal sitting in our balcony and reading a book. We laughed a lot watching their reaction.

[**Note:** The name of the Hindi tele-serial was '*Kissa Kathmandu Kaa*' in which Utpal Dutt played the role of Maganlal Meghraj. Later, in 1996, Sandip Ray made a full-length Bengali movie called, '*Joto Kando Kathmandu te*']

**Interviewer** - What about '*Lambakarna*'?

**Shobha Sen** - No, that was not a good one. I told you that all serials he did were good except one - that one is '*Lambakarna*'. It was based on a very good comedy

but the director was not efficient enough to turn it into a film.

**Interviewer** - What was his serial with Basu Chatterjee?

**Shobha Sen** - Basu Chatterjee's serial was called, '*Jodi Emon Hoto*'. Utpal appeared in one of the episodes. His role was that of a judge who was not happy with his own verdict. Utpal was the solo actor of that episode. It was a very good serial.

**Interviewer** - He was very progressive about his ideas and we have watched that in his theatre. Was he selective about his roles in films?

**Shobha Sen** - He never accepted any offer to perform in any reactionary film. He always wanted to know the story before accepting the offer. If there was anything contradictory to his belief he refused to perform. He never made any compromise.

**Interviewer** - You were talking about some incident regarding this.

**Shobha Sen** - Yes. In one scene for a film, he was supposed to say some dirty words to a very young girl. He refused and left the floor. He told the director that this scene had not been mentioned at the time of the offer and that he would have refused the offer then and there had he known it before. Saying this, he came home and never went back.

**Interviewer** - This shows that he never compromised regarding these issues. Now please tell us something about the directors with whom, both of you have worked.

**Shobha Sen** - Utpal's career in the Hindi film industry began with Mrinal Sen and K.A. Abbas. [Repetition about '*Saat Hindustani*']

**Interviewer** - Why did K.A. Abbas offer a role to Utpal-da in his movie? How did

you get connected with him?

**Shobha Sen** - He had known Utpal for a long time not only for his acting but also for his political background. In fact, he did not support Utpal's viewpoint when we staged '*Kallol*'. Utpal, of course, did not budge from his stand point.

Abbas Sahab realised that Utpal was the best-suited actor to perform that role in '*Saat Hindustani*'. He took many new faces in that movie. It was Amitabh Bachchan's first film. For Utpal, it was his first Hindi film. Anwar, Jalal Agha and many more artists were there. Jalal Agha's sister, Pushi, [Shahnaz] appeared in the lead female role.

The film's outdoor shoot was done in Goa. I also joined them. We were like a large joint family. We used to dine together. It was a low budget film and Abbas Sahab was trying to control the cost. So the food was a simple one. Utpal was not used to that. I knew that he was facing difficulty. Abbas Sahab also noticed this. Then, he told me to cook for Utpal. I said that I could not cook only for Utpal. If I cooked, then I would prepare food for the whole unit. Finally, I could not cook for the whole unit single-handedly and the technicians felt left out because I could not prepare food for them. But on the whole we enjoyed a lot in Goa. Anwar, Amitabh, Jalal Agha - all of them made the atmosphere lively with their jokes and laughter. After a few days, I returned home and the unit went for shooting in some other location. We always had a lot of respect for Abbas Sahab.

**Interviewer** - Tell us about Mrinal Sen.

**Shobha Sen** - Mrinal Sen had been our long-time friend. He knew that no-one else would suit the role of Bhuvan Shome as well as Utpal and so he offered the role to him. [Repetition about '*Bhuvan Shome*' and Mrinal Sen]

Utpal truly enjoyed working with Satyajit Ray. Ray was a great man. His methods, his thought process and his character analyses were entirely different from others. Utpal was tremendously impressed by him. He did his best in 'Agantuk'. Every morning he used to sit with the script and analyse the role he had to perform. There were lengthy dialogues in 'Agantuk' which he almost learnt by heart. I never saw Utpal working so hard for any other movie.

Utpal had a role in almost every film directed by Tarun Majumdar whose comedy movie, 'Sriman Prithviraj', was a box office success. He had a very good understanding with Utpal and used to take his suggestions before shot-taking. Tarun babu is a very skilled director who understands cinema. Utpal was very happy to work in his films.

**Interviewer** - What was his experience with Gulzar?

**Shobha Sen** - He worked with Gulzar for only one film - 'Bedona', which was an adaptation of Shakespeare's play. His role was not a major one. Gulzar is a renowned director so his work experience was good.

And I have already told you about the English films. [Repetition about Merchant Ivory Productios].

**Interviewer** - Tell us about Rajen Tarafdar.

**Shobha Sen** - There is no doubt about his skill and efficiency as a director. But he had one flaw-he was terribly fussy about his work. For one scene he used to take ten to twelve shots. Because of his habit of taking too many shots for one movie, a rule was imposed in the industry which specified the number of reels to be used for each movie.

**Interviewer** - You mean that according to this rule the maximum number of reel per movie was fixed.

**Shobha Sen** - Yes. He was a very good actor too. There were so many times when he explained a scene to Utpal by demonstrating it. He understood acting very well. He was also a great director. '*Ganga*' is an outstanding film. But Hrishikesh [editor] had to discard half the reels under his strict instruction.

**Interviewer** - Did he really discard so many reels?

**Shobha Sen** - Yes. It became almost a legend. But he worked really hard for '*Ganga*'.

All the movies which Utpal performed in, for Shakti Samanta, Basu Chatterjee and Hrishikesh Mukherjee, were good ones. Each of Hrishikesh Mukherjee's films was a super hit. Utpal almost monopolised the role of the comedy actor in Hindi films. His roles in Shakti Samanta's films were outstanding ones and he performed remarkably well.

Let me tell you an incident during the shooting of a movie by Shakti Samanta: Utpal and Uttam Kumar were co-actors in that movie. Uttam had a different opinion about a shot and insisted that the director take it according to Uttam's instructions. But Shakti Samanta refused to do so. He said that the shot was taken after a lot of planning and thinking, and he would thus be unable to take Uttam's suggestion about it. Uttam became upset and went to sit at the corner of the floor. So the whole unit ended up sitting and waiting for him. Finally, he agreed with Shakti Samanta's point and returned to the floor.

**Interviewer** - Perhaps what he thought was right.....

**Shobha Sen** - Certainly. Shakti Samanta didn't care for Uttam Kumar's

prestigious position as an actor. But this was not possible for the directors of Bengali films in Kolkata.

Utpal had a clash with Suchitra Sen during the shooting of '*Fariyad*'. The camera was continuously focussing on Suchitra for close-ups and Utpal's shot was taken from behind, showing only his back. Here, even the directors used to follow Suchitra's whims and instructions. After sometime, Utpal lost his patience and told them to use a dummy wearing Utpal's coat. He left the floor and came home. There was no shooting for some days. Finally the director and the producer came to him to apologise. Suchitra also realised her mistake. She said to me "Your husband is so quick-tempered, he just left the floor!" We had always had a good relationship between us. I also had a good relationship with Uttam. [Repetition of her relationship with Uttam Kumar during the days in M.P. Studio]

Basu Chatterjee became our family friend. Whenever I faced any problem, financial or otherwise, he tried to help. He took me to Goa during Utpal's film shoot for '*Shaukeen*'.

Utpal was happy to work with Anil Ganguly who made '*Saaheb*'.

**Interviewer** - What about Ajoy Kar?

**Shobha Sen** - We performed in many films by Ajoy Kar. My first film with him was, '*Bamuner Meye*'. He was a true gentleman. There were very few people like him in the industry. One day he came to our house to discuss the scene from '*Othello*' in '*Saptapadi*'. Utpal had directed that part of the movie. Meera Rahman, the wife of Ataur Rahman, who stayed one floor below us, came at the same time to show us her new Russian camera. We told her to show it to Ajoy

babu. She asked, “Does he know anything about a camera?” We started laughing and Ajoy babu calmly replied, “Oh, I know a little.” He was such a modest person. I performed in many films directed by him. He was a director with unusual skill.

**Interviewer** - Utpal-da also worked with him.

**Shobha Sen** - Yes. He performed in Ajoy Kar’s ‘*Dutta*’, ‘*Naukadubi*’, ‘*Madhuban*’ and others. He was an excellent camera-man and a talented director but he had no ego.

**Interviewer** - Tell us about the directors of the earlier times such as - Madhu Bose and Nitin Bose.

**Shobha Sen** - Madhu Bose gave Utpal his first opening in the industry. Utpal learnt Bengali so well thanks to him. He loved Utpal like his own son and missed him if Utpal could not meet Mr. Bose for a long time. Whenever Utpal went to meet him, he became happy like a child. If I went to meet him without Utpal he would ask me about Utpal’s activities in minute detail. We used to go to meet him often. Utpal had great love and respect for Madhu Bose. Madhu Bose wrote a lot about Utpal in his autobiography. He also had a good relationship with Utpal’s mother and sister. Utpal’s sister was settled in Shilong and he met her there during the shooting of ‘*Shesher Kabita*’. She used to sing very well. Madhu Bose mentioned all this in his autobiography.

**Interviewer** - And what about Nitin Bose?

**Shobha Sen** - I cannot say anything about Nitin Bose. He was a renowned director but I never worked with him. Utpal performed in one film by Nitin Bose. I think he had done well.

**Interviewer** - How was Rabi Ghosh, as a director, in '*Nidhiram Sardar*'?

**Shobha Sen** - He did a good job. He is a comedy actor himself.

**Interviewer** - Was he still in your theatre group when he made the film?

**Shobha Sen** - No. He had left our group long back. He accepted so many film offers, after '*Angar*' became a super hit, that he could not give time to theatre.

Utpal also liked another young director - Bharat Rangachary. He passed away a few months back.

**Interviewer** - Tell me about Aruna [Raje] and Vikas[Desai].

**Shobha Sen** - Aruna and Vikas got married after they graduated from the Pune Film Institute [FTII]. Aruna came first in the editing dept. and Vikas came first in direction. They made films together. They were a very happy, loving couple. If Aruna started a sentence, Vikas finished it and when Vikas started a sentence, Aruna finished it. We used to laugh a lot. When their daughter died and they divorced, we felt really sad.

Utpal worked with another director, for whom he had a lot of respect and that was Mohan Sehgal. He also loved and respected Utpal. His producer was also a very nice man. We received much care and love from him. Our secretary came from Mohan Sehgal's unit. We could get our own house in Bombay and Utpal worked in so many Hindi films - all thanks to him. We remain grateful to him forever.

Manu Sen was the director of '*Mohun Baganer Meye*', '*Subarna Golak*' and many other movies. He had been a football player earlier. Manu babu was a jovial person and we had a very good time during the shooting of '*Mohun Baganer Meye*.' I was also there because I played Utpal's wife in that movie. Our

relationship with Manu babu was always good.

**Interviewer** - What was his experience with the directors of South India? He performed in two films by Sethumadhavan.

**Shobha Sen** - He worked with Sethumadhavan and also performed in '*Shubh Kamna*' by K. Viswanath. Utpal liked working in their films. They are very disciplined and followed rules. They offered good money but one had to work hard. He performed in '*Julie*'. Jalal Agha was also there in that movie. He used to tell lots of funny stories and entertain us. He told us many stories about Dilip Kumar which we enjoyed.

I have already mentioned Gautam Ghosh whom we consider one of the best directors of today. Utpal performed in his films '*Paar*' and '*Padma Nadir Majhi*'.

**Interviewer** - Did he appear only in '*Jukti Takko Aar Gappo*' by Ritwik?

**Shobha Sen** - Yes. He worked for Ritwik only once. Ritwik was a very peculiar person but we loved him. Though he had flaws in his personal life, he was undoubtedly a genius.

Another good offer came to Utpal for '*Koto Ajanare*', based on the famous novel by Shankar, but he could not finish it.

He also performed in Rakesh Srivastav's teleplay '*Inspector General*' for which he had to stay in Delhi for one month. It was a great performance.

**Interviewer** - What was his role in '*Chalchitra*'?

**Shobha Sen** - I don't remember. It was not something significant.

**Interviewer** - Subodh Mukherjee used to make commercial Hindi films. Utpal-da worked with him too.

**Shobha Sen** - He was our friend. Utpal worked with him. Was it '*Aaj ka Romeo*'?

[**Note:** Utpal Dutt performed in '*Mr. Romeo*']

**Interviewer** - Was it '*Ulta Seedha*'?

**Shobha Sen** - Was it a film by Subodh? I cannot remember now.

**Interviewer** - I see the name of Bimal Roy here.

**Shobha Sen** - Oh, this is Bimal Roy (Jr.) who has made '*Duti Pata*' and many other films.

**Interviewer** - Yes, he made '*Pratiksha*' and many more.

**Shobha Sen** - We had great relationships with Dulal Guha, Arabinda Sen from Bombay, the director of '*Atithee*' and also with Pijush Bose, the director of '*Dhanraj Tamang*'.

I noticed that very few artists received so much respect as Utpal got in the Bombay film world. Not only did the Bengali directors show him love and respect but also the whole industry used to call him *dada*. They knew him as a scholar and a writer which put him on another level. Everyone touched his feet or said *Namaste* to him. We consider this as our best reward.

**Interviewer** - Didn't he work with Ravikant Nagaich?

**Shobha Sen** - Yes, he performed in two of his films. The producers were young. They were from a Gujarati business family who didn't eat outside food and brought-home cooked food every day. They always offered the food to Utpal and called him *Dada*. Their behaviour was nice and respectful.

**Interviewer** - Did he perform in Victor Banerjee's '*Agun*'?

**Shobha Sen** - Yes, he did.

**Interviewer** - How was Victor Banerjee as a director?

**Shobha Sen** - I will not make any comment about Victor Banerjee.

Desh Mukherjee, who made *'Imman Dharam'*, was an able director. Utpal enjoyed working with him.

**Interviewer** - You have been to foreign countries so many times and also attended film festivals. Please tell us about those festivals. We would like to know about the festivals you attended, the movies you watched and whether or not any of your films ever shown in a festival.

**Shobha Sen** - The first film festival I attended was held in West Germany. Mrinal Sen was also there. I stayed with our friends. The most interesting thing I noticed there was a parallel film festival which was going on side by side with the main, government-approved festival. Most of the film makers were young and most of the films were political. Some of them were banned in their own countries and thus the shooting and exhibition of those films were done in a clandestine way. I watched some excellent films there.

**Interviewer** - In which year did you attend this festival?

**Shobha Sen** - I cannot remember the year. And it is not written anywhere as I did not go there as an official delegate. My son was staying in Germany at that time and I went to visit him. While staying with him, I attended the film festival for fifteen days. The first film festival I officially attended was in Tashkent. Later, I went to Moscow too.

**Interviewer** - Can you tell us the years of those festivals?

**Shobha Sen** - I attended the Moscow film festival, for the first time, in 1983. They have their film festivals in Tashkent and Moscow alternately every year. I attended most of them from 1983 onwards. *'Maa'* and *'Baishakhi Megh'* were exhibited in those festivals.

**Interviewer** - What were the reactions of the audience?

**Shobha Sen** - Their reactions were good but it was difficult to get due attention at such a big festival. One has to go there in advance, and spend a lot of time for publicity, which we could not afford. Basically we were theatre people. So, our productions did not get much recognition there. But if we could have arranged for proper publicity then they would have no doubt gained recognition.

Then, we planned to make a film on Lebedev's life as a joint venture with the USSR. For that we went there several times, watched film shoots, did research and had discussions. Unfortunately, the film was never made due to lack of financial support. We were supposed to bear half of the cost of the production but we could not get any producer who would agree to invest so much money. We tried to get governmental support but our government refused to finance the movie. It was a great disappointment for us.

**Interviewer** - You met with Pudovkin and Cherkasov when they came to India. Did you meet any other great director or artist when you went there?

**Shobha Sen** - Yes, we did but I cannot remember their names now. We also used to meet them when they came to India, talk to them and offer our hospitality.

These film festivals enriched our knowledge and widened our horizon. We could meet artists and film-makers from all over the world and also watch their productions. We considered ourselves really fortunate. Mostly we went together. It was easier for me to understand the films if Utpal was there to discuss them with. We were mainly interested in political films.

**Interviewer** - Please tell us the names of some films which you have watched.

**Shobha Sen** - I cannot recall their names now. We watched mostly political

films. Their [the Russians] hospitality was remarkable. They arranged for food coupons, nice large rooms for us to stay in and also for the transport.

One time, I went there alone to research about Lebedev during the time of the film festival. I was not an official delegate that time. I went there as a guest of Soventfilm. So, when the festival was over I did not get the same return flight as the official delegates. My ticket was booked via Kabul. In the meantime, political strife started in Afghanistan. I wanted to change my ticket but no-one listened. Then, I went to Raj Kapoor and appealed to him. He had always liked me. Raj Kapoor enjoyed tremendous popularity all over the USSR. I am a witness to this. When we went for some trip arranged by our host country, people used to stop the bus to see Raj Kapoor and pay homage to him.

**Interviewer** - Was it because of his film '*Awara*'?

**Shobha Sen** - Yes. But his other movies were also much appreciated in that country. So I told him about my problem and asked for a solution. He said, "You come with us." I said, "What if they catch me?" He replied, "Don't worry, I am there." Then someone told me that the flight for the delegates was scheduled to leave at 4 A.M. and the reporting time was at 3 in the morning. Raj Kapoor said that no one would check and find me amongst a hundred and fifty delegates at that unearthly hour and that I should insert my passport in the pile of the passports of the delegates. Basu Chatterjee and other delegates also promised to help. Still, I was very apprehensive and scared when I reached the airport. But the officials also showed sympathy and let me enter. I reached Delhi with the delegates and was greatly relieved. Basu Chatterjee started his little jokes about my situation and Raj Kapoor asked whether everything was okay with me. I

replied that everything went fine. He could speak Bengali very well as he had spent his early life in Kolkata and worked in New Theatres. He threw a party there one day and made me dance at that party. Every one enjoyed the party, it was so much fun! I loved to attend all those film festivals.

**Interviewer** - Was '*Nicher Mahal*' shown in the Moscow Film Festival?

**Shobha Sen** - No, it went for the Theatre Festival in Moscow. It was a very big festival. They invited us to stage '*Nicher Mahal*' there.

**Interviewer** - Tell us about the Tokyo Film Festival.

**Shobha Sen** - We went there for '*Agantuk*'. '*Agantuk*' won an award there and Satyajit babu wanted Utpal to go to the Tokyo Film Festival and collect it. He gave me permission to accompany Utpal as he was not keeping well at that time. The cost of my flight was my own but food and stay were free. We had been to China but had never visited Japan. So, we were eager to see a new country and its people. Utpal, naturally, wanted me to go with him. We loved our stay in Japan.

**Interviewer** - What was your experience there?

**Shobha Sen** - It was very good. The film had subtitles but subtitles were of very poor quality. I don't know who did them. Utpal and Mamata Shankar both went to collect the award and the certificate for Satyajit Ray. And our greatest reward was getting a meeting with Kurosawa. In the festival leaflet, we discovered that there was a meeting with Kurosawa, scheduled for the delegates. We immediately went and asked for permission to attend the meeting. Kurosawa talked to us, wanted to know about Satyajit Ray, and discussed his own productions. We were thrilled to meet such a celebrated director. We learnt

about his method of work and many other things in this meeting.

**Interviewer** - Do you want to say anything more about cinema?

**Shobha Sen** - Indian cinema lost two of its most renowned personalities in two consecutive years. This has created a void that can never be filled. The demise of Satyajit Ray is considered to be a great loss for international cinema too. He was one of the greatest directors in the world. He always selected unique subjects for films. Who could dare to make a film like '*Pather Panchali*', in those days, other than Satyajit Ray? All his movies such as - the Apu trilogy, '*Goopi Gayen Bagha Bayen*', '*Hirak Rajar Deshe*' were exceptional in their storyline and also had their appeal to the people.

Moreover, in Utpal's last days, Ray elevated him to the highest level by selecting him for '*Agantuk*'. We will remain grateful to him forever. On the last day of shooting, at Shantiniketan, Utpal went and touched his feet saying "I don't know whether I could make you satisfied or not but I have tried my best." Satyajit Ray hugged him and said that he was immensely satisfied with Utpal's work. When he was asked by Rabi Ghosh and others about his selection of Utpal for the main role in '*Agantuk*', he told them that he had always planned to make the film with Utpal in his mind. He would not have made it if Utpal was not there. He said that the character had long dialogues which discussed a wide variety of topics. He knew that Utpal had scholarly interests in various subjects and thus he could deliver the dialogues properly. Any actor can deliver a dialogue by learning them by heart but that fails to add the touch of authenticity in his acting.

**Interviewer** - Yes, one can understand that while watching the movie.

**Shobha Sen** - This was the greatest achievement in his life. He was completely

happy and content after performing in this movie.

**Interviewer** - You still act in films sometimes, isn't it?

**Shobha Sen** - Yes, but there is nothing remarkable. There is a lack of senior actresses these days so if some friend offers a minor role, I perform it. It's better than sitting at home and doing nothing. I've acted in a hundred and fifty movies so far and thus, I have a weakness for cinema. At the same time I am grateful for radio too especially to Biren Bhadra and Bani Kumar who gave me my first lessons in voice training. [Repetition about her early days in AIR]

I am grateful to Nimai Ghosh for my career in film, and for my success on stage I am grateful to Bijan Bhattacharya, Shambhu Mitra and above all, Utpal Dutta.

And here ends my story.

*Amar kothati phurolo/Note gachhti murolo.*