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'I fall in love'

Baghban DOP Barun Mukherjee on shooting his first bengali film and why he was the chosen man for bolly beauties



Koushik Sen, Ananya Chatterjee and Suman Ghosh discuss a scene from *Dwando*; (below) Barun Mukherjee on the sets. Pictures by Aranya Sen



Cinematographer **Barun Mukherjee** has shot some of the most beautiful women in Bollywood, but it's not easy to get the 66-year-old to talk about himself. A **t2** chat with the low-key DoP of *Baghban* and *Baabul*, who is in town shooting his first Bengali film *Dwando*, directed by Suman Ghosh...

Why did you take so long to shoot a Bengali film?

Nobody offered me one. Time and again I have expressed my desire to work in a Bengali film but people had different notions about me. I'm told that some thought I was too big for a regional film or I was too expensive or I was too difficult to approach. Rituparno (Ghosh) had approached me when he was planning to do *Titli*. I had agreed but unfortunately it didn't happen at that time.

How did *Dwando* happen?

I had seen Suman's *Podokkhep* and after reading about him in the papers I was pretty impressed with him. I called him up in Miami and we became friends over phone. He met me in Mumbai and requested that I do his film. Staying away from Mumbai for too long is tough but knowing that the film would be shot within a month, I made time. I liked the subject. I didn't have the heart to say no to him. Suman is very sincere and I like working with people who have no inhibitions and are true to their work.

What kind of visual design have you created for *Dwando*?

There are a lot of shades and stages in the film, which you can make out from the title itself. It's about a woman's conflict and I am trying to give it a naturalistic look. The woman is going through a trauma and one needs to create the drama through the framing and lighting. The whole thing has to be very subtle and subdued. Nothing loud and gimmicky. I can't really be drastic with my photography, which I'm actually finding quite tough to do.

Is working in the Bengali film industry easy or difficult?

Within their limitations, people in the unit are trying to provide me with all the equipment I need. In Mumbai, we're pampered. I could have got bigger light set-ups more easily there because we get anything and everything, which spoils us to a certain extent. For me, working with restricted amenities is a learning process. There's also a feeling of *apnapan*, a sense of humour, which makes the environment in Calcutta quite pleasant.

After *Baghban* and *Baabul*, you have shot Ravi Chopra's *Banda Yeh Bindaas Hai*. Tell us about your long association with Chopra...

We've been friends since 1981 when I started working with his advertising and production house, BR Ads. My first film with Ravi was *Aaj Ki Awaaz* in 1984, starring Smita Patil. We had a wonderful team. Then, after a long gap, I did *Baghban* and *Baabul*, and now I've finished *Banda Yeh Bindaas Hai*. Ravi's most important demand while shooting *Baghban* was that Hema Malini had to look stunning. The man (Amitabh Bachchan) is in awe of his wife and that chemistry is what drives the film. The overall look they wanted was pretty yet convincing, so it was very down to earth. My lighting was quite simplistic. I didn't go overboard at all.

Baghban and *Baabul* had a similar look and feel. Is *Banda Yeh...* different?

Banda Yeh... is a comedy starring Govinda, Tabu and Lara Dutta. So, the look is more fresh and open. I could take more liberties in this film. Many a time, I didn't go traditional. I've tried to put in more gloss in this film.

How did you become the man behind the Lux ads?

Ravi was directing the Lux ads and he felt very confident about me doing them. Hindustan Thompson was the ad agency handling the account and they too felt that I should shoot the ads. That's how I got to do most of the Lux ads in the Eighties and early Nineties. I shot with Hema Malini, Zeenat Aman, Meenakshi Seshadri, Sridevi, Juhi Chawla, Pooja Bhatt and Raveena Tandon. The last one was with Aishwarya.

People would feel that women looked special and prettier in front of my camera! I did feel bad when I stopped shooting the Lux campaigns. I had been doing it for a long time but people probably thought I was getting old.

Why haven't you thought of directing a film?

I feel scared. I still feel that I need to learn a lot to become a director. A director does things for people. You need to be strong to do that and I'm not sure if I am that strong. But I have been seriously thinking about it for some time and more so now because my daughter Mini has been pressing me.

More about Barun

Hometown: Jamshedpur

College: B.Sc from Tata College, Chaibasa; topped FTII, Pune, in motion picture photography

Started out with: Ad films

Major ad campaigns:

Raymond's Complete Man series; Lux ads with Hema Malini, Sridevi and Aishwarya Rai among others; Limca with Sonali Bendre; Reid & Taylor with Amitabh Bachchan; Emami with Madhuri Dixit; Aamsutra with Katrina Kaif; Kiah with Sushmita Sen; Fiama Di Wills with Deepika Padukone....

Major films:

Chakra, Aaj Ki Awaaz, Baghban, Baabul, Banda Yeh Bindaas Hai

The mirror man...

At first I tell all my girls that they shouldn't feel embarrassed since I'm going to look at them for 10-15 minutes. So when they're getting their make-up done, I stand behind them and observe them in the mirror for a long time. Then I start setting the lights. The moment I look through a frame, I fall in love with whoever is in front of my camera. And when you're in love, that person becomes the most beautiful. It's not mechanical. Of course, the height and the angle of the lights and camera are important and I spend a lot of time on that but eventually I go with my gut feeling. You need to create a one-on-one wavelength with the person to capture her persona.

His favourite faces...

One of my all-time favourites is Smita Patil. Shooting with her for both Chakra and Aaj Ki Awaaz was a pleasure. Of the present generation, Aishwarya (Rai) has no inhibitions, while Katrina (Kaif) is like a child. Sushmita (Sen) is so lively that she'll suddenly burst into a song or serve tea to everyone on the sets but she's extremely alert in front of the camera.

While shooting for the Liril ad, Preity (Zinta) insisted that I shoot her from the angle that showed her dimple, but I chose to shoot her from both sides. That's why what to highlight is so important. You can shoot from any angle to make a broad jaw look narrow or vice versa and the person will look nice.

Framing Dream Girls...

While shooting Baghban, Hema (Malini) was aware that she was appearing on the screen after 20 years. So she called me on the first day of the shoot and said, "Barunda, I'm worried because of my age and you have to take care of my looks." I kept watching her in the mirror. The highlight from the left seemed to suit her best and that's how I worked out the lights.

Hema is unique. She's like a queen. With her you don't have to wrack your brains to understand which part to highlight or which angle to shoot from. It's a similar thing with Madhuri (Dixit). Both are like a dream! You don't have to do anything and

they still look so pretty.

(Who among Hema/Madhuri/Ash/Katrina is the most beautiful? Tell t2@abpmail.com)

Mohua Das

