

Goatherd, destitute, film director... and all of 14

Twelve-year-old Sahiful Mondal was playing with his friends at Mukthaneer, the home for destitute children in [Kolkata](#) where he stayed. They were posing as wild animals in a forest.

'Why don't we turn this game into a film,' Sahiful thought. He went and told Swapan Mukherjee, secretary of the Centre for Communication and Development (CCD), the organisation that ran the children's home.

Mukherjee wrote a script based on the game, the children scrambled to put the costumes together, they rehearsed for two days and then they started shooting under the direction of Sahiful.

The result was 'Aamra' (We Are), a 12-minute movie that won the best film award at the Kids for Kids International Film Festival in Naples, Italy, in 2005 and the critics' award at the 2005 Chicago International Film Festival.

'Aamra' is now an entry at the fourth Environment and Wildlife Film Festival organised here by the Centre for Media Studies from Wednesday to Sunday.

The movie retains the flavour of a children's fancy dress competition, as 12 of them dress up as animals and get together for a meeting. But then it gets serious.

In Sahiful's words, 'Why do we fight among ourselves, the animals ask. Instead, let us attack those who come to our forest to destroy us. We won't do anything to those who come for a visit. But if they come with axes, we're going to attack them. How would a human feel if we went to his house and tried to break it down?'

And that's exactly what the children act out. It's simple and very effective.

'I never dreamt I'd be able to hold a camera in my hand,' Sahiful told IANS when asked about his experience as a director. He lost his father to tuberculosis when he was less than three years old. His mother Zahida Bibi works as a maid.

From the age of four, Sahiful would take the villagers' goats and cattle out to graze, helping augment the family income. As the animals grazed, he would wander around, trying to find a good patch of grass and water, with a bit of shade, for next day's grazing - a filmmaker would say he was already learning to check out shooting locations!

Sahiful moved to Mukthaneer when he was eight, as his mother couldn't look after him any longer. Now she visits him occasionally at the children's home and he sometimes goes to visit her at their village in North 24 Parganas district.

Now 14, Sahiful looks like any freckled gawky boy, shy and tongue-tied around adults. But the mental horizon of this Class 8 student has gone far beyond the grazing grounds of his village.

What would he like to do when he grows up? 'Be a film director, of course,' he says.

Joydeep Gupta (© IANS / India eNews)