

## **ANIL MEHTA**

My earliest recollection of contact with film or image or anything goes back a long way. I was quite young, and it was my dad who introduced me, he had some glassed negatives from his young days, so he introduced me to the whole notion of negatives and printing and prints and we improvised a little contact printer and expose some paper with naked bulb in the middle of the night. I was 6 or 7 years old. So at that age it came to me as a magical thing – the printing & developing. That is I think my earliest contact with photography.

### **You used to go and see films?**

No my film viewing is much later. I was not passionate about that. My dad was an engineer, but he had an interest in the cinema. He has a brother who was abroad so he had cameras like the 8 mm camera. He would shoot films of our family and viewing those films on an 8 mm projector is a very important part of our memories.

### **But did you have any experience with the camera?**

No, not with the movie camera. My first experience was with the Click III. It was an imported still camera. At the age of 10 or 11. These things have stayed with me because my Mom preserved stuff. But otherwise talking of being a keen photographer or film watching or talking about films, that was not really a part of my growing up.

### **So you never followed that interest of taking still photographs after that?**

No, not really. Actually then the important thing was school. For some odd reason I was very good at school! So I shifted to a residential school and then there was no time for any other interest at that time... It was just that you had to do your exams well and study hard.

**What was the first film that you saw?**

One big film in my childhood (in Calcutta), which created a huge event, was "*The Sound of Music*". We were not a film going family. So going to see the film was like an outing. I still remember the feeling of the theatre and the wall-to-wall carpeting. The film definitely stayed in my mind for a long time because of its visual quality. There was another Hindi film about a little kid, and it was a film that made me very sad. But otherwise there was a huge gap in the exposure to films. TV came home much later. It was only post school that. I can say I watched television.

**How did you get into cinematography?**

Towards the end of the school something began to snap. I didn't know which way to go, so in the final years of school this thing took over me and it reflected on my academic performance. So in college things had to open up. I was very clear that I was not interested in the academic work I was doing in college. So I got involved in theatre work in Delhi and started. I got into amateur theatre, and being in Delhi I also had good exposure to productions coming out from NSD. However, the work that we were doing wasn't so interesting... At that time Badal Sarkar was very active and doing work in Calcutta. Some friends invited him to Delhi and because of his coming a small group was formed. This was also the time when emergency was declared and later lifted. So there was

political activity, suddenly the whole world was out there, and then college ended. Film at that time came as a coincident because for the people I was working with, film became the option.

**Were you a member of any film society?**

Yes, briefly. But I wasn't the hard-core type... I went to see films out of some interest, obviously, but I was much more keen on theatre and other stuff happening on the streets, actually. I never thought that sitting for an exam to a film school was going to become a determining factor in my life!

**How did you select cinematography?**

When I got selected for the interview, I realized that I had to take this option. As far as I was concerned, in theatre there was no professional life so it was out. And there wasn't any support system coming from the house like a ready business! So there was a definite pressure to 'work', even within films. The memories of the still photography thing were there in the back of my mind, so I thought that if I had to take a professional approach to film-making this was the profession through which I would be able to see through. I knew from very early on that this 'Direction' thing can be very abstract...

**Your family supported this decision?**

I don't think they were delighted, but they were aware that it wouldn't work if they tried to push a life onto me. They had this much faith - that if there is a certain passion, and that this is the direction he wants to go in, then we have to let him go.

### **How were the years in FTII?**

Just like after school, college was a very important phase of opening up of the whole world, in the same way going to the institute was very significant because politics was very central. Indira Gandhi was back in power. In the Institute it was a struggle to some how keep the struggle going, to keep different things open, not to fall in the pattern of the same old things. Also, the Institute came with a tradition. And there wasn't a choice about whether you wanted to be in that tradition or wanted to belong to it, or whether you wanted to fall into that bandwidth. So it became a struggle to stay open within the institute. Although we did have some reasonably mature people in the senior classes who were thinking within the parameters of filmmaking and education, and looking at film in a new way, a perspective in which a whole new world had opened up...

The vital thing about the Institute was that whereas earlier you had always worked within the parameters of what you knew, you came with a certain background and you met people who also came from that background, at the Institute it was like being in a cultural melting pot. There were people from all regions, all very located. Everybody was very rooted as to where he or she came from. Calcutta and Kerala were strong centres for example. So a new level of opening out happened for me, which had not happened earlier. I feel that living in the institute was enough whether the film education at the end of the day worked or not. Just living there was more than enough.

**What we are trying to say is that when you get into the institute and watch film you realize that there exists a whole new vision of filmmaking, and this affects you...**

I think that is inevitable because you didn't have that exposure earlier. That thing completely blows you away in the beginning. It left me very shaken because it was too much. I thought, where this all is coming from?! I mean I had gone out to see Mrinal Sen's film that had been released in Hyderabad. I had taken the morning bus and seen it with ten people in the cinema hall. I had done all that, but when you come to the Institute, even the first semester is too much. It just throws you completely. I think today that there has to be a certain rationing of it because if you are not exposed to this kind of film viewing before and come bang in the middle of it, as I had, you have a huge overdose and I think you are left very, very stranded.

### **But how you do that?**

I can't quite say. After all, rationing has its own implications. But I will maintain that the Institute leaves you stranded. You may have come with a certain amount of clarity in your mind about what you wish to do, but this whole opening up suddenly throws you, and you are no longer sure if that is the direction you wish to take. Because you see too many paths.

My first year was a period of most intense discussions and debate, internally within the student community and with the authorities, and for me it was gained experience. Nothing lost even if we lost time because of the strike. It was all very vital and its important that those questions about education and processes that were being asked continue to be asked.

### **How was the teaching faculty?**

For me, the fact that you could do hands-on work was the best thing. Incidentally we had only one person in our faculty who would say - bring out the

cameras, put them on the tripod for the whole day, do operational exercise or follow focus, go in that direction whole heartedly. This one person, Bhanu, allowed us a lot in that direction. However, that's as far as it went. As far as theoretical aspects were concerned, one didn't find any support from the faculty. In the evening, the discussions between the students were of higher order than any classroom. Then people with similar interests would hang around, some seniors would be there, and that cultural realigning for me was an essential part of things. Because then one's narrow culture of middle-class up-bringing started to melt down, and one could see new frontiers... For me that was the real education - the cultural meltdown of barriers and thus being able to see beyond.

**Did you ever want to direct films at that stage?**

One opted to do camerawork for two obvious reasons: First, because of the professional and financial stability. And second, because the filmmaking environment was not very friendly or encouraging to new directors. My first exposure in direction was with Ketan Mehta and therefore with the NFDC. I assisted Ketan on "*Mirch Masala*" straight after finishing FTII. Working with the NFDC was a very demoralizing experience. These are supposed to be friendlier environments but I realized that the amount of corruption, or "the system" was too oppressive, even in that supposedly friendly environment. One also felt a sense of being let down by the parallel film movement in much the way Naseer has spoken about it.

**You did a part of *Holi* as well, didn't you?**

*Holi*, I can say now, was almost done by me. What happened was that at a film festival in Delhi, in the Indian Panorama section, we saw *Bhavani*

*Bhavai*. This was when I was in the second year and it had a deep impact on me because it was a very, very fresh approach. I thought it was a very vital work and I was very keen on finding out where it came from and about the filmmaker. One and a half years went by, and then one realized that Ketan Mehta was not doing anything in terms of making films at all. He was doing a play with the Indian National Theatre in Bombay, with a Gujarati crew. I thought that this was not right. That in this environment of filmmakers like Benegal etc. this person can't get to make his second film - there is something decidedly wrong in this. So I went to meet him and at the meeting he said that he had a script idea, and he suggested that I put it to the Institute authorities so that the Institute would call him and allow him to make it on campus.

Actually, it is not entirely fair on my part to say that there was no real input in terms of teachers at the Institute. We pushed with the authorities to get people to come in from outside as Guest Lecturers, and we pushed very hard. So in the 2nd semester of our first year we got Subrata Mitra to come down for a week, and in all my three years this is the time where I can see that the entire week was extremely productive and very structured. I mean I found a person who was self taught but who came in with such clarity and such thought. And I don't mean this as a session in hands-on application. We just sat in a classroom and he went through all aspects of cinematography. It was a lucid and scientific approach, whether the discussion was around emulsion structure or whether it is sensitometry or getting your negative densities right or what your negative will look like finally... as well as introducing you to the concept of reflected light and going through Labs and the printing process. I have not encountered such clarity at any other time from any other person, especially one who was self taught and had read up everything himself.

It's quite sad actually that Subratada at the end of his own career and life has not liked the trajectory of his own career and feels that he has not realized enough or that the system or the motion picture industry is not developed enough. This is actually the big tragedy, that standards have not been set with such exacting minds around, even though his work is always around and will always educate you.

**Did you see his films with him?**

I think only "*Charulata*".

**Who else came to take workshops?**

K.K. Mahajan came, so did Govind Nihalani. But those sessions usually ended up becoming lighting exercise and I didn't find that as interesting. The work that I liked a great deal and which stayed with me was V.K.Murthy's. Also, I liked Guru Dutt's films more than Satyajit Ray's. I don't know if this has something to do with 'Indian sensitivity' versus 'western sensitivity'. Both Ray and Subrata Mitra had a kind of classical approach and a somewhat western orientation in their way of doing things. I mean Guru Dutt's treatment was very dramatic, almost on the verge of being melodramatic, whereas Ray's treatment was ironic or psychological. I don't think that Indian structures in narrative work that way, they are episodic. The episode has to tell something and has to make a point, and that point will then dictate what the actor or character will do. So the function of light is to add to what we want to say in the frame, whether there is a window there or not. I find that actually more interesting directionally. For a



western mind this may be a more 'theoretical' approach, as in not 'real', but for me this is a more correct narrative approach.

### **Tell us about your experiences of working in Bombay...**

Bombay actually has its own dictates; as a matter of fact it almost dictates the terms of how you live. If you can see this and are able to cope with it, then you can live here. Otherwise it can be quite devastating and we have seen this amongst us. But the fact is that this is also the place where the most vital things happen.

My first independent work was with Chandita Mukherjee on her science series on the history of science on the subcontinent. The subject matter was very interesting and the most challenging part of it was how to transform the material into a visual thing, not like a reading of a textbook. I was shooting this in 16mm, and at that time I was also assisting in the advertising industry.

Working in the advertising industry did not come to me easily. It took me very long to figure out how exactly to approach working on an advertisement. However, it is a fact that it's the only thing that has helped me survive and sustain myself here. I feel that in advertising, the approach has to be that you have to see every aspect of the ad. film frame as a subject. Every frame has to be treated as a thing in itself, and since it is a filmmaking about objects, therefore each frame has to deliver. It becomes an object-oriented process where you keep arranging things and placing them in different ways, and as far as lighting styles go there are trends and phases. These I think are like hairstyles that keep changing! In short, advertising demands that you should have the capability to deliver each frame as a finished product. There is a huge amount of learning in the advertising industry, because ad. films are short, because they are about

varied situations and you thus get an opportunity to look again and again at your tools. This is a difficult opportunity in features because the gestation period cannot be so long. Learning in advertisements is a vital thing.

As far as narrative in films are concerned one is not working only as a photographer, one is also working as a storyteller. Each time a scene is rehearsed, you take clues from what is played out in front of you. Some things work and some things don't. Also, you are taking clues from the text and then providing substance and adding to the director. The fact is that the different individual sensibilities will impinge on decisions which are finally taken. These might not be very tangible, but on set all these individual sensibilities are interplaying at all times, and it is a synthesis of all this that is called 'arriving at a style' in the feature. And as you know, it's difficult to say that this is the extent of my work and that is the extent of the director's work.

After "*Hum Dil de Chuke Sanam*" the most reassuring feedback that I got from very different kinds of people was that they felt that there is consistency in the work. This does not necessarily imply that the shooting style was planned out in advance. As far as I am concerned, if you develop your approach to the scene on the spot it is not that it leads to a jagged approach or that it implies that there was no plan in mind. But, like I said earlier, the sensibility of the cinematographer which is informing all the decisions taken on set is interacting consistently with the screenplay and I think that you will get real consistency at the end of the day, even if you are switching between various lighting styles, when the approach to the film in the screenplay is consistent. So it is not merely the technicality of the cinematographic approach that is required for the consistency. For example, I am not always source driven; it's not necessary that the source will be there in every scene. I am far more text driven, I am driven by the

emotions that the scene will convey and what is important for me is how the cinematography will contribute to that emotion. And keeping this paramount is how I approach the scene.

The director of this film (Sanjay Bhansali) was always alive to all these visual clues. For example, after I finished shooting the confrontation scene. The confrontation scene in "*Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam*" is the night scene in which the patriarch of the family conducts something like a family court and gives his verdict. It is a scene in the first half – basically an argument between the brothers in which the errant daughter of the younger brother has to be "disciplined" and the daughter of the elder brother (Aishwarya Rai) tries to defend her cousin.

Bhansali turned to me and said that the mood for the performers was to be set by the lighting. This happened even though we had not sat down together and spelt out how the light would be or which would be the colours used. There is enough understanding between us, which ensures that the way we approach things is pretty similar even if everything has not been pre-designed. If you remember the scene where the hero and heroine meet each other for the first time in the grandmother's room, the colour of the curtains was a deep purple. So then I tried to take that purple tone further into the other scenes whenever the two met, even if those were different spaces from the original room.

**This thing can happen only when you are shooting your script in progression...**

True. In "*Hum Dil de Chuke Sanam*" most of the first part of the film which is centred in the haveli was shot at a stretch, even if not in sequence but at least at a stretch. So I was well aware of where the scenes would be played out at what the movements of the characters would be. To talk further of the story of the purple tones. After purple became a significant colour, I was shooting a scene

where the girl's parents are talking about their daughter. Their room was completely white and I found that very clinical. People here are tending to bring an advertisement kind of 'look' into feature films...they want their films to look like ad. films. So this room had been designed entirely in white... For me, however, this background was just not right, so I put country purple gel on the lights and made the curtains lilac.

In another scene, after Ajay Devgan has been struck by the girl, he sits in a very romantic sort of mood thinking about her. The purple/lilac backlight is used even though the whole scenario is very different, but here too I wanted that same tonality. So I put that same gel on the backlight, and even though you don't realize it, the colour starts working. What I am trying to say is that even though the styling was not pre-done, there was a consistent sensibility at work. Which is why I could say on set that I wanted something changed entirely or in part and I would get a very similar response from Sanjay.

**There was lot of fabric used in that film.**

I think this could have been because of a bit of rebound from Sanjay's earlier film which was made in very lean colours, shot in a poor house with distressed conditions. As a matter of fact, a lot of colours were taken out during the shoot. It wasn't a rich looking film at all. The fact that *Khamoshi* hadn't worked well with the public was on Sanjay's mind, and he therefore wanted to bring in a lot of colour. I think this could be the reason for the overuse of fabric in *Hum Dil de...*'s set. When I first saw the costumes I knew that this would be the visual direction of the film. Sometimes I thought that there was an over use of colour but somehow it held together. However, the decision let colours dominate the film was a conscious decision.

### **The dance floor in the “Dhol baaje...” song also had many colours...**

That was an acrylic floor. When the whole idea had been conceived I knew that the usual method of putting a string of 100-watt bulbs (because that is the way these floors are lit) was not going to work, because there you can see the bulbs and it ends up looking like a cheap disco thing.

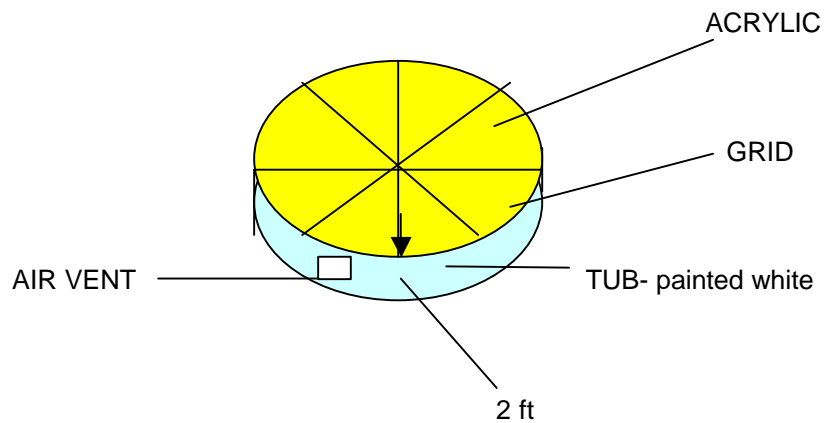
The acrylic floor was still lit from below but not in the usual way. The idea was to create a softlight that would illuminate the acrylic floor like a glow from within. So the metal grid that supports the acrylic was lined with halogen sungun lamps pointed downwards and the bottom of the floor was painted white – so the light that illuminates the acrylic is bounced light. The logistics of execution were quite difficult and hazardous, but eventually it worked.

### **VERBATIM DESCRIPTION OF SCENE:**

There is this metal grid over which the acrylic circular sheet is placed, which made the dancing platform. So I got this metal grid made and put that in a circular tub and painted the tub white. Now I could bounce the lights into the tub so that the acrylic is lit evenly. I decided to use the long bulbs used in sun guns for lighting the tub. I told the production to buy the bulbs and fix the holder on a thin aluminium *patra*. Now the bulbs would not cast their own shadow onto the acrylic. These bulbs were fixed inside the tub which had been painted white. Now the tub got even illumination with out any shadows. The tub lighting itself required around 75 KW, so I decided to keep this entire system on a different generator so that it could be switched on and off separately. We could switch it off when not required. Then I told the art designer to make separate vents on four corners of the tub and put exhaust fans, so that the air circulation could be really good. I

even increased the height of the tub to two feet. When I asked them how they are going to replace the fused bulbs, the gaffer in charge told me that 'we will send a small man inside'. Our working conditions are so inhuman that nobody has considerations and actually I had to take the help of a tiny fellow who would crawl into the tub to change the bulbs...

Here is an approximate diagram of the contraption--



#### In response to the Questionnaire

1. Do you have preferences in terms of what you like to shoot, and why?

- song & dance
- action
- drama
- nature & wildlife
- historical and period based work
- fantasy/science fiction/ special effects oriented work
- work with an emphasis on architecture

- **work with an emphasis on graphic elements**
- **documentaries**
- **other**

I like to shoot the following:

**drama / narrative:** Preference for narrative as cinematography provides a vital sub text, which interprets the narrative – also, because of the dominant nature of narrative cinema – to grapple with it is essential.

**work with emphasis or architecture:** Architecture – in terms of spatial organisation interests me. Architectural elements - graphic possibilities within architecture inhabiting architectural space- all of these inform pictorially.

**documentary:** Because of its continually improvisational state is an interesting mode to work in inverting as you go along – discovering.

**2. Tell us your opinion (based on your experience) about what you think is the nature of the relationships between**

- **cinematographer & director**
- **cinematographer & art director/costume designer**
- **cinematographer & choreographer/action director**
- **cinematographer & sound-recordist**
- **cinematographer & assistants**
- **cinematographer & actors (experienced & inexperienced, stars & non stars)**
- **cinematographer & light boys**
- **cinematographer & laboratory technicians**
- **cinematographer & production in charge**

**In these relationships please talk in terms of what you think is the ideal and what you perceive as the existing reality.**

The nature of relationships is essentially determined by individuals. These relationships continually change as you move from crew to crew adapting and getting on is part of the job.

Director and director of photography – relationships are very rare – where a director calls in the cinematographer at the inception stage – Where (location scouting – or) production design is undertaken together. Vinod Chopra and Binod Pradhan are probable one such team. My experience on Sanjay Bhansali's films was quite rich in this regard. This relationship is built on respect for each other's intent and capability. This equation is rarely found as cinematographers generally go from job to job to job – parallelly Directors expect photographers to photograph and that is it.

This equation is now changing on the firmament of the Hindi film industry. Because of the work of a few cinematographers has contributed in bringing the 'Look' of the film to the forefront. All over, relationships follow from this basic premise of sharing and respecting each other's talent and areas of expertise. I have on occasions called for the costume designer to come in on set colours. Often costumes (which are supposed to be the sole domain of stars) are now being collectively thought over by the designer, director, cinematographer and the actor.

Cinematographer and assistants is a delicate issue as they are also personal equations – And on that count I give a lot of importance to the person(s) who work with me. Team compatibility comes at par and before professional competence.



Laboratory is an area that has been neglected by the cinematographer and vice versa. A lot more needs to be done in terms of talking to the lab. technicians (colourists) and the lab being responsive to the cinematographer's needs. Lot of reluctance to innovate or even keep pace with developments internationally.

Actors are generally becoming more responsive to the needs and suggestions of the cameramen but a lot needs to be achieved in terms of a professional approach towards work.

Sound Recordists need to be resurrected on shooting floors. They're all gone away to the studios and left the job of pilot track recording to attendants and other novices. With the return of SYNC SOUND the situation is bound to be redeemed. In fact, on a full length feature I just did in sync sound it was an education to work in silence with equipment that was silent. It was quite good to make that extra effort and listen to the sound as we shot.

Light boys/men are a very critical team that can make or break the temperament of the cinematographer. It is always refreshing to find a few men who enjoy their work and do it well. How they manage to keep that spirit in such trying working circumstances always surprises me. Considering that I don't have the privilege of charging my team wherever I go, I try and strike an easygoing working relationship with the crew. Always shows in the work.

**3. What in your opinion is the relationship between the craft of Cinematography and the other departments in film making :**

- **Art Direction**
- **Editing**

- **Scriptwriting**
- **Music**
- **Sound**

In cinema it is very difficult to separate areas of work clean out. Although the highly specialized approach in the west encourages clearly drawn lines, I feel that that overlapping disciplines are always healthier.

Personally I like to get all the info possible of the edit pattern in mind, which can in turn dictate camera moves etc. Try and be available for as much prep as possible on set design – colours – tonalities – spatial delineations.

A detailed well-written script can always trigger treatment ideas and other overall concerns. Music has its own unique place in Hindi Films - the recurrent themes and the songs. They require a different sensibility in terms of filming and an understanding of music will always inform the filming – my response is more intuitive and based more on the context of the music.

**4. Please tell us about at least 3 instances from your experience that clearly illustrates the cinematographer-director relationship. Who are in your opinion the significant directors that you worked with, on which films and for how long? Tell us something about the different things that you learnt from the directors that you have shot for.**

Director - cinematographer relationships are quite tenuous, often pulling in different directions but when they work in tandem the results are quite rewarding.

Working on a night scene in “*Hum Dil...*” where the patriarch holds a family court, we had to start practically from scratch on the day of the shoot because we wanted the space to look different from what it was dressed for and

wanted to create an atmosphere of impending peril. Right from arranging the furniture, and thereby the character placement, to propping – lighting and shooting, we achieved the scene in that one night. The entire mis -en- scene evolved on the moment.

The lighting pattern was simple and stark – the background receded to black. The entire process was possible because the director and cinematographer were working in tandem. The performances were heightened by the ambience that had been created. A simple scene eventually had come just right. Small joys at the end of the day.

On another occasion much discussion centred around the scene/song that was to introduce the heroine of the film. On location scouts we kept turning down obviously ‘pretty’ location for one reason or another. The lyrics of the song spoke of how the woman was made of the elements: earth, fire, wind, water. The music had a hard-hitting rhythm – the situation the director thought of was a game of seven tiles. The location eventually (through a process of elimination and persuasion) was the stark and barren landscape of *banni* in kutch.

The texture of the earth became an essential visual element. The song dance - turned into picturing the game in a vivacious manner - a lot of the frills of camera moves gave way to elementary and energetic moves. It was a process of taking away that gave the introduction of the heroine so much power. The editing contributed to the efficacy of the scene by choosing only the material that had this elemental quality.

The point here is that effective solutions usually evolve out of dialoguing. The director, while being the person who has the most to say to all and sundry on a film set, is also the person who has to have a very nuanced sense of listening.

Sometimes it is not the lensing or lighting that makes the scene work for the cinematographer – it could be the choice of a T-shirt. As on the sets of *Khamoshi*. The costume person brought Nana Patekar his T-Shirt for the scene. Nana looked at it and was not convinced (it is never easy to convince Nana). He looked around and spotted something one of the AD's was wearing – he turned to look at me for confirmation – I turned to the director and the nods went around spontaneously. It was after Nana wore that T-shirt that I realised that the entire image had turned mono-chromatic. We had chosen a printed gray T-shirt for Nana. Seema Binwas was already in her trademark gray dress, Salman Khan entered the scene dressed for his wedding in a black suit and white shirt, we were shooting at Gorai beach on an overcast day when the sky, sea and sand all turn shades of gray.

The tones were just right for the scene, which was a grim moment in the film. May not be a good illustration of director / cameraman interaction but shows how intuitive decisions & collaborative thought inform image making.

Not to say that planning, pre-visualising, careful scripting are not vital to the process. The thing to learn from directors working in the mainstream industry is how to keep your film clear in your head in spite of the tremendous logistical pressures and cultural pressures of various agencies: the distributors, stars, dance directors, action directors, etc.

**5. "Without a well worked out screenplay/script and an imaginative director who is willing to take risks to open out possibilities for the camera, the cinematographer's labour is not worth the footage" - Comment.**

This comment is in consonance with what I have been saying about dialoguing – improvising – collaborating – listening – and exploring while on the shoot.

**6. What in your opinion are the different professional and technical demands made on cinematographers in:**

- **Mainstream Commercial Cinema**
- **Parallel Cinema**
- **Documentary**
- **Ad Films**
- **Music Videos**
- **Television Serials**
- **Television Shows**

At a basic level the demand made on the cinematographer is always the same: to interpret the ‘text’ as creatively as possible in images.

**7. What are the different ways in which you approach working on film and working on video?**

Film and video – my approach to image making does not change much. In fact in video one has to put in a little extra to try and enhance depth and texture, given that the medium is inherently flatter.

**8. What do you think is the importance and role of new image making technologies, digital and computer aided image making in shaping the work of the cinematographer today?**

New technologies particularly in the digital domain are going to make their presence felt increasingly even in the realm of conventional filmmaking. But

the issue of the 'feel' is still pertinent as is in the case of paint and canvas versus the computer, and very sophisticated print and paint machines. The textures of film negative and print have yet to be replicated by digital rendering machines at the mass production level. So, it is a question of time but also a question of finding the right balance - one medium has never replaced another – only helped in redefining its position in the mix. Digital image making is definitely going to become a superimposed layer on traditional modes – but whether it will replace anything I am not so sure.

**What are the international trends that you see emerging in cinematography today? What kind of work do you admire in Hollywood, European Cinema, Other Asian Cinemas (Iran, Hong Kong, Japan, China, South Korea etc.) in Mainstream Indian Cinema, in parallel and regional cinema in India?**

The west is so Hollywood heavy that there are no emerging trends, only entrenched ones. The overlay of digital imaging is becoming more and more obvious.

The only really interesting trend to emerge in the recent past has been in Iranian cinema where the modes of storytelling have been adapted to their new habitat so effectively that it informs the cinematography in obvious ways. The simplicity of the solutions is what impresses a lot. It is a kind of unobtrusive but incisive presence of the camera. Mainstream Indian cinema has moved towards improved 'packaging', so to speak, the look of the product has suddenly been up-fronted. But because that means employing more articulate technicians – who can 'deliver the goods' so to speak. In some way one hopes that it will inform 'the way' things are said as also 'what' is said.

**10. What are the trends that you see emerging in Documentary cinematography?**

Not having worked in documentary and not having seen any work of late, there can't be much to say, except that documentary even as a niche activity in the Indian context is fast becoming extinct. Programming on TV is probable the cause.

**11. What are the trends that you see emerging in cinematography for advertising?**

Cinematography in Advertising will go the digital way, as the pressure to be at the cutting edge of technology is very high in Advertising. Which means many more buttons will be pushed and 'The look' achieved in 'Post', pushing basic cinematography further with its back to the wall.

**12. Do you perceive a difference between the cinematography of the mainstream film industries in Bombay, and in the South? If so, what is the nature of this difference? Is there a difference also in terms of the work culture, professional standards etc?**

The industry in the south is definitely more professional. The crew that mans the camera is usually more proficient - good at pulling focus, understanding lighting, etc. They also take the lead in acquiring newer machines / cameras etc. Why this difference in culture, one can only guess, as it is not as if the Bombay industry is strapped for cash.

**13. Do you think there are different schools of cinematography, in India as well as internationally?**

Basically one would like to identify two broad approaches in lighting: realistic and expressionistic. The former probably derives from a western (approach) way of thinking. Whereas the expressionistic is more the indigenous mode of expression, where issues like 'source', 'continuity' are treated with casual indifference – more emphasis on the effect of the moment – the expression of that image.

**14. What kind of cinematography would you have very negative feelings about?**

I have learnt to learn from most forms of expression – it is the prerogative of the learned to discard.

**15. How do you keep up with new trends and ideas in cinematography? What are your sources of information on new developments?**

The American Cinematographer magazine is a good fall back to keep abreast of technological moves internationally. One tries to pick up whatever is published in India – unfortunately not enough is done nationally on this front although Sunny Joseph is trying hard to sustain a mail group on the net.

**16. What is the level of your interaction with other cinematographers? What issues would you discuss with your cinematographic colleagues?**

Casual and personal – but there is more fraternising amongst cinematographers than among most other professionals. The level of debate is restricted.



**17. Are there enough forums for debate and discussion on cinematography? What are the role of the associations, guilds and other organisations of cinematographers?**

If the dropping level of interest in the activity of Cinematographers' Combine is any indicator, then it can be seen that it is very difficult to sustain any serious forum.

**18. What is your opinion about the practice of giving awards for cinematography? Has this helped raise standards? Has it encouraged unhealthy competition and patronage networks?**

Awards do help in raising awareness – currently Award ceremonies in the industry have become profitable events and so are losing credibility. This is encouraging patronage circuits.

**19. Do you think that cinematography gets the critical attention it deserves in the press and in film criticism/reviewing?**

Film Reviews are currently at their lowest ebb. No critical faculties are at work and the comments on the technical aspects of the film are always fatuous.

**20. Do you think that the ordinary viewing public in India is sensitive to and aware of the contribution made by the cinematographer to a film or television programme?**

Not really.

**21. Why do you think there are very few women in the profession of cinematography? And why are so few women taken on as assistants?**

It is traditionally a male preserve, so it will take its time for women to brave through. Some are working at it.

**22. What do you think of the payments given to cinematographer? "Cinematographers are well paid but highly exploited." -**

**Comment**

Cinematographers are paid well in the advertising industry where the 'look' is accorded prime place. In all other areas cinematographers are exploited. Now with *Mission Kashmir* I am told that the trend is being bucked.

**23. What is your opinion on the payments and working conditions of assistants, light boys, grips electricians etc.**

Improving but lack of safety nets and unionisation make them quite vulnerable.

**24. Do you find yourself having to become involved in protecting the interests of the camera crew often? Why is this so?**

Often.

## **Section V: Technical Questions and Issues.**

### **1. Pre-production planning**

**1. Given a choice between Film and Video what would you like to work on and why?**

Film is a more versatile medium although it may be assumed that there is more scope for manipulation in video.

**2. What are your preferences in terms of the following and why:**

**In Film & in Video Accessories & Gadgets**

**16mm Beta Video Assist**

**35mm Digi Beta Remote Control**

**Cinemascope Mini Digi Lighting Fixtures**

**Hi 8 Steadycam**

**(In which situations would you choose to work with which of the above)**

Although most cameramen resist the Video Assist, I feel it is a good tool for the director, and if he can use it well he should. It fosters a stronger Director-Cinematographer relationship if there is mutual trust.

**3. What are the different meters that you feel are essential to your work, and why?**

Incident & Reflected. I like the reflected spot to be on me at all time so I can keep a close watch on tonalities. The spot often overrides the decision of the incident meter.

**4. How much say and involvement do you have in discussions about sets, locations, costumes and props? What are the things that you think have to be kept in mind when discussing these questions prior to production?**

I like to involve myself quite closely with these decisions but I also feel it is the prerogative of the director. For example, my involvement with costuming was closer in '*Hum Dil...*' than in '*Lagan.*' I am always available for location scouts and have a lot to say about the props featuring in the shot.

**5. "If we do a comparative analysis of the heads and amounts of expenditure in an average film, we find that the least amount of money is actually spent on what the film is going to end up looking like" - Comment**

Not necessarily on the films that I have worked on.

**6. What are the different kind of tests that you are able to do, and would like to do prior to filming (In terms of equipment and stock tests)?**

Not always able to execute but would like all lenses to be tested for sharpness & colour consistency, the camera for image stability, and the stocks for exposure range in practical conditions.

**7. What is your opinion on the general standards of maintenance of camera equipment, lights and accessories?**

Poor. But a certain quality consciousness is entering this domain.

**8. To what do you attribute the absence of innovations in technology, equipment and accessories, especially with relevance to Indian conditions? What can be done to remedy this?**

Economic considerations. There is just no money for R & D as the entire trade thrives on copying designs and making them available for the cheapest rates possible. The money you pay to hire lights in India, you may end up only with the knob of C-stand anywhere else in the world. Only individuals initiative at ones own expense can remedy this.

**9. What in your opinion is the importance of lab reports on stock tests? How do you decide upon a particular laboratory?**

Labs have a long way to go in terms of standardisation, so test reports etc. don't have the same meaning. It is more the 'what you see is what you get' syndrome. Lab decisions are also economic production decisions. The lab may be giving you credit on stock, the lab owner may be a co-producer. Lots of factors come into play that are not strictly in the domain of the cinematographer.

## **B: Lighting**

**1. When you begin thinking of a lighting design for a film, do you work towards an overall look for the entire film, or do you work out your lighting scheme in terms of different sequences, scenes and shots? How do you realise 'the look of a film' in your work?**

We are quite far from being able to decide looks for the film which are derived from processes in the labs etc. However, films if thought out from the start take on a life of their own. Costumes, set design, the director's sensibility - all start informing the cinematographer's Look. A cinematographer first derives his cues from the director's pre-occupations. For *Khamoshi*, e.q., the palette was going to be lean. So the treatment was never elaborate. In fact in certain sequences one sought the monochromatic effect. These things flow from the script - a sensibility starts to permeate the work. I am not sure if one can articulate all the determinants of 'the look' before one starts shooting. They emerge as you go along, as the work grows.

Sometimes scenes dictate their own lives. So, to revert the question, there is no set routine. Both planning & improvisation go hand in hand. In *Lagaan* one of the themes is the lack of rain. The choice of location, the palette of the costumes is all dictated. In *Lagaan* browns dominate the film, in fact we had to have a lot of green shrubbery cleared around the set. Cool tones in costuming were a no-no. Very often there was a slight warming filter on the camera. The

light was preferable if it was harsh, quite a non-glamorous look for a commercial film. But in a romantic song one allows for softer light colours in the costume, one gets greens and saturation goes up.

In *Lagaan* again, there is song towards the end which was called 'gloom' because of the mood in the village. The light is stark, harsh and directional, giving the mood its due treatment, whereas a song on the festive occasion of Gokul Asthmi in the same space in the village takes a very different treatment. Soft well rounded light - an array of chinese lanterns were rigged like a canopy - with some gold diffusion on the camera. So mood is a big determinant for me in a narrative film.

### **3. How do you begin to light a set?**

No rules, but again in narrative film the dictatorship of the actor is quite pervasive. Character placement and movement in the set is probably the main consideration. But I do look at all textures & spaces available on the set and try and pick them out for visual appeal, although a scene may demand that you eliminate detail & depth. In *Khamoshi* there was a large area of textured glass that separated two rooms. I remember spending a long time setting up lights in the next room to create an interesting pattern on the glass.

### **4. Do you light for the frame, or for points of emphasis within the frame? Does Lighting determine the frame, or, does framing determine the lighting?**

More often the framing determines the lighting but there are instances when a lighting dictate may alter the frame.

**5. What are your preferences in terms of specular/ bounced/ diffused lighting, and why?**

The quality of light is determined also by the content of the scene. On many occasions in '*Hum Dil*' I have lit Aishwarya (more an icon than a face) with specular directional light. For example, in the confrontation scene with her mother the lights have no diffusion, but in the marriage ceremony song '*Aankhon Ki*' it is soft ambience that suffuses the entire set. In advertising, more often than not, one is using very soft/diffused light - as every frame has to have the quality of a 'seductive object'.

**6. What kind of filters do you use, in what contexts, and to what effect?**

Filtration is also a function of the context. But in the past few years, I have been moving away from filtration. Mild diffusion, occasionally warming filters.

**7. Do you like to work for a 'lit' feeling or for an 'unlit' feeling? Why?**

Ideally one would like to work towards the unlit feel - I try and use ambient light as much as possible but given our problems of the through chain of processing, projection, etc. one tends to overlight a fair bit.

**8. Do you ever mix Tungsten and Daylight? In what situations? Why?**

Tungsten & Daylight mixes can be used interestingly and I have used mixed colour temperature quite often - it allows you to create colour separation through light and any way in lived/real experience colour temp is never uniform.

**9. "The Film Industry wastes a lot of power. There is a lot of unnecessary lighting in films today" – Comment.**

Tend to agree. So my light requirements always tend to be modest. My lighting assistants invariably have to end up ordering extra units on the shoot.

**10. How much room or leeway do you give to the possibility of changes in your lighting scheme in terms of variations (clouds, sunshine, changes in the weather etc.) in the light condition in your locations? Do you incorporate such variations into your lighting pattern, or, do you insist on taking shots at particular time and only under pre-determined light conditions?**

One tries to be as adaptive as possible, given the scope of the film. But in *Lagaan*, for example, I had huge arguments about not shooting in overcast conditions, as the text of the film spoke of 'Lack of rain', no clouds, etc. Not that I had my way entirely in the context of determining the time of day for the shoots/scenes.

**11. Do you insist on working at a particular aperture setting for a film? Do you have a favourite aperture setting? Why?**

No. No fixed aperture setting for the film. But using aperture as a device – yes. Trying to open up to lose depth and vice versa. Also to try and not use apertures where the performance of the lenses gets affected, like high f-stops in wide lensing.

**12. What makes a location or a set interesting to work with in terms of Light? What can we say is the 'feel' of a location? In a given location or set,**



**how do you consciously incorporate natural light sources, available practicals like lanterns, firelight, candlelight etc., architectural features like pillars, doorways and different elevations in the designing of your shots and lighting?**

The question does not lend itself to verbal explanations. One takes it as it comes. The attempt to incorporate all the elements available (lighting/architectural) into your scheme is there and also to allow all these features to inform your scheme.

**13. Do you ever experiment in terms of playing with differences in exposure for different takes of the same shot?**

Not much.

**14. How do you work in the possibilities of camera and character movement into your lighting scheme for a given shot?**

The camera and character movement is generally known before one lights. However in a song sequence In '*Hum Dil...*' the '*Nimabooda*' song, I saw that it was a wrap around set and the dance was going to be choreographed in the round. So I rigged a huge unit from the catwalk - to allow for fluidity in choreography of both camera & dancers.

**15. Do you like to use the idea of moving your camera between different intensities of illumination in a given space? Or, do you prefer evenness in terms of lighting on the set?**

Both, depending on the scene. But 'evenness' is more the dominant dictate.

**16. Have recently developed faster film stocks changed or had any impact on your overall philosophy and pattern of lighting?**

No, not the overall approach, but just some more possibilities - like using real flames as a source of light which may not have been practical with slower stocks.

**17. When do you say that the lighting for a shot is done?**

When it is done - and then continue to tweak it through the takes.

**C. Framing**

**1. "The presence of a video monitor or video assist diminishes the autonomy and authority of a cinematographer on a set in terms of determining the framing of a shot" - Comment.**

Yes it does and gets obtrusive too. But like any other new gadget, you have to allow it the space to settle down. It is an essential director's tool and directors have to be mature about it. They feel they have become camera operators by looking at the box there.

**2. How do you guide the viewer's eye within the frame? Through graphic elements, symmetry/ asymmetry, volume, light or colour.**

I guess all elements are used - some more often others.

**3. What are your preferences in terms of working with different camera angles?**

No *a priori* preferences, but as a general practice I prefer not to use obtrusive angles that draw attention to themselves.

**4. How do you create depth in a frame? With the help of light, or colour, or both?**

Both. But more often light is more in a cinematographer's control.

#### **D. Lenses & Lensing**

**1. What are your preferences in terms of working with block and zoom lenses?**

Blocks generally, because they require more rigour and create more consistency in look (in terms of lensing) and are sharper.

**2. Which makes of lenses are your favourites? Why?**

In India you shoot with what you get, particularly in anamorphic.

**3. Do you think that variations in focal length have expressive and subjective connotations? Please give examples to illustrate your opinions.**

Variations in focal length are obviously an expressive factor. If one is not restricted by overinterpreting the word 'Normal' for 40-50 mm in 35mm, lensing it self lends itself to an expressive element in the narrative.

**4. Does working in different aspect ratios have any relationship to the kind of lensing that you would go for? Compare between film and TV, and between 16mm, 35mm and cinemascope.**

Only to the extent that the medium's limitations have to be kept in mind. For example, Anamorphic is quite a compressed format with shallow depth but large angle of view. So one is trying to create depth in cinemascope. In 16mm one is trying to keep the image crisp so that the medium's loss (in sharpness) is kept in check.

**5. What in your opinion is the subjective and aesthetic factors that makes zooming different from moving the camera itself?**

Moving the camera itself is always more dynamic as it continually changes P.O.V. The zoom I tend used very selectively & rarely, although the zoom can also have expressive use. I have used a lot of snap zooming in one song in '*Lagaan*' to create an added sense of urgency/energy to the shots - pulsed with music it seemed to work. The line between effective and gimmicky can be thin.

**E. Movement**

I feel all movement is related to the context of the shot. Although not only movement but even sound can inform the subjective experience of the duration, or 'time value' of a shot.

Generally, I feel that all decisions regarding the amount/kind of movement in a shot are context/scene based. There are scenes that demand a totally static treatment. Some shots/scenes take violent hand held work, while others fluid steadicam. So the camera movement style flows from the context and text.

## **F. Colour**

One does think about the use of colour in narrative film as an element that can contribute to the 'meaning' of the film. One does engage with the 'art director' & 'costume person' to arrive at a palette for a film. There have been instances then one has tried to achieve a monochromatic look for particular scene/shot. But no, I don't work with 'codes'. Red can mean many things and meaning is derived from context. Red can be 'bright', can be grim, it is like Pudovkin's 'close up' - it's how you use it.

Video colour rendition has a long way to go.

## **G. Laboratory & Post Production Work**

Unfortunately not much leeway is provided by Indian Labs. Our struggle currently is to standardise processes. If we are able to get consistent prints and consistent processing, we are content.

I spend considerable amount of time with the colourist on the Analyser, trying to achieve a consistency in our grading. There are limitations to colouration that an analyser can offer. Getting the extra by altering the processing in an Indian lab is still a risk, although I am told things are improving. We have recently seen some bleach-by-pass tests done at Adlabs. The fact that the tests were done is an achievement in itself.

In video the manipulation of the image has become so 'cheap' that it has led to a 'too much to soon' syndrome. The colourist, the director, the editor, the producer all step into the area because the medium offers you a 'what you see is what you get' deal. The cinematographer, I feel, has chosen to stay out of a very crowded space unless he is specifically called in.

## **H. Viewing Conditions**

A lot of noise has been made about projection standards in the country, but precious little has happened. The ultimate determinant in a market economy is money - who will invest in better projectors, screens, spend money on carbons arcs for projection lamps etc. The noise that cinematographers make is not worth anything till theatre owners and the cinemagoers who pay money to watch movies change their attitude. With the coming of the upgraded multiplexes and the renewed enthusiasm of the filmgoers, hopefully standards will go up.

Legislation to specify standards, educating filmgoers & persuading theatre owners should go hand in hand to improve conditions. About the chain that brings images to home (TV), I am not so sure of the technology. The cable operator has a big role to play too.

## **SECTION VI: Aesthetic Questions**

### **1. Do you adapt different styles in different categories of filmmaking?**

One person, one sensibility, informs all the work of that person. However being receptive to the 'text', the needs of the script, help the cinematographer grow in trying to achieve styles to match the content. So, signature and evolving styles to suit content go hand in hand.

The distinction between realist & expressive styles can probably be restated as western & oriental pre-occupations. The realistic/naturalistic school tries to take from the logic of the physical world, whereas the expressive is not restricted by considerations of source, etc. Although by education one might veer towards the realist/source logical tradition, one tries to stretch its limitations to

make it more expressive. I do not get restricted by the question - where is the light coming from - even when there is obviously a 'lamp' in the frame.

**2. Subrata Mitra once said, " Could *Pather Panchali* have been shot with Panavision cameras, and sophisticated accessories?" - Comment. Can an excess of technological gadgets sometimes be a hindrance to the practice of cinematography, and to creative freedom?**

To be at the cutting edge of technology, to be able to use tools which have the latest advancements, is always something to strive for. Given that to find a simple and expressive approach is what I try to do, Subratada's question is rhetorical. Post facto nothing can be said about what *Pather Panchali* might have been. But in today's scenario, I would like to choose between 16mm SR, Mitchell, Arri IIC/535, depending on the need of the film.

It is a pity for example that in India Panavision is not available for anamorphic work. Too much technology can never be a hindrance because you can always choose to use as much as you need.

**3. How does the presence of the human body affect the decisions that you take in terms of lighting for a frame? What is the relationship of the image size of your frame to the volume occupied by the human figure within it? What are the different elements that you take into consideration when you position the human body within the frame? Do these elements change when you move from a studio set to a location, from an interior scene to an exterior scene and from daylight to night?**

**Are there any differences in the way in which male and female figures are lit and framed? Are there any differences in the way in which, the eyes, the face and the body are lit and framed?**

**Do different characters in a narrative demand the application of different lighting codes and conventions?**

**"The visibility of the Star in mainstream films demands its own form of lighting." - Comment.**

**Do you light up the space and then allow the characters to move within it, or, do you light the characters and by doing so evoke the space?**

All these are very hypothetical questions as all these decisions are taken depending on the action, the content, and the treatment of the scene. There is however an overbearing consideration for stars, for how heroines look, for following the actor, etc. But one tries to balance the requirement/treatment of the scene with the 'visibility of the star'. There is a small scene in *Khamoshi* that is lit from only one overhead lamp regardless of the fact that all three lead characters sit under it - not a very flattering way of lighting, but a requirement of the scene. So one prioritises as one goes along.

There is a lot of lighting the space and allowing the actors to move in it in *Mission Kashmir* which I enjoyed a lot.

**3. "Pragmatic considerations and Time Management determine the aesthetic of a film" - Comment.**

They often do and yet one tries to extract the best from the given situation. Also one ends up putting one's foot down when it crosses a certain threshold. So the attempt is to be 'pragmatic', but not to let the 'aesthetic' of the film be determined by the production manager.



**4. "Editors spoil cinematographers labours" - Comment.**

I have not had this experience. In fact, I feel the editor has aided the process in selection. Not to say that there are no differences of opinion, but then that is part of the process.

**5. "The mobile camera (extended tracks & cranes and steadicam) have transformed the cinematographic experience and effect." - Comment.**

Tarkovsky has helped us look at a moving camera, or a static camera and elements moving within it, in a very fresh way. It requires a man with a vision to extend the cinematographic experience, not the machines.