

ASHOK MEHTA

Can you tell us how you came to Bombay?

I came to Bombay when I was very young. I must have been about 13 or 14 years old. I ran away from home when I was in class seven...

When I came to Bombay, I knew nobody and I had no friends here. I did any job that came my way. My first job was working with a hawker. I used to sell boiled eggs. Another job offered to me soon after was to sell watermelon slices – this was in 1963. Once, during a holiday, I got a chance to go and see a film shoot happening. So I decided to actually go to the studios after that to see if I could find something to do. I went to Ranjeet Studio, Roptara Studio and to the Sri sound studios at Dadar. They wouldn't allow me in. The gates were closed. Shooting was going on inside and I couldn't go in, they said. While I stood there and waited a gentleman came up to me. He asked me a few questions about myself and then asked if I would be willing to work. I said yes and so I became a studio canteen boy. I got work as a canteen boy in Asha Studio where I worked for some months and then shifted to the canteen at RK Studios. It was raining very heavily that year, and part of the floor had caved in. The studio manager at R.K. called me and asked me to fill the hole with earth. So I did that. I don't why, but he was damn happy with my work. So, he spoke to the canteen owner and said I want this boy to work in my office. So I got the job of an office boy at the R. K. Studios for 4-5 months. That studio was very popular for stunt films and it was always busy. They always needed extra hands, and they used to call me for the help for all kinds of work, so gradually I got into the studio floor. At that time, camera, lights and sound were provided by the studio along with a camera coolie, and that is what I became. Basically, I was never trained, I just picked things up. The studio had just acquired two brand new Arriflex cameras, and there was a cameraman called Mr. M.W Mukadum who was looking for an

attendant for these cameras. Some people told him about me and said that I was a bright boy, so he called me and gave me the job of a camera attendant.

Gradually I started getting really into it. I had some knowledge about the Mitchell camera from the time I had worked as the studio floor boy and camera coolie, but most of my knowledge about the Arriflex I got when I joined as a camera attendant.

Basically I worked as the camera caretaker for a couple of years. Then I get a better job with more money at a company called Srikrishna Films. There was a Mr. Sabarwal in this company who was very good to me. Apart from the work of being a camera attendant I began to find other things very interesting as well, so I started assisting the cameraman sometimes.

What happened was that once some lens caps and cards went missing. So one of the bosses called me and told me to leave the job. So I left, I didn't have any choice at all. The cameraman called me and asked me to join him as an assistant. I said I didn't mind but I don't want to become focus-puller or something like that. You see, my confidence had started building. I worked very hard.

After a few years Mr. Sudarshan Nag came from Pune, he was a batch-mate of K.K. Mahajan at the film institute. He had lots of films in hand and I worked with him as a camera attendant. He was very impressed with me and asked me to join him as a chief assistant. *Maze aa Gaya*, I felt great. So I joined him on the unit of a film called *Trishna* which was being backed by NFDC, Waheeda Rahman was supposed to be the main actress. The film was supposed to be completed in one stretch but it did not happen that way. After one schedule, Nag Saab became very busy, and he said he didn't want anyone from outside to work on the film. He recommended my name and said, "I have worked with Ashok, he is OK", and so I went and shot the rest of the film. This was in 1969. By that time I knew how to light up. That was the beginning. My needs were very few that is why it didn't feel like I was struggling.

Then I got another film called the witness with Shashi Kapoor and Rakhi in the lead. I was very young; people didn't have confidence in me. There was some objection from Shashi Kapoor, he said "This boy is very young, what will he do in this type of film?" This was in the October of 1972. The film was supposed to be a quickie, it was meant to be completed in 4-5 months. We were shooting that film in Bhandi Bazaar, which is a very dicey area in Bombay. Anyway, here I was, getting involved with an intellectual group, and I had not studied or read anything. I am very grateful to my friend, and to luck and everything, that it all went off well. Once during the shooting Shashi Kapoor said we should have a break, and look at the rushes. After seeing the rushes he felt very happy. I went to his house and met him there as well. Jennifer came and met me and congratulated me.

So that was beginning of my career. Shashi Kapoor liked my work so much that we became a sort of pair. He gave me a lot of breaks; actually it was he who introduced me to the industry. I am very grateful to him. He advised me not to get only typically mainstream kind of camerawork, he told me to get other kinds of work as well.

At this time I began to go and see a lot of foreign films, and I used to wonder why the camera work in those films was so much better. Gradually I understood that it has all to do with lighting. *Lighting ka kamaal hai*. I got a lot of exposure when I started working with this intellectual group, Shashi Kapoor and his friends. I got a lot of opportunity to see some good films.

Are there any films that you remember from that time?

The films that I am talking about are films like, *The Graduate*, *Guess Who is Coming to Dinner*, *A Man & A Woman*, etc. As I said, when I did a comparison in my mind I realized that the main difference was in the quality of lighting. I realized that you

have to think about the look and the feel of a film and contribute your work according to the demand of a particular script. I realized the importance of all this at that time by watching these films.

None of the films that I had worked on till then were released. Then Basu Chatterjee offered me a film. In that shoot I learned to shoot with very few lights, without reflector and on location. This was my first film, which got released. Then I did some more films like *Daaku*, and *Teesra Pathhar*. Then a filmmaker called Ashish Roy came from Calcutta. He became quite close to me and I did his film in Bengali, called *Lal Kothi*. There were lots of problems with availability of stock at that time. There were import restrictions; we had to be always careful with stock, in shooting and in printing. All the films were in colour. I have not seen the B/W era at all. Only in one film called *Trisandhya* I had mixed B/W & colour and have shoot in B/W and colour. The problem with B/W is that the labs in our country can't handle very fine printing demands. What is very sad is that you may take out a test print now and then go after an hour and take another test print and these will not match. There will be no consistency; there may be another layer of colour that you never wanted. I find this damn difficult actually. Or, you could have worked with the system of using 'lilies' but the labs couldn't control this either. This is because there are a lot of chemicals to manage! Also what would happen is that when you shot B&W and wanted to print in colour you had to keep track of whether you were shooting in the same emulsion or not, or at one speed or not. Otherwise, when you looked at your stuff after processing, one roll would be pink and the other a bit magenta, while a third one would be white! I think that even now our labs are not capable of doing a great job.

I am basically from the 'new wave' cinema, and I worked with intellectual filmmakers. In *Lal Kothi* I got a BFJ (Bengal Film Journalists') award, and this was the

first time that something like this had happened to me. Then I worked with Umesh Mehta in his film. It was called *Hamare Tumhare*. I had done a few films in between. I was a bachelor, I had very few needs, and by then I had an ego, I wanted to work only with good people, and on good projects. So I went to work with Umesh Mehta. It was his first film as a director. Rakhi was the heroine, and she recommended me. By that time, I had very good relations with my stars. I was in two minds because the payment was not much, but Umesh insisted that I do the film (we were both of the same age group) There was a lot of pressure on me, so I agreed to do the film, it was my first main stream film, must have been 1978-79.

Did you work in advertising films at all at that time?

At that time, there wasn't much advertising film going on. There were very few people, who used to make commercials, and there was a typical style, and specialized people who used to do all this. So I didn't have much of a chance in advertising films at that time.

At that time were you watching the work of other cinematographers?

I used to like K.K. Mahajan's work very much. In my opinion he was the best cameraman in that period. I wanted to assist him, but he didn't have any place on his unit.

What were the films of Mr. Mahajan that you had seen in that period?

I had seen films shot by K.K. Mahajan like *Uski Roti* and *Ek Aadmi ki Kahani*. Mr. Mahajan got an opportunity to do some very good work in B/W. Subratada's (Subrata Mitra's) work was also much appreciated and I saw one or two of his films. I really liked his work in *Bombay Talkies*, and then I saw *Guru*.

And how was your own work developing? And what were the work conditions like?

There was a certain amount of satisfaction because I got some good reviews and I got an award (the BFJ award) as well.

Sometime after this I got the first film which really brought fame to me, and for which I got my first and last National award. This film was *36 Chowringhee Lane*. This film gave me a hell of a lot of a good reputation. It had the best calibre cinematography. After these films I started working with Shyam Benegal in *Mandi* and with Girish Karnad I did a film called *Utsav*. I started mixing different kinds of work, sometimes mainstream sometimes something different. Like I did, *Shiva ka Insaaf* (a 3D film), I did *Ijaazat* with Gulzar, *Trikal* with Benegal and quite a few films with Aparna Sen. After *Utsav* I had a good portfolio and I began getting advertising and television work as well. There were more commercials being made and in better quality, so keeping this in mind I did a couple of ad films

But, you know how it is, in the cinema you might do good work but the films would not be released because there would be no buyers. For instance, *Paroma* on which I worked with Aparna Sen, was a golden jubilee hit in Bengal, but there were no buyers for the film in Bombay. Everybody wanted mainstream films. This led to a lot of frustration. Then once Subhash Ghai offered me a film. I said to him don't take me, I am an art film cameraman, how will I do your kind of work. I also said that I am more expensive, and I will take time to light up a scene, it will depend on my mood, I will demand a contract, and on top of all this you will all complain that when you project things in the cinema hall, you can see nothing, it is all dark. I thought that I had discouraged him, but it turned out the other way round. He called me the next morning and said you have to work on my film, I want quality. He also agreed to my rates and

told me to start work the next morning. You see, Ghai in Marathi means “*jaldi jaldi*” or ‘fast-fast’. Then I gave him another name; I used to call him panic station! The first Ghai film that I made was *Ram-Lakhan*, then *Saudagar*, *Khal-Nayak* and the last films with him was *Trimurti*.

When I started doing big time commercial work I also became famous for handling mega sets and all that. Now I can say that this industry has given me everything, it has made me a better person and I am very grateful to everybody here.

But now I am once again in touch with art films after a long time. I have done a film with Mr. Benegal, *Making of the Mahatma*, and Shekhar Kapoor’s *Bandit Queen* and M.F. Husain’s *Gaja Gamini*.

In that period there were some very good filmmakers and some films did a lot of good business. But still technicians were insecure. There was a feeling that if you asked for more payment you might not get work. Say, if I asked for a particular price, others might come and ask for less. So due to insecurity, technicians acted against their own interests. I should not blame only producers and directors for this; a lot of the blame is ours as well. Now people are demanding money and it is happening because there is a feeling that there should be really good technicians in a film. Also, our audiences are not bloody fools you know, they won’t just see anything.

Now things are becoming much better, now you (the cameraman) get the price that you ask for, and you can become a star of a different kind. At one time, only the main actor /actress was a star, even the director would not get a credit, let alone a technician like a cameraman. You will see that this balance has changed many times in the history of filmmaking. You know, especially when there is a new director, you will notice he will usually be in tandem with a well-established and famous cameraman who can control him and guide him.

Around this time people started watching films on video. People were watching bad quality VHS prints. I am not talking of common people; even the elite was watching it. If you go to Europe or to Cannes, people walk off from a screening if the print is not good. But when video first came in here, people would see anything at all, it happened in my family as well. What can you do, you have to live with it. Now at last people are getting mature.

But in the early days of video, because of the decline in attendance in the movie theatres, filmmaking became a very insecure business. Every production wanted to fit into the commercial mainstream. If you wanted to do a different kind of film, you would have to face a hell of a lot of problems. That affected filmmaking. This happens everywhere, you see American films too, they produce any old shit, but as long as it works and draws the audiences in, they keep producing the films.

You have worked with Art film directors and you have worked with Commercial film makers, what is the experience of working in these two different kinds of film making cultures?

See, for instance, one thing great about a film like *36 Chowringhee Lane* was that it had a complete script and a very good script. If you have a script like that, you will understand immediately what the film requires of you. Once you read the script everything is clear and if you have a good director, he will tell you what he wants. A good location also helps, in *36 Chowringhee Lane*, for instance we went to the location beforehand. These things happen in art films, and they make it possible for you to deliver better.

I don't take much time to grasp what the director wants and I can also give suggestions. I find it very important that the director and the cameraman should understand each other. I don't have the kind of ego which makes me think that I know

everything. In *36 Chowringee Lane*, I had a very good opportunity for playing with a little bit of light, and with darkness.

Do you improvise a lot of the time?

Yes, see improvisation always helps, but you have to be consistent. Again lets take *36 Chowringee Lane* as an example. You have this lonely character played by Jennifer Kapoor, and you can do a lot to evoke her moods, but at the same time you cannot make anything overdone. That also looks very bad, you can't also break the consistency of the film, consistency is very difficult to achieve. That looks very bad, you should not jump too much between the looks of different scenes. You have to be consistent, only then you are good, otherwise you are bad.

But this doesn't mean that you storyboard everything. This storyboarding stuff started with advertising. I don't think that you have to know each and every frame. There has to be an image in your mind and you have to keep thinking. But storyboarding started in advertising, because they had no other means to communicate with their client. The client makes shampoos, he doesn't know what filmmaking is, so to make every picture clear to the client they started using storyboards in advertising.

Do you prefer shooting on locations or in the studio?

Not on locations because the condition of sunlight in India is very toppish. I prefer to shoot in a studio because there you can create the light ambience that you want, and it remains a constant. Everything can have a standard actually. Whether you are right or wrong whatever you are doing should maintain a standard. If you keep that in mind then it is good.

What about stock?

My first choice is to shoot on lower ASA, because I think this gives you better quality. Nowadays all films are shot on Anamorphic lenses. Whatever is in the background is out of focus. Now this is all right to a certain degree, but after a point it gives you a headache so you have to shoot f4.5, f5.6

Also I have a habit of shooting slightly underexposed. You have to know about the mood of the film. Then natural sources of light available to you have also to be considered when you are choosing your stock.

When I saw these foreign films then I suddenly realized, that the look in our films is terrible, and that their films look good. We tend to use the top light system, there are always bridges, we tend to forget the window source, and there are double shadows in the frame. Nobody was bothered about these things; there was no such thing as source lighting. These things developed later. When you see the paintings of old masters you can see that the sources are absolutely well maintained. I have not learned these things; I have picked them up over time through observation.

Actually what happens is that the acceptance of natural conditions gives rise to better things. Artificiality breeds artificiality. Sometimes difficult times, people who have suffered, countries that have faced war, give rise to better filmmaking. Look at Iran, they started to make very good films recently because they have been through so much. It's no as if they had no talent before, so how is it that all this happened there recently?

You have to be more receptive, you can't always be taught things, you have to pick them up as you go along. Sometimes a hard, difficult life gives this to you. I am a school drop out, but even I pick up languages. While shooting with Aparna Sen, I would pick up Bengali, understand what everyone was saying. So you have to keep at it.

Tell us how was to work with someone like Shyam Benegal?

He was very different in different films. When we did *Mandi* the work was very straightforward and simple. But in *Trikaal*, he wanted to do something different, he wanted to experiment. As you know, *Trikaal* is a period film, set in colonial Goa. I asked about the kind of lights that they would have had in Goa at that time. He said that there was hardly any electricity at that time. So I said that we should work with candle light as much as is possible. He then said to me "Ashok I don't understand these things, take some tests and see if it can work out." So, we shot a couple of reels, the 250 ASA stock had just come in at that time. That is what we used. So you see, he could allow for this kind of flexibility.

You think change in technology in camera etc has changed your style of work.

All that is not really that important. What is important is that you have good lab facilities. And that the lab technicians are co operative with you. That they are willing to push by one stop in the processing, may be punch one or two light numbers, if you ask them to. Let's say you are shooting with candles, as I was in *Trikaal*, then they should be able to understand what I am trying to achieve and print accordingly. Sometimes even the so-called best lab technicians are not able to understand that I am playing around with sources, cheating to achieve an effect. People say that I use a lot of lights. I do, but you don't get to see it in my work do you? I use a lot of light to make it appear that there is very little light. But all this depends on the lab.

You use lot of bounce light.

Yes, it depends a lot on the situation that you are supposed to depict. You know I was the first person to use HMI lights in India, and I also began using acrylic sheets with lights in feature films.

Are you responsible for bringing HMI lights into the country?

Yes, I was aware of the technical parameters of using HMI lights. I knew which frequencies they matched, and all that sort of thing. I had seen them being used in Ismail Merchant's *Heat and Dust*, then after a long gap we got them for shooting *Utsav*. They were available, so we got them. I could have also shot the whole film without them. The point I am trying to make is that the lights themselves do not make such a difference, what makes a difference lies in how you create with the lights. You have to be experienced, and you have to be intelligent.

Are you always working towards achieving a natural look?

If you look at my films, you will realize that I use backlight very seldom. If there is a door or window in the frame that justifies the presence of backlight, then I think that you should use that, but otherwise you shouldn't. People do it anyway because it looks glamorous. If an actor/actress becomes a star then the cameramen are afraid of going the other way with them, they have to look glamorous. But I don't believe in this. I am not like that.

So what is your problem with the backlight?

There should be a sufficient reason for using backlight when it comes to the shooting of heroines. Yes, we do have to take into account the need for beautification. But if you see my work, you will see that I don't make anyone unduly beautiful. According to Shekhar Kapoor, the best that Madhuri Dixit ever looked was in *Ram Lakhan*, Sometimes you have to compromise to get the amount of glamour that is just enough.

Do you follow a different system of diffusion for men and for women?

No I don't like diffusion. If I use diffusion at all, (you can see it in *Utsav*) then I might use a low contrast number 1 filter. This is what has been used throughout the film.

If I keep doing that kind of job (using diffusion, backlight etc.) I will become mechanical. I don't want to be mechanical in my camerawork. I don't want to be too technical but my main concern is the achievement of consistency (from my earliest to my latest films).

If I have to use diffusion, then it is because I am trying to get a 'filtered look'. I don't try and conceal my use of filters. I am not trying to use it just to create beauty.

I did use a diffuser in *Ijaazat*, but there was a reason, the film moved between past and present. The present was clean, but we made the past look a bit soft. This helps the audience feel slightly different about the past and the present, but the difference is subtle, they can't tell exactly what the difference is.

I am not from that school that believes that to achieve 'extra' glamour one must keep on using diffuser. When you shoot on video or when you are shooting something very hard edge, you might need to soften things up a bit, but otherwise there is no real need to use diffusers.

What about lighting continuity?

I try and stick to lighting continuity as far as is possible. There may be a variation of 1-2% because my assistants are using the meters. But in general I would say that there is never any problem, this is especially true when my negative goes for telecine transfer anywhere. I never face any problems in telecine because the lighting continuity is maintained so closely.

Who was your favourite cinematographer?

I am not my own favourite! I used to like K.K. Mahajan's work, especially his early work, but not the work he does now. He has done lovely and beautiful work earlier. And in terms of black and white work, I like Subrata Mitra's work a lot. When you go back earlier, there are of course Jal Mistry and Fali Mistry, they had their own style. At that time the diffuser must have just come in, so they used it a lot. But otherwise I would say their work was very good.

In commercial cinema do you work for lighting the character?

No, I work towards lighting the frame. We have to think about the frame that will follow a particular shot and about the transition between long shot and close ups and extra long shots. You can't do bounce lighting for one shot (say in a long shot) and then have direct light in a close shot. You have to manage all this, and use butter paper to ensure that the shadows match between different frame sizes.

How do you start lighting a dark room?

The first thing that I have to think about as a cinematographer is – "What can be the possible sources of light in a dark room?". Sometimes a character's expressions are very important, then you have to think about how you are going to make that register in a completely dark environment. Like right now I am working on a film called *Gupt*, suddenly I realised that there is a scene in a dark dungeon like set, so I thought that the best thing to do is to look for cracks in the wall, through which we can establish certain patterns and light the characters.

Today actually I don't have so many problems in convincing different people. I have the time on a set to try things out. Lighting also takes time and needs to grow, just like acting, direction and script writing. So, things take time. The Taj Mahal was not created in a day. Lighting cannot be done in a hurry.

But you know, most of our films are commercial films. Six songs at least, and lots of heavy action scenes, plus regular dramatic scenes, and no one knows anything about how they want things done. Songs and action scenes require a lot of time. A lot of extra time. But time is the one thing we never get. Everything has to be done in a hurry. So we end up making a lot of compromises in the lighting to save time.

Its not that it can't be done in commercial cinema, or that nothing interesting is ever done. But it's all a question of attitude. Even the Taj Mahal looks flat in top light. But in the golden light of the moon it is something else altogether. We have different seasons, different terrain, and many different kinds of naturally available light. We can plan in advance and get really interesting situations in terms of lighting. Sun and nature are the best lighten and the human eye is the best lens.

Who decides the look of a sequence, you or the director? For instance, in '*Bandit Queen*' there is a clear difference between the look and lighting of the love making scene and the rape scene. The love making scene very soft lighting and the rape scene has very dramatic lighting. Who decides this, you or the director?

Let me answer your question in a roundabout way. Shekhar Kapoor has done two or three films in India. *Masoom*, *Mr. India*, and with me, *Bandit Queen*. You can see for yourself how different the three films look. All the cameramen were good, but the films are different. When Subrata Mitra shot Satyajit Ray's films, they were different. I try and bring to the film something that the director cannot give, something that he is not capable of giving. It's all a question of give and take between director and cameraman.

Now if I start demanding 25,000 – 30,000 Rupees each day no one will give in to me. Only if I am capable, and my work and services are up to the mark, then only can I

demand something. Otherwise, no one does any one a favour. Basically you have to understand your capabilities and work in a sensible way. Creativity is also important and so is your capacity to adapt to new situations and to keep learning. Ultimately whatever you do depends on what you can do. And it takes time. Any artistic work takes time, be it painting, making a building or creating anything at all. But there is a lot of time pressure, because filmmaking is becoming expensive all over the world.

Talking of adaptability, how do you as a cinematographer see the question of adapting to new technologies, like video or computers?

See, you have to adopt to technology so that you don't lag behind . I have a computer and I don't know how to use it because I don't feel its important ,but its not that I don't know anything, I have a certain amount of knowledge about this thing. If tomorrow I get an opportunity to work on a computer I should know enough to be able to work on it. At the same time you shouldn't change everything about yourself. There should be a line in your life that determines how much you will compromise and change. I should not change my entire look, even though there are no limits to creativity.

What did you think of the practice of giving references in advertising?

Earlier, there was some fun in working on advertisements. But now everyone works with 'references', that is copies of foreign ads. If they were strong in terms of what they wanted to do, then they wouldn't constantly use references. It's not as if just because they make a storyboard nowadays in ads, that they don't ever deviate from it. Storyboards, references, they have their uses, but they are more for the client, for the layman. Just because they give us a reference, doesn't mean that we have to make a replica. Reference should be just that – a 'reference'.

When you were working in *Utsav* (the entire film has a created look), did you have to work a lot with the Art Director before?

No, actually, the whole thing was improvised on the run. I was busy shooting *Mandi* at that time. But when I do get the time I like working a lot with the Art Director. Some people like this, some don't. But if I fail in what I had to do, then it is my responsibility alone. I shouldn't be blaming the Art Director. I don't have the right to do that.

Would you like to do a film with lot of time?

If I am really creating something it is good to have time. Otherwise having time is also wasting time, why should I do it. But it is true that if there was a little time then it does make a difference to creativity, it does help. Things get a chance to grow.

See, we put in lets say 100% in terms of effort; we achieve maybe 80% or 90%. We are never able to reach the 100% mark. Again, it all depends on how much pressure there is. All over the world, we keep working between the takes, changing things, trying things out, that is creativity. We even help the actors, when the director is raw and inexperienced. The world should give credit to our craft for all this as well.

Last question, do you want to make your own film?

I don't know, of course I want to direct my own film. Do something good. When you look through the camera you become a better judge of what you see. I am talking about improvisation and all that. When I am not looking through the camera there is always a margin of error. So I want to look through the camera and make my own film.