

NAVROZE CONTRACTOR

(in response to the questionnaire)

1. PERSONAL BACKGROUND AND EARLY YEARS

My father came from Ahmedabad and so I grew up in that city. We lived in a huge compound that my great grandfather had established. It was like living in a joint family but really not as each family had their own flats/ houses to stay. Most of the houses were built by red bricks and red tiles and the compound was covered by Asoka, Neem and Gulmohor trees. Round the compound was a drive way where we (my cousins) learnt how to walk, bicycle, ride motorcycles and drive cars.

My father's side of the family was very interested in Hindustani Classical music. My aunt was a singer of sorts, at least she did a lot of *riyaz* and listened to music few hours every day. My grandmother held music *jalsas* in her spacious dining room, or at my aunt's veranda where all the little grandchildren HAD to come. I remember one of the concerts, I must have been three or so, sitting in the first row and when the *ustad* burst into his first *taan* we all began to cry. We were so scared of the faces he made!

My mother's side of the family came from Panchgani, a small hill-station 100 kilometers south of Pune. They were very interested in the arts and Western Classical music. My mother was trained at the Royal College of Arts in London and I suppose she must have really been my very first influence in visual arts. She later trained in Czechoslovakia as a puppeteer, became a professional puppeteer and teacher till she passed away. When she was in her teens and studying art in London she had taken a trip to America and to Hollywood. There she had visited the Walt Disney studio where the film 'Snow White' was being animated. She always talked to me how cartoons were made, how animation was done and later presented me with

my first art book, because I started to draw much before I could write... a huge tome on Walt Disney.

I studied at Shreyas, the very first Montessori school started in India by Leena Mangaldas. The school had tremendous emphasis on the visual and performing arts. There was also this theory that travel expands knowledge and so the school would go on long excursions, months long in summer or *Divali* and by the time I finished there I had seen almost all of India. Each year the school had a big play and every child was given a part to act in it. Our stage was an enormous open-air place and Shreyas plays became an event every year in the city of Ahmedabad. The art teacher in our school, a Shantiniketan graduate, Mr. Purnendu Pal was a wonderful person, a great teacher, an inspiration to all. We loved his classes. He actually was the first person to talk about 'art direction' because he used to do the sets for our plays.

As part of the curriculum at school we had visiting faculty. For dance it was Mrinalini Sarabhai, Kumudini Lakhia, for drama it was Hirendranath Chatopadyay, C.C.Mehta, Pransukh Naik, for music it was Pandit Kishan Maharaj, Pandit Shadashiv Lutde and once even Prithvi Raj Kapur and his son Raj Kapur turned up at the school for a workshop! Because of the school, performers from all over the world came so we had no dearth of contact with the visual and performing arts.

When we went to spend our summer vacations in Panchgani I used to be fascinated by my uncle, mother's brother, who struggled with photography. He did everything in the day by masking the bathroom windows with red or green and processing in small basins. He was also a projectionist in two schools, so every Friday and Saturday he would go to the village bus stop, receive huge aluminium trunks with film prints, put them on his bicycle and take them to his make-shift theatres (which were indoor basketball courts), check them, rewind them and get his projectors ready. I would tag along with and help with his tasks, very often even

splicing the film prints if they were broken. After the show we would repeat the same thing ending up sending the print trunk back to Bombay. So years before I knew how to load a film camera I had learnt how to load and run a projector. I loved to see the sprockets whirr, the film travel and the racket of the whole machine is still very clear in my mind. It seemed all so dangerous and heavy as I was only 12-13 years old.

By this time I knew how movies were made from books and so I didn't pay any attention to the films I was seeing. One day my uncle projected the *'The Ascent of Everest'*...I think it was 1953, it made a deep impression on me. It was then I realised that films can be made outside a studio, without lights and special effects, without actors, songs, fights and chases. During the late 50s I was taken to a travelling photography exhibition, 'The Family of Man'. This I remember as making a deep and ever lasting impression on me. The same years my mother forced me to see *'Pather Panchali'*, as it was the 'new' thing for everyone interested in cinema. I cried all through the film! I found it just too sad.

I studied painting and photography at the Faculty of Fine Arts, Baroda University. Not only was the 63-67 time very dynamic in Baroda but at the same time the School of Architecture had started in Ahmedabad and also the National Institute of Design. My friends were spread out in these three institutions so one had an in on all of them. While studying art under such masters as K.G.Subramaniam, N.S.Bendre and Shanku Choudhuri I began to study photography seriously under Bhupendra Karia who introduced me to the 'world' of photography, the old and new Masters, the different styles and ways of 'looking'. I consider him a great teacher because never once did he impose his own style but encouraged me to be my own. In those years it was Gulam Shaikh who returned from England and introduced me to cinema and new directors. I enjoyed myself at the Faculty very much all through the four years. By the end I was sure I wanted to shoot films.

2. ON LEARNING TO BE A CINEMATOGRAPHER

I applied to the Film Institute of India (as it was known then) for the cinematography course. I went for my interview armed with a huge portfolio of my pictures, as by then I had had a one man show in Bombay, confident of breezing through the tests but to my utter horror and disappointment I was refused admission because I was not a 'science' student! I pleaded that I wanted to be a cinematographer and not learn how to manufacture or repair cameras but the administration did not budge. I was then advised to accept the direction course and that's what I took up.

I must say that after the hectic, dynamic years at the Fine Arts Faculty my time at the Film Institute seemed very bland and dull in comparison. Yes, I did see hundreds of films, assisted every friend who needed a hand, enjoyed the history lessons very much but found the going just too slow. If it was not for Mr. P. K. Nair, a rather shy and soft spoken person, who was then a lecturer in the cinematography department, who took an instant liking for me, I would never even touch a film camera. Mr. Nair not only answered all my questions but also let me handle whatever equipment I wanted to. In just a few weeks I could load and unload, mount the lenses, work the tripods of all the cameras in the department... and all this through the back door! I spent a lot of time with Mr. Nair at the institute lab, now officially as I would volunteer to take the exposed film of my friends exercises to be processed. I am extremely grateful to Mr. Nair for giving me his time and taking the risks he did for me. During the same year I spent a lot of time with the music professor, Bhaskar Chandavarkar who explained and unravelled all the mysteries of the music of my childhood and present interest in jazz.

The films that made the most impression on me were documentaries of Flaherty, Greerson, Ivans, Haanstra and features of Kurosawa, Bunuel, Ghatak, Bergman, Polanski, Wajda and of course Eisenstein. My inspiration always came

from the pictures of W. Eugene Smith but compositions came from Eisenstein. Even now, some days I get into an Eisenstein-mode! My student film is a tribute to all the greats I admired.

The year I was there the first major strike took place at the Institute. The place was closed for quite a few months and instead of sitting it out and sympathizing with the acting department I left the Institute to further my work in still photography.

In spite of what I felt and what suggestions others may have, it remains a fact that the Institute has produced some of the most outstanding cinematographers of this country. K. K. Mahajan, Balu Mahendru, Shaji, Jehangir Choudhuri, Naresh Bedi, Santosh Shivan, Anil Mehta and Ranjan Palit are some of the cinematographers I know and admire their work.

The only strong suggestion I have for students studying this art is to be involved continuously in all aspects of film making while at the Institute. There is much to learn from every department. Nothing substitutes for hands-on training. There are no 'formulas' for anything as each cinematographer tackles each subject differently in each of projects. I feel students must take plenty of colour slides of the set-ups they do as that can be projected and analysed better than a running film. I also feel that somewhere history of art/photography has to be brought in as a subject to see what old masters did, how they tackled composition, light, perspective and colours. It is an invaluable reference. For example I feel it is imperative to know the work of Rembrandt as to know how 'candle lit' or 'window source' moods can be created for a period film. The works of photographers like Eugene Smith and Salgado are necessary to study to see how they have tackled 'workers' in relation to say Eisenstein... these are just a few examples coming to mind now.

Many years later, after I shot my second feature and a few documentaries in-between, I studied cinematography under Laszlo Kovacs in America. This was an extended workshop situation with already quite established cinematographers from

around the world. The course was supported by Arriflex cameras, Lee filters, Kodak, Cooke lenses, Syteadycam, and several light manufacturing companies. Basically the master took us through as many set ups-ups as he thought we might encounter. House interiors, clubs, bars, boats, hotels, churches, exterior of streets, parks and open wild land. Thirty students were divided in 5 batches, each one being a DP each day. At night he would show his films, talk about them and later our footage would arrive and there would be outside critics to discuss with us our good and bad points. I remember distinctly that he never spoke once about technicalities but always about colours, forms, perspectives, compositions and moods... as finally that matters the most. How one gets to it is each person's personal choice. The course also had well known actors, editors and art directors lecturing on the relationship with the cameraman which was extremely useful because all this put together brings a 'look' to the film.

3. ON ENTERING AND BEING IN THE PROFESSION

My entering the profession was absolutely coincidental. In 1968 I was working as a still photographer at the Ford Foundation and covering many of their projects in Punjab. One day in Delhi I met Mani Kaul who was researching his first film '*Uski Roti*'. He became interested in my pictures and joined me in many of my visits to Punjab looking for his locations. Often he would sit with me and go through my slides. As he began to shoot '*Uski Roti*' I left for Europe but before that he promised that if he ever shot a film in colour I would be his cameraman. A year later when I returned he was already famous for his work and was just finishing his second film, '*Ashadh Ka Ek Din*'. A year after this he asked me to shoot '*Duvidha*'.

'*Duvidha*' was shot entirely on location in Rajasthan with a Bolex 16mm camera and Kodachrome II reversal film. We had very little money, just two sun guns for lights, a Uher non-sync tape recorder, no trolley and tracks... nothing. The

shooting was improvised day to day. Mani had the script in his mind; nothing written but as the days passed by we began to understand what was going on and then there was nothing that could stop us. We must have made a million mistakes but turned them round to our benefit. If asked whether we would have done it differently if we had all the means is a question I just cannot answer. I had a tremendously fascinating time working with Mani and to this day we remain good friends. The film was blown up to 35mm in an optical printer and turned out a big success...and my career changed.

So...I never really worked as an assistant to anyone and cannot answer questions regarding this.

My next two film projects which came four years later (!) were both documentaries, one directed by George Luneau from France, a long film again in Rajasthan, and the next directed by a woman from America, Martha Stuart. The second project had me as a 2nd unit cameraman. The first camera was handled by Richard Leiterman, the legendary documentary cinematographer from Canada.

By this time 'cinema verite' was already going out of fashion and a new way of looking which many critics called 'the living camera' style was emerging. Leiterman was one of the first to shoot this way and I began to learn from him and have never stopped. The style mainly involves being as invisible as possible, no flash and no drama, as close to the subject as possible, less and less use of telephoto lenses, almost always hand held, hardly stopping the camera, letting the editor do all the cutting later, always with sync sound and never to interfere with existing lighting... if need be enhance it for exposure but never interfere. It is not like being 'a fly on the wall' its like being a 'trusted friend'.

Since then I have been shooting films on Super-8, 16 and 35mm and all formats of video.

A major part of my work has been in 16mm. I feel the facilities for this medium in India are still very primitive. Good quality cameras are rare and hard to come by. NFDC has invested in equipment but it was in 1979 and now they have just about done their life's work. The labs and projection equipment have not kept up with the times and even the blow up process that one uses needs very much to be updated. A big stumbling block for everyone who wants to do films in any medium has also become finances. Filmmaking has become so expensive it's almost non-affordable to most... it's the nature of the beast. For example in all low budget films there is never any money to make another print. It is not always that the final print comes out to the best of the satisfaction and this last cost is never woven into the budget from the beginning.

4. ON THE PRACTICE OF CINEMATOGRAPHY

I am sure cinematographers have preferences in what they would wish to shoot but its not always possible unless we pullout our own subjects. So when contacted for a film project I have to make myself like the locations to be able to work best in the given situation. I enjoy most on outdoor locations but also doing work in a studio. The studio provides you with unlimited lighting possibilities. We can create our own sources, key lights, day, night, whatever and keep the situation under control for several days of shooting. This is a difficult exercise on location and provides a bigger challenge. What elements to keep in mind come with discussions with the director and the art director, as that will finally make the film look one way or the other.

Unfortunately cinematography is not like any other art where one can work in seclusion and so for those who do not have an open and sociable attitude with people it becomes extremely difficult. Besides knowing your own skill it is essential to be able to get along with people of all kinds. It is a completely interdisciplinary art and relies heavily on many people around. All those you have noted, art director, sound

recordist, editor, lab technicians, gaffers and grips, equipment providers, actors, costume designer, production manager and location hunters all are as important in making an image come good.

The test that I do before every project shot on 'film' is take a static shot, say a person next to a window, with all the lenses that are going to be available to me. I read exposure in all parts of the frame, from the highest to the lowest and ask the lab to make a standard print. This way I can figure out what is the latitude of the film, processing capabilities of the lab and quality of the lenses. This simple method eliminates doubts about under and over exposure and gives me a safe field to work within.

For film I have always used the Spectra light meter, the professional, Combi and now the digital model. I like to use the simplest and the most reliable tools in my trade and I have found the Spectra lives up to all my expectations.

Whether I am shooting a documentary or a feature, I mix tungsten and daylight. I use any light source available to me from colour-corrected cinema lights, to house bulbs, tube lights, lanterns, flash lights, car lights...just about any source that can illuminate 'that particular scene, in that particular project under those particular restraints'. I can live with the warms the tungsten creates and the colds the daylight has in my work very comfortably. I do this over and over again because I see that today everywhere our environment has mixed lights. Any light that one uses affects the skin tones and so I don't generally correct my images with the skin tones alone but for the over-all scenes. I do consciously use as few lights as possible. I find too much equipment, too many lights, too much gaffer gear and too many people inhibits the projects I have been involved in. I feel we do work with just too many people in the crew. Very often the director or producer or even both feel you haven't done your bit if you have not used up all the lights and very often they feel extremely nervous shooting with very few lights...at least till they see the first rushes.

I feel there are different schools of cinematography in India. The distinction is very clear between the commercial films and non-commercial films. The commercial cinema is constantly trying to keep up with Hollywood and the non-commercial films are still struggling trying to find their own. Over the years, being involved in the new cinema movement since almost its inception I have not yet noticed a particular style of a cinematographer whom I can say has his 'signature' on it. Each one, from Mr. Subroto Mitra, K.K. Mahajan, A. K. Bir, Nihilani, Shaji myself and many others have solved problems in different ways. I am not the correct person to comment on the differences between the work of people from Bombay versus ones from the South as I don't see so many films and don't feel qualified enough.

There are many questions asked about the working conditions of light boys, grips and assistants in which I don't again feel qualified to answer. This is a very 'industry' specific question as in the projects I have been involved in all have been well looked after and well paid. I have been involved in protecting the interests of the camera 'crew' quite often, especially on commercial projects and foreign projects when the producer/ director is not so well known to me. It's the same everywhere in the commercial film world. The producer wants to save on every front and to them cinematography is just another department.

It maybe strange but I have never heard such a thing as "Cinematographers are well paid but highly exploited". This may have been true in some cases but not so in most. If a cinematographer has been totally involved in the process with the director and he then just gets a DP credit I can understand the word 'exploitation' but this word is generally used when finances are concerned. In that sense I know many that get very involved and at the end remain only with a DP credit. I do strongly feel that even now cinematographers are not as well paid as their work demands, but neither are they ill paid like in the past.

Cinematography is one of the most important aspects of filmmaking and if the cinematographers are exploited I would put the blame as much on them.

Yes, I think there is no real comment in the media about cinematography and generally it is brushed off with maybe a line or two. I definitely find the ordinary public very interested in cinematography as each and everytime after a film show I have overheard comments on how good or bad the film looks.

From Interview

Could you tell us about how the shooting of *Duvidha* (Mani Kaul) started?

You see, Akbar Padamsee (the painter) had a camera and he also had some film. He was a friend of Mani Kaul so he agreed to help us with *Duvidha*. It was daylight film and since there was going to be a night shoot in the film we went and exchanged it for night film. It was 30 years ago, so I don't remember very well but that Kodak had not taken any money for exchanging and they also gives us some ten rolls extra.

The camera you had was a Bolex camera?

Yes, with a motor drive. Later on, into about 40 percent of the shoot the motor packed up, so we had to hand crank it to make it work. It had only one zoom lens and no block lenses.

What was the film stock?

It was 25ASA Kodak chrome and the tungsten film was 40 ASA.

Were you trying to achieve a certain sense of colour in *Duvidha* with these very resources?

Most of the village houses and the *kothi* we were using for shooting were all white. Apart from this, we had no problem with any costumes, because, even now they wear traditional clothes and stuff like that. But we wanted the whole place to be painted white and we had no money for this. Then, Vijay Dan-Detha who had written the story the film was based on, and his colleague Koala Kothari (the ethnomusicologist) were both in the village and very well respected by the village

community. They called a meeting of all the village folk and requested them to cooperate with us. Within three day whole village was painted for us. The colour scheme and the art direction got sorted out then and there. Not only the *kothi*, every house in the village was painted white.

We were doing a lot of shooting in the night and you can say that the film was definitely divided into two parts one - was very very dark and one was very very bright. We had two sun guns and there was not enough power even for that. If we put on one sungun it was all right but the moment we put the second sun gun on the power would blow. So we had to request the people in the village to please not put their lights on at night and not listen to their radios so that they could shoot uninterrupted and they agreed to do that. So then we used cold starts to get two sun guns to work at one time. So if you have noticed there was no long shot in the night even at 40 ASA because the lens was f2.2. The aperture was very low. There are scenes where an actor walks in candlelight and there are *diyas* all around on the wall. So the actor has to carry the sun gun concealed in his hand with the white reflector so that it reflects light on his face and eventually we shot it like that. It looks like candlelight. And when we had to shoot the characters when they were lying down on the bed, the sun guns used to be kept just two feet away.

Were you trying to achieve a certain quality of black?

Yes, There was black in large parts of the area of the frame in most shots. I think it was the deficit in terms of the amount of light available to us that we were trying to make into a virtue; Kodak chrome is an excellent film, if you shoot in those conditions. One day in may life I would like to see the original prints that I have shot. It was fantastic.

What was it like to work with Mani Kaul?

It was great fun. He is interested in many things in life. In music, literature and in story telling. So, it was not as if we were always talking about the film. In fact we were rarely talking about the film. Mani at that time had not even written the script, so he was reading the story and planning work and shots and sequences on a day-to-day basis.

How was the relationship between you as a cameraman and him as the Director? Was it very collaborative?

It was collaborative in the sense that he had very good ideas about what he wanted to do, but it was very much left on us as to how we would achieve it. He has a very good and very strong sense of visuals and he had seen my work before. So it was collaborative in this sense.

He had seen your work as a still photographer?

Yes, In fact if we get time you should also see the still photographs I had taken for a documentation project in Punjab. Then you will be able to see the similarity between those photos and the shots of the *Duvidha*.

I think if I am not mistaken *Duvidha* was the first films where zoom was used in an interesting way and that too quite often?

It was used as an expressive device because I had no trolleys, tracks and the lenses we had were also not very wide.

Another thing which we had decided, (I don't know how we had come to this decision because it was so many years ago) was that there would be only horizontal and vertical movements. No diagonal movements. The architecture of the place also matched this, because of all the steps going up and coming down.

When you work according to a principle like that many cameramen will say that the restrictions limit what they are trying to do and that it doesn't do justice to their skill as a cameraman. I should tell you that I shot a film with Vishnu Mathur, in which there was no movement at all.

You have seen my work & you can tell that one of my good qualities is my camera operation. I can really operate smoothly in all kind of directions and in that film every shot is a static shot.

But sometimes working like that does open out other possibilities. Because you have to deal with the frame only in terms of things being either back and forth or being sideways. But if the location provides that space and the story requires it and you can make you choreography and actor work according to this limitation then I like it because the restriction on the camera person also becomes restriction for the art director and for everybody.

You talked about a one hour long single take film that you had shot. Was that the kind of challenge that you look forward too?

This was in 1986-87. There was a French production company in Paris that had this idea - they wanted to make one hour long films that would consist of a single shot. They wanted these six films to be shot by people who were cameraman and at the same time had directional skills. So six cameramen from all over the world were selected, and I was one of them. We were given certain guidelines and they were like this - you can't have a play, you can't make the film on a famous person because that means publicity, and that there should be a real time lapse that in the course of the film/shot – i.e. evening should become night or night should become day.

At that time there were no digital cameras and I shot beginning to end and it was exactly like 16mm. They had given us some Hi-8 kind of cameras, which shoot some 62-63 minutes. And we ourselves had to decide the subject. I decided to work on block printers in Kutch. They have very big houses where the entire family is involved in printing. In one corner of the house the mixing of colour is going on, on the other side dyeing is happening and somewhere else the actual block printing is taking place. The printed pieces of cloth are dried on the terrace and then the pieces are taken for washing to a water source that is some half a kilometre away. After all this they came back in the evening and close the workshop. So everyday I had to start shooting just before it was going to dark.

The whole film was shot in a single take, and that too a hand-held single take. In such a situation you have to devise a choreography of the entire thing and you have to be careful about where you are going, moreover, it was not really predetermined that I would move from here to there. It was like a reverse movement. These people were not actors they would do different things all the time. If they are sitting and making something, and then they get disturbed, they will get up and do something else. So it was completely spontaneous.

You took many takes?

I think I took three takes. In one take the battery ran out because, you see that the distance from village to the place where they wash was half a kilometers walk. The movement was very dynamic. So you can't put the camera down and relax. This means that as a cameraman you have to work very hard.

Do these observations and movements some how relate to your experience with documentary filmmaking?

I think one of the things that it comes out of is the ease in working with non-actors. Actor's movements are rehearsed. So you know where to stop and where to start but when this kind of thing happens (when you are working with non-actors) it is totally different. You know I am a very big sports fan and I studied the human body in motion. So all the time when I am filming I think about movement, I try to know what the movement will be. I can anticipate movements.

One of the things which documentary cameramen think about is edit points. (But here I have to say that when I am working with Deepa [Deepa Dhanraj, documentary filmmaker and Navroze's wife]) it is quite different because she edits on the word. When she has her line she cuts the shot. But otherwise, when I am shooting I am always aware that something has to happen which should focus your attention.

Sometimes it happens that you feel that you should have got 5 seconds more. Also I find that when I work in other languages which I don't understand, it is difficult to anticipate about when the sentence will reach the end.

I think that in a documentary crew when you are only about six people and if you have not chucked your ego out of the doorstep then you can be in trouble. Anybody can create a problem, director, assistant director, anyone. This working in a limitation creates a special kind of aesthetics. You have to mine the light! See, when you see a woman cooking in a village in a feature film, it is a very different image form what you see in the same shot in a document film.

Does a documentary films maker bring a special kind of sensibility into the making of a fiction film?

See one of the things I have heard a lot is that "it (a feature film) should look like documentary, *camera ko hila do thoda*". But seriously I have done just 8-10

feature film and about 50 documentaries. I think I must be bringing my sensibility of working with documentaries into any work I do. But I also like working with actors, especially if they are very trained actors and they can hit the light spot and they can do everything right for the light. But it is also good just to jack up the ambience of the room and gives them enough space to do what they want to do and make them feel comfortable.

What is your feeling when you have to shoot a situation you are not used to?

See, for instance, while shooting *Kya Hua is Shahar Ko* we didn't expect that there would be riots, so you do get into situations that you don't expect.

It is clear that if somebody is crying or laughing in front of me then I will also be feeling the same way, but when we are filming it does happen sometimes that the presence of all these huge machines and cameras dilutes that sympathy. This is so because if you get involved in a way which can spoil your final result then everything will be messed up, even the emotions that your character is feeling and that you are trying to be sympathetic towards.

But we didn't expect that there would be riots when we were shooting in Hyderabad. I was shooting on a *machaan* (a raised canopy) and there was no other way to shoot except to just take shots even when one of the rioters came and grabbed the lens. Then I got hit on the head and the camera fell down but Deepa was there to catch hold of it. She gave the camera back and all this time the camera was running. The effect when we saw it was quite interesting.

Later in the film's shooting we started to go into victims' houses and finally at one place we saw a child get killed and, then we stopped shooting.

Once when I was shooting *Claptrap* with Jill Misquitta (a documentary film about extras) a very difficult situation unfolded before me. Because of lack of work and their age the extras are always on an edge. All the trends have changed; they

need younger and younger people. So to get any kind of work there is a lot of competition, a lot of push and pull. At one point of time during the shoot there was a fight between two women. She (the director) wanted me to shoot. I didn't shoot. We shot the argument between the women – “I want work and you are talking my work away” – but I draw a line somewhere. I don't think that when a human being demeans himself or herself so much I can be there and keep on shooting. I have a little block about this.

Once I was shooting a film in Gujarat. Gujarati women are very out spoken. It was a two-camera shoot. One camera was shooting a person who was selling vegetables and the other was shooting the person who was buying. We were sitting in a way such that the people couldn't see our cameras, but the woman of course knew that she was being shot. She unbuttoned her blouse and started breast-feeding her child, but as she was doing this she saw the red light of the Arriflex camera come on. She stopped and said, “You didn't ask me if you could shoot me like this. Why are you shooting? You ask me and I will show you both my breasts but ask me and then shoot.” That fellow (the second cameraman) packed up. He could not shoot the whole day.

You know the whole point of documentary film is that the character also has to accept you. If you have an agenda then you can lie and shoot. This may be necessary because in a lot of cases you simply can't shoot otherwise in India. But whatever you do, don't get into the personal space of another person without any consent on their part.

But at the same time I think that this is the most paranoid country in the world as far as photography is concerned. Even on a *nulla* (ditch) there will be a signboard saying that photography is prohibited.

I keep on saying that film is an anti-social art form. (Murli)

Yes but if you are a documentary filmmaker you have to make this (filmmaking) a social art form.

A good documentary cameraman always gives his or her director a real sequence. For *Something Like a War* (dir. Deepa Dhanraj), I was in a hospital shooting doctors and women during a mass family planning operation drive. I just had 20 minutes to go in and shoot and come out the footage looked as if it was a multi camera set up because I had to shoot everything, even the *tikas* on the forehead of the women because they are numbered. So you are the only person who can provide life to the material of the film by giving something that can be used as a real sequence.

In documentaries, which are made like as if they were on commercial themes they know exactly what they want – the character said the right line, that's it, they want to pack up. Because you know that on the editing table everything else will be thrown out. You just want that byte. But this kind of working style doesn't suit my temperament. I am a very curious person and I like to see life which is around me. Filmmaking, especially documentaries just provides me with a vehicle to see more of it.

You said to us that you really want to get into the picture, the frame that you are shooting. The sound recordist also wants to be as close as possible to the frame. How do you resolve this tension?

The only film I ever shot non-sync was a blockbuster. Otherwise, every single time I have shot sync sound because for me sound is absolutely as important as the image. So if I get a good shot and the sound recordist is not yet able to get good sound then I will make it a point to wait for him.

Tell us about this experience of shooting a blockbuster that you just referred to.

I did shoot one blockbuster. All my friends with whom I have worked have all shot one blockbuster so I thought why shouldn't I shoot one as well. This was in 1981. Shankar Nag directed the film but it had big Bombay stars, cranes, lights and 60 people in the camera crew. But I do enjoy working with actors but if they all well trained.

In what sense do you enjoy working with well-trained actors?

I will give you an example - when I was attending a short course on cinematography (for already working cameramen) in America we had to day discuss things like – “what is the relationship between an editor and a cameramen, between cameraman and sound recordist, between actor and cameraman” and so on. Experts from the different departments of filmmaking used to come and talk to us about things like this. Once we had Jack Nicholson come and do a workshop with us and I am telling that this experience was like learning everything in life about what it is to be working with an actor. He is cinematically so well trained that if you touch your lens or change your zoom he would stop moving his hands because he would know that his hands are not in the frame. He knows exactly where to place himself on a set, so much so that even if there are 25 people standing he can go and stand between them in such a way that you can spot him immediately.

We asked him questions about focus and in the evening he was going to act and we had to shoot him and one of the girls on the course had to act with him. So we gave him 54 focus positions in one shot. Take after take he was spot on, then he said, “You guys are shooting with a wide-angle lens, how can you see my mistakes”. So we changed the lens to 100 mm. We found that there was only one mistake and that too happened only because of our focus puller.

He was amazing. I have worked with lots of stage actors and I must say that they are very good because they had a lot of training and they are very good they don't mind rehearsals. But In my entire cinematographic career this one day with Jack Nicholson has remained a highlight. He was just illustrating a simple principle that tells us that if your eyes can see the lens then the lens can see you. If you are in a crowd of 50 people and you can see the lens of camera then the camera also sees you.

What do you look forward to now?

What I really want to do is to go around the country on my motor cycle and every week send a small film to television studio to show my journey.